

A night cityscape with a shattered glass effect in the foreground. The city lights are visible in the background, with a prominent skyscraper on the left. The foreground is dominated by a large, cracked, and shattered glass surface that reflects the city lights. The overall color palette is dark with green and blue tones.

S H A T T E R E D

R O X A N N A M A S O N

Shattered
Roxanna Mason

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TALA EDITORIAL, LLC

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*This book is dedicated to my readers.
I have been waiting my whole life to meet you.*



One

Everything I knew felt like a lie. For weeks, I had been hiding in the apartment of a man I knew had feelings for me while mourning the loss of someone who'd taken what was left of an already damaged heart and shattered it. I told Gabe things were over between Leon and me, but that too was a lie.

I fell asleep on a couch, across from Gabe, in a plant-filled studio in Brooklyn. I was sure of that. It was the same place I'd fallen asleep night after night since I'd found out the man I was in love with was capable of not only shapeshifting into anyone I encountered but capable of changing my entire reality.

However, when I woke up, I was at home, in the bed I shared with Leon. As soon as I opened my eyes, I sat straight up in shock. I looked around frantically as I tried to assess how I'd gotten there. I ran my hands over our duvet, flipped the lamp on my bedside table on and off, everything around me seemed real and exactly the way I'd left it. I got out of bed, planning to look around the apartment when I realized I could hear Leon's voice from the living room.

Did he do this? How else was this possible? I slowly got up and tiptoed down the hallway. Until I knew what was going on, I figured it was best to keep my distance. I poked my head around the corner but what I saw immediately broke my heart.

Leon was a mess. He was most of the way through a bottle of whiskey and more broken than I had ever seen him. He was on the phone, and though I knew he was speaking Portuguese, I

somehow understood every word he said as if it were all in English.

“Please, Mom. You have to take it away from me.”

The response was muffled, and though I strained to hear anything coming from the other end, I couldn't tell what Constança was saying.

“I can't do this anymore. She's not coming back. Just make me forget her, please.”

Without warning, tears started spilling out of my eyes. I knew I must have hurt him by leaving, but he wanted to forget me? *Forget us?*

“It's going to kill me!”

Leon wasn't one for theatrics. He was drunk, and I could hear the pain raking through his voice, but he was never just dramatic for the sake of making a point.

“What's going to kill you? What are you talking about?” I interrupted, stepping out into full view.

No reaction. He didn't even glance in my direction.

“Leon!”

Nothing.

I hurried across the room and knelt in front of him. “I'm right here. Talk to me! Please!”

Suddenly, my body jolted awake, gasping for air.

“Woah! Are you okay?” Gabe's voice was groggy as he tried to sit up in bed.

“I messed up,” I muttered.

“What?”

“I have to go!”

With that, I threw the quilt off my body and fumbled for the lamp next to the couch. Before Gabe could even entirely comprehend what was going on, I was already manically shoving clothing into a bag.

“It’s 4 am, Jacey!” Gabe countered as he looked on, his eyes wide with shock.

“I know. I’m sorry. I just—”

“What is going on?”

“I have to go home!”

“Okay, okay! Can we talk about this?”

I finally paused enough to get a good look at Gabe, at the horror on his face, and realized that my behavior seemed crazy. I took a breath and stopped packing.

“I saw something.”

“In your sleep?”

“Look, there’s a lot about this situation that I haven’t exactly been honest with you about. I hope one day I’ll be able to, but for right now, I just need you to trust me. I’m not losing my mind, I’m not having an episode, but I have to see Leon, and I have to do it now.”

Gabe dropped his head in defeat, staring down at his bedding silently for a long moment. I knew that I was hurting him. This wasn’t the first time I’d done that. I promised myself that somehow, some way I would make it up to him, but I had to go.

Taking in a sharp breath, Gabe abruptly got up out of bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Helping you pack,” he groaned.

“You don’t have to—”

“I know!” he cut me off. “But I love you so I’m putting you first,” he mumbled angrily under his breath.

My heart sank. I realized it wasn’t just that I never should have left. I shouldn’t have turned to Gabe in the first place. Now I was responsible for hurting not one but two men whose only crime was wanting me to love them.

Gabe and I moved around the apartment in heavy silence. We didn’t look at each other or speak. We just packed what belongings I brought with me. When we were finished, I

watched Gabe grab his phone. After a few moments of typing and scrolling he finally looked up at me.

“Your Uber will be here in 5 minutes,” he said.

“Thank you.” It was the only response I could come up with.

“Will you call me please and let me know you’re okay in the morning?” he asked.

I nodded.

He looked at me for a long moment and then unexpectedly closed the gap between us. He wrapped me up in his arms and held me close. I held back tears as I returned his embrace. I doubted I would ever be close to him this way again, but I knew some part of me would always want to.

“Thank you,” I whispered again.

“I’ll still be here when you figure it out,” he responded.

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach as I pulled out of his embrace, grabbed my bags, and hurried out of his apartment. I couldn’t let that moment sink in any longer, or I might lose my resolve. I had to go home.

For exactly 25 minutes, I fidgeted restlessly in the back of a white Honda Accord. The driver, a stoic dark-haired man in his 50s, drove in complete silence. At this hour, he must have assumed I was drunk. If I was driving plastered people home at 4 am, I probably wouldn’t want to talk either. It was just as well. I didn’t have the capacity for small talk. I just had to get to Leon.

I felt like I had been in that tiny, suffocating sedan for hours. We finally pulled up to my apartment, and while I thought to thank my driver, the sight of my building, *our* building, took any words I had right out of my mouth. I struggled to get out of the car with all my belongings but eventually found myself standing on the sidewalk, looking up at our fire escape.

The reality hit me that I didn’t have this planned. I didn’t know what I was going to say to Leon or what would even happen when I walked in the door. I only knew that leaving had been a mistake, perhaps the biggest of my life.

I had no more time to waste. I punched in the code to the entrance, rushed up the stairs, and let myself in as quickly as I possibly could. I was moving so fast that I ended up tumbling through the front door. My belongings hit the ground with a loud crash as I struggled to lock the door behind me in the dark.

Before I could turn back around the lights suddenly flipped on.

There he was.

To say that Leon didn't look like himself would have been an understatement. He was just as scruffy and disheveled as he was in my dream. The worst of it, however, was the look on his face. The only way to describe it was haunted. It was as if he hadn't slept since the moment I left.

We just stared at each other from across the room. We were only twelve feet apart, but it felt like miles. Leon's chest moved up and down with heavy breaths, but the rest of him was perfectly still.

"Please, tell me you're real," he pleaded.

My eyes glistened with tears, but as much as I wanted to, I couldn't make myself speak.

"Please, tell me I didn't alter you in," he continued.

I didn't realize until that moment that Leon could alter his own reality and the thought that he had been, just to put me back in it, was the most heartbreaking thing I'd ever heard.

"Please?"

I was still speechless and reeling, so I did the only thing I could think to do. I slowly made my way toward him. Leon didn't move an inch, but his eyes never left me. When I finally reached him, I wrapped my arms tightly around his bare torso, burying my head against his chest. Leon remained frozen in place, motionless.

"*Fuck*," I finally heard him say. In nearly 11 years, I'd never really seen Leon do anything more than get a little choked up, but what I heard next was nothing but raw emotion ripping through his chest.

I held onto him tighter as tears ran down my face.

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry,” he choked out.

“I’m sorry, too,” I whispered. I never should have left. I knew that now with a clarity that took me nearly a month and some vision I still couldn’t explain to reach, but I knew.

“I didn’t think you were coming back,” he said as his tears subsided momentarily.

I pulled back a little to look at him. “You needed me.”

“I am always going to need you, Jace, but how did you—”

“You didn’t—?” I took a step back. Leon was wearing the same sweatpants he had been in the vision, but that didn’t confirm anything. It easily could have been a coincidence. I stepped around him, intent on investigating further. Sitting on our coffee table was a bottle of whiskey, the same size, same brand.

“Were you talking to your mom tonight?”

He narrowed his eyes on me in confusion. “How did you know that?”

I thought there was a chance that maybe what I saw came from him. That Leon had somehow found a way to alter my reality from afar so that I’d know what he was going through and that he was in some kind of danger, but that wasn’t the case.

“I just knew,” I shrugged. I wasn’t sure how to explain to Leon what I saw. Now, I couldn’t even be sure how I saw it.

“Please tell me you aren’t leaving again.”

I glanced over at the bags that had tumbled to the floor during my less-than-graceful entrance. His gaze followed mine.

“I’m staying.”

“Staying here or staying...”

I knew he was asking if I was coming home or if I was coming back to him. Until I walked through the door, I wasn’t sure I knew the answer, but the moment I saw him, touched him, I was certain. I was never leaving this man again.

“Staying with you,” I repeated. “If you’ll have me.”

“If I’ll have you?” he asked, a humorless chuckle escaping him. He shook his head before reaching for me. One hand caressed my cheek as the other pulled me close by the waist. “I’m never letting you go again.”

My eyes moved to his mouth as he slowly lowered it to mine. His lips barely grazed against me, and I could hear my pulse banging in my ears. I knew we weren’t out of the woods yet, but at that moment I truly believed we might be okay.

Leon took my hand and led me back to the bedroom, *our* bedroom. It was exactly as I’d left it. I had no doubt that if I’d opened a closet or drawer, my things would all still be there.

My eyes made their way back to Leon as I sat down on the edge of the bed. He looked like he was still trying to catch his breath.

“Do you still think you’re imagining me?” I asked, a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

“No. I just missed the way you look in that bed.”

I motioned for him to join me. He quietly crossed the distance before carefully sitting next to me.

We both sat silently for a moment until I felt Leon’s hand gently slide into mine.

“Should we talk?” I asked. I had no idea what to do now. It hardly seemed like the time to broach the subject of our break up but I didn’t know how to navigate this. I had so much I needed to tell him and yet...

Leon turned to me. “Yeah, we should, but for tonight can we just... be?”

I understood immediately and the truth was I didn’t know where we stood or what would happen tomorrow once we’d hashed everything out. So for tonight, just being together sounded like a good idea. I nodded.

Leon’s lips met mine again. He pushed me back into the bed. Situating himself between my legs as we continued kissing each other wildly.

“Stop, stop!” I said, though there was a smile on my face. “Where are we?” I teased.

Leon couldn't help but smile.

“Our bed, Jacey Lange.”

“And who am I?” I continued despite the fact he just said my name.

He moved his mouth to my ear, pressing his growing hardness against me. “You're mine,” he growled before pulling back to look at me.

“And what does that make you?” I teased.

“Yours. I will always be yours,” he responded.

A part of me knew that Leon didn't know the whole story, and I started to question the *always* in that sentence. I couldn't help but wonder what future we would even have when it was all said and done. However, feeling him against me and the way my body instantaneously reacted to his touch clouded my racing thoughts, pushing aside any hesitation left inside me.

I arched into Leon as he almost frantically undressed me, tossing my clothes carelessly toward the floor. I tried to reach for him again, but he grabbed my wrists, pinning them above my head. His gaze grew heavy as he looked at me, drinking me in.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he breathed.

I needed him so badly. It was like every inch of my body was screaming for him. The screaming was so loud I couldn't hear myself think anymore.

“Please...” I whispered.

A smirk played on Leon's lips as he held me there. “Please, what?” he teased.

“I need you,” I breathed.

Leon's lips met my neck, and my breath halted in my throat as he trailed that perfect mouth down my body. I gasped as he teased the peaks of my nipples before slowly continuing his descent.

My legs spread wider for him, desperate to feel his mouth on me. He looked up at me as he kissed the inside of my thighs, first one, then the other with painstaking slowness before his

tongue found its way to me. I pressed my hips toward him as I reached down, tangling my fingers into his mess of dark hair.

My breathing turned ragged as he slid his fingers inside me, his mouth never ceasing. I'd almost forgotten how quickly Leon could make me come completely undone. He knew every inch of my body, every button to push to make me lose myself. The truth of his words rang in my head. I was his. I would *always* be his.

Leon didn't stop, his fingers moving faster and harder inside of me. I could feel my body start to shake as he drove me closer and closer to the edge. "I'm close..." I gasped out barely above a whisper.

He stopped suddenly. I let out a groan of frustration as he pulled away from me. Leon hastily flipped me over without warning. I adjusted, sliding my knees underneath me as he pulled the rest of his clothes from his body. He moved behind me, I could feel him pressing against my opening, teasing me, once again. "Not until I'm inside you," he said roughly against the shell of my ear before suddenly taking me, making me gasp at the feeling of him deep inside me.

Leon stayed close to me, his lips against my neck, his breath hitching in my ear as he drove himself inside me again and again. I gripped the sheets below me tightly. The way he took me was rough and possessive, like he was trying to remind me of everything I had been missing. I couldn't hold on any longer. That fire between us rolled through me as I moaned out in pleasure, losing myself. "Yes, Jace." I heard him gasp as I squeezed hard around him.

Before I could even come down, Leon turned me back around, spreading my legs open again and driving himself back inside me. "I'm never letting you go again. I'm never fucking letting you go," he repeated, through gritted teeth. I kissed him hard, trying to push the thought that I had ever even left out of his mind.

I could feel him throbbing inside of me. Feel him get closer and closer to the edge. My whole body was burning. I held onto him tightly, trying to hold on just long enough. Suddenly, Leon

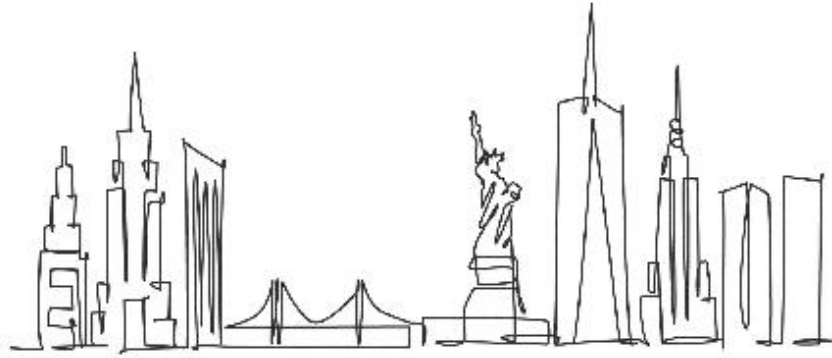
halted, burying his face in my neck as he fell apart. Unable to hold on any longer, I fell with him.

There was silence after. We lay there, a tangled mess of limbs, unable to speak. I adjusted, bringing my face close to his. I watched his eyes slowly close as he held me closer. "I love you," I finally whispered against his lips. "I'm sorry."

Even though I knew that neither Leon nor I were going to be able to fully articulate where we were or the damage we did, I still wanted him to know I regretted leaving. At the time, I thought it was the only way to get clarity, but that wasn't an excuse. When we were in Tavira, I promised there was nothing he could do to make me stop loving him, and while I hadn't stopped loving him, I *couldn't* stop loving him, but I knew the minute I walked out the door he believed I did.

"You came home. That's all that matters," he whispered back to me before his lips met mine.

I came home.



Two

I awoke again in Leon's bed. This time slowly and peacefully. There were no sudden gasps for breath or panicked attempts to figure out what was real and what was not. It was just me, wrapped in slate gray sheets with the light from the window warming my face. For a brief moment, I'd almost forgotten that I'd ever left. However, when I turned to the space where I expected Leon to be, he wasn't there. I was alone.

I looked around the room for any sign of my best friend, but everything was perfectly still. I listened for anyone in the living room but heard nothing.

"Leon?" I called out.

When he didn't respond, I reached for my cell phone. Despite my fondness for early mornings, I had somehow managed to sleep until 11 am. I immediately noticed the texts Leon sent nearly an hour ago.

Leon: I'm sorry I wasn't there when you woke up.

Leon: I had to go into the office.

Leon: Check your nightstand.

The office? It hit me that it was Monday morning. I had been working from Gabe's apartment instead of going into the studio for so long that the days all seemed to blur together. Suddenly, I felt guilty about bursting through the door at four in the morning

on a Sunday night. I also hadn't exactly let Leon sleep in the hours following my homecoming.

I set my phone down and followed his instructions, pulling out the drawer in my bedside table. A tiny gasp escaped me. Sitting there was my ring, still in its perfect burgundy box. Next to it was a neatly folded piece of paper with my name on it. I carefully unfolded the note.

Jacey,

I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I want you to know I will spend the rest of my life earning it. I have been in love with you since the moment we met. No matter what happens, I will be in love with you until the day there is nothing left of me.

Leon

I ran my fingertips over the velvet box before slowly opening it. Somehow the ring was even more beautiful than I remembered. *No matter what happens.* I wondered how far that promise extended. Leon still didn't know that I had been staying with Gabe all this time and I doubted he would be very happy about it. I slid the large marquis stone onto my left finger, looking down at it as it caught the light from the window. I promised myself I would tell him everything as soon as he got home. I was scared, but Leon had to know.

I reached for my phone again, intending to text Leon back, but as I unlocked the screen, I froze. My heart stopped as I heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming from the living room. I was sure Leon would be gone for hours, but maybe he'd forgotten something? I scrambled for the clothes laying on our bedroom floor, quickly throwing them on my body. I could have stayed undressed and in bed, but I figured if I had to have a difficult conversation, I didn't want to do it naked. I clasped my sweaty palms tightly to my sides as I barrelled into the living room. I still had no idea what I was going to say.

“Leon? What are you doing—”

“He's not here,” I heard an unfamiliar voice with a thick Portuguese accent say.

Standing in our living room were two men I had never seen before.

The first had a resemblance to Leon that was uncanny. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought they were brothers. They had the same dark hair, deep tan, and unmistakable eyes. He was younger and far less polished, but there was no way they weren't related. The second was much taller and broader. He had a completely shaved head and several tattoos running up his sizeable forearms.

I took a sudden step back, knocking over an end table. It went crashing to the floor loudly as the strangers and I stared each other down in silence. The gaze of the second man wasn't kind. It was downright predatory. I had no idea what was happening, but I could immediately tell it wasn't good.

"W-who are you?" I managed to get out shakily.

"Family," the taller of the two responded.

I wasn't sure if he was trying to be intentionally vague to further intimidate me, or if it was simply that his English was limited. Either way, the sound of his voice was more than a little menacing.

"Where is Leon?"

"*Tu fazes muitas perguntas, minha linda,*" the man who looked like Leon responded.

My Portuguese was rustier than it had been when we were in Tavira, but I understood, *you ask a lot of questions, beautiful.*

"*Não me chames linda! Estás no meu apartamento, por isso sim, quero fazer perguntas.*" I fired back at him, telling him not to call me beautiful and that yes, I had questions because he was in *my* apartment.

His dark brows shot up in response. My Portuguese might have been rusty, but I'd gotten my point across.

"Cute," he said with a hollow laugh.

He took a step toward me, and I tried to back up again, but as my back hit a wall, I realized there was nowhere to go.

“You didn’t answer my question...” I protested although the sound of my voice betrayed me.

“That’s because we want to know the same thing.”

“If you don’t know where he is, what are you doing here?”

The long silence that stretched between us made me realize that this wasn’t going to end well for me. I didn’t know where Leon was, I hoped he was safely at work, but regardless, he wasn’t there to protect me. The truth was, I was a woman in an apartment alone with two men I didn’t know, but who I could now tell weren’t supposed to be there.

“You know what... I’ll just give him a call...” I said with a smile. I changed my tone, trying to sound friendly. Maybe if these men thought I was trying to help, they wouldn’t harm me.

I reached into my pocket and grabbed my cell phone.

Thankfully, Leon was in my favorites, so it only took one button before my phone dialed him. However, before I could even put the phone up to my ear, the bald man lunged at me. He grabbed the phone out of my hand and tossed it to the ground.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” I snapped at him.

“Jacey? Jace? Hello?” I could hear the muffled sound of Leon’s voice on the other end of the phone, but I couldn’t reach it, and I had no idea if he could hear me.

“I’m going to do a lot more than touch you,” the intruder growled back at me as he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me toward him.

“Leon!” I screamed out as loudly as I possibly could before he forcefully grabbed the back of my head with one hand and covered my mouth with the other.

My eyes went wide. I didn’t know what was going to happen to me. I had never been so scared in my life. I just kept praying that Leon would burst through the door and save me. Yet with every passing second, no one came. I realized that the only way out of this was to use my head.

I stared back at the man in front of me. His eyes were wild and feral. There was no way to predict what he was capable of doing.

He released the hand holding the back of my head but kept one hand over my mouth. I watched as he reached into his back pocket, and as soon as the shiny, silver metal object came into view, I started to panic. I tried to back away, but he grabbed me again. This time, by the throat, before I could let out another scream. He held the knife in his hand up to my neck.

“Jacey, where are you?” Leon’s voice said through the receiver.

“Get the phone, tell him you’re fine, and you’ll call him back.” Leon’s doppelganger commanded as he watched on. He was quiet, just above a whisper, yet there was no mistaking the anger in his voice.

I nodded and slowly walked over to the spot on the floor where my phone had landed. I bent down and picked it up, holding it to my ear with trembling hands.

“Hi, baby!” I said, knowing full well that I never called Leon that. I couldn’t tell Leon I was in danger, but my logic was that if I used the strangest language I could without explanation that maybe he would know something was wrong.

“Baby? Jace, what is going on? Are you okay?”

“Yep, I’m fine... I just tripped over that rug my Aunt Carol bought us in Boca. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

I didn’t have an Aunt Carol. I didn’t even know anyone named Carol. I’d also never been to Boca. Thankfully, Leon seemed to catch on.

“Where are you?” he growled.

“No, no need for you to come *home*. I need to put a bandage on this knee, but I’ll call you back.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. Don’t hang up the phone.”

Tears started to sting my eyes, but I knew I couldn’t let the men watching know I was warning Leon of something.

“Okay, I love you. Bye.” I said.

Instead of hitting the end button, I locked the screen, so it appeared dark though Leon was still quietly listening on the other end. At least if I didn’t make it out of this, my last words

to Leon were that I loved him. If I only had three words left to say to anyone on earth, telling Leon that I loved him seemed like the right choice.

The smaller man started to move toward me.

“Wait! Wait! You can’t hurt me!”

A laugh escaped him.

”*Porquê, linda?*”

“I’m pregnant!” I blurted out

It was the only card I had left to play, and I had no idea if it would work. Leon said shifters couldn’t hurt other shifters. I had to hope that if this man thought I was pregnant that he wouldn’t harm me. I didn’t know how likely it was that Leon’s abilities would even pass on to a baby. Leon only had one shifter parent, and I was entirely human, so I assumed it wasn’t likely, but I didn’t know for sure. I just knew that I had to do anything I could to save myself.

I knew Leon could hear me, and I could only imagine what he might be thinking, but I had no way to explain.

“Fuck!” was the last thing I heard the second man say before his face contorted into some mixture of anger and annoyance.

The next thing I knew there was a sharp and unexpected blow to the back of my head, and everything went dark.



Three

I thought that finding armed men in my apartment, demanding to know where Leon was, was the scariest thing I would ever have to experience. That was until my body was jostled awake by the unmistakable feeling of turbulence. My eyes shot open as the plane bounced up and down against the sudden change in airflow. I looked around frantically, but there was no one there. There were no other passengers, no flight crew, just me in what appeared to be a private jet. I didn't know where I was going, and to make matters worse, I didn't know how I'd gotten there. I looked down at my arm and realized I was handcuffed to my seat.

Breathe, Jacey. Just Breathe.

What did I know? I knew the men in my apartment claimed they were related to Leon. I also knew that they hadn't killed me, and I suspected that was because I told them I was pregnant. Therefore, I had to assume I was on my way back to Portugal. I looked over my body. I was still wearing the same clothes, and there were no bruises or marks on me, so I had to guess that no one had harmed me while I was unconscious. I looked down at my shaking hands. My engagement ring remained on my left finger. It was the only thing I was wearing of value so I noted that it hadn't been taken from me. The back of my head throbbed. I reached toward the pain with my free hand. I could

feel a large lump starting to form. It must have been how I ended up unconscious.

I looked around for anything that might help me. Something I could use as a weapon, a cell phone, a way to get the handcuffs off my arm, but there was nothing within arms reach. I jerked my arm as hard as I could against the seat in an attempt to find out just how secure the cuffs were, but the movement only caused the metal to dig into my wrist in a way that I was sure would leave a bruise.

“Good luck with that,” I heard a chilling voice from the seat directly behind me say.

I knew right away who it was, despite the fact I couldn’t see him. It was the same deep voice and Portuguese accent I heard in the apartment. I still didn’t know either man’s name or their relation to Leon, and I had no reason to believe that he would tell me, but I knew that any moment I spent with him, I was in danger.

“This is hardly practical,” I said, trying hard not to let my voice give away how truly terrified I was.

Instead of responding, I heard the man get up from the seat behind me. To my surprise, only the younger of the two appeared. My chair faced another identical leather seat with a table between them. Uninvited, this stranger sat down across from me.

“What is?” he asked me, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

“I’m pregnant, and you have me chained to my seat.”

“And?”

I gave him a look. I thought the answer was obvious, but his face remained emotionless.

“Morning sickness? Frequent Urination? Do you know anything about pregnancy?”

In truth, neither of those things were a problem, but I was grasping at straws to get out of my restraints.

It felt like the two of us were having an endless staring contest. Looking into his eyes was almost too much. They were darker but otherwise nearly identical to Leon’s. I wondered if

I'd ever see those eyes again. The thought was almost enough to bring me to tears until the stranger finally gave up and rolled them at me.

I watched as he leaned forward and reached behind him. He held my gaze as he pulled out a handgun and set it loudly on the table in front of us. I stared down at the weapon. I had never actually seen a gun in person before. It was equal parts terrifying and fascinating. I couldn't look away.

Before I could bring myself to say anything more, he pulled a metal key out of another pocket and knelt in front of me. His eyes never left me as I watched his calloused hands slide the key into the handcuffs. With one quick turn, he released my wrist. The thought crossed my mind to grab the gun, but what was I expecting? I didn't know who was flying this plane or where we were going. Yes, I had ample opportunity to shoot this stranger, but who was to say that when we landed there wouldn't be a dozen more angry-looking men waiting for me?

It was clear to me that the gun was placed there as a warning, not an invitation, and until I knew more about the situation, it was a warning I intended to heed. I carefully got up from my seat and walked toward the back of the plane. I didn't need the restroom, but I needed a moment to myself to try to figure out what to do. I stepped into the tiny airplane bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. The only reason I wasn't having a complete meltdown was that I knew my life was at risk.

I didn't understand how I got here. This didn't seem real. Then it hit me. If it didn't seem real, maybe it *wasn't*.

In a blind rage, I threw the bathroom door wide open. I stormed back into the main cabin of the plane. "Put me back!" I demanded loudly.

My abductor only raised an eyebrow at my outburst and crossed his arms over his muscular chest.

"I can't believe that I thought, even for a second, that I might be able to work things out with you. I can't believe you would do this again. This is insane! I'm fucking scared, and I don't want to do this anymore, so put me back!"

My shouting and agitation were only met with one thing—laughter. It was cold and bitter, and the smile on his face didn't reach his eyes at all.

“Is there more?” he asked me sarcastically, leaning back in his seat as if waiting for a show to continue.

“I'm not going to stop until you put me back.”

“By all means.”

“I came back! What more do you want from me? Are you trying to punish me for leaving?”

For some reason, this caught my abductor's attention. He tilted his head to the side and looked me over before standing up and making his way toward me.

“Leon, stop. Please.” I pleaded with him.

I didn't know why it didn't occur to me before. They were so similar-looking, and those eyes dug straight into me, the way that only Leon's could. There was no way that he hadn't shifted into this man and altered my reality to believe this bizarre kidnapping scenario. What I didn't understand was why.

“I'm not Leon,” he responded.

I didn't believe that, not for a second.

“Prove it!”

“*Como é que é suposto eu fazer isso, linda?*” he said, asking me how he was supposed to do that and calling me beautiful yet again.

There was this sing-song tone to his voice as if he were mocking me. It only served to infuriate me further. I rolled my eyes. This act was getting old, and it was getting old fast. I knew Leon was many things, and I knew he'd made more than a few bad choices, but I would have never dreamed he was capable of this.

I took a defiant step toward my captor and without warning I kissed him.

In my terror I had convinced myself that this was Leon and that nothing I was experiencing was real. Leon might have been able to make himself look like other people, and he might have

been able to change what I saw and experienced but what he couldn't change was the way I felt when I kissed him. It was a shot in the dark, but I hoped one of two things would happen. Either I would know it was him, or maybe kissing me again would snap him out of this insanity.

He reached out for me and pulled me closer to him. His rough hands grazed my face before lacing into my hair. My heart raced as his lips moved with mine but it took mere seconds for me to realize that none of this was familiar to me.

This wasn't Leon.

I struggled against him, but he seemed intent to keep me there. I finally got free enough of his grip that I was able to shove him away from me.

“Get the hell off me!”

If he wasn't Leon I was really in trouble. This wasn't some magically created version of my reality. I was really in a plane headed to god-knows-where with a man I didn't know so he could do god-knows-what with me.

There was something unreadable in the unblinking face staring back at me. It was like I'd taken all thought right out of him. I sat down in the closest seat and tried to avoid the ever-present gaze of my captor. He, however, remained speechlessly watching me for a long moment before jumping back in. Clearly, he had no intention of leaving me alone to figure out what to do next.

“He really did a number on you, didn't he?”

“Fuck off.”

He cracked a smile. This time it seemed less cold and frightening though just as irritating.

“I can see why my cousin is so obsessed with you,” he added

There it was, my first clue. They were cousins. If they were cousins, there was a good chance that the horrible man who burst into Constança's home in Portugal was his father. I didn't want my captor to know that I was quietly putting pieces of the puzzle together, so I said the first thing that came to mind.

“Screw you,” I responded.

Perhaps, it wasn't wise to trade insults with a man with a gun, but if I knew one thing, it was that if he wanted me dead, I would have been dead. I didn't know what it was, but I did know that I served some purpose.

"I really wish you would."

"You're disgusting!"

"Is that why you were all over me?"

"I thought you were Leon."

"I can be anyone you want me to be."

The truth of that statement hit me hard. This was the first shifter other than Leon I had ever spent any time with. I didn't know for sure that he was one, but I assumed as much, and that meant that he could, in fact, become anyone.

"Where are we going?" I asked though I doubted any answer I got would be the truth.

"*Vais ver, linda,*" *You'll see, beautiful* was all he said.

"I swear to God if you call me beautiful one more time..."

"You'll what?" he challenged me.

I didn't know what I intended to threaten him with. I knew nothing about him or what he wanted so I had nothing to use as leverage. I crossed my arms over my chest and turned my gaze away from him to the window on my right, resolute to ignore him completely.

I watched silently as we started to make our descent. The clouds around us parted, and as I stared out the window, I realized I was looking at an entire sea of green below us. It was like a jungle or a forest of some kind. It seemed to go on forever. I thought back to our flight into Faro after my sister's wedding and knew immediately we were not in Portugal. But if we weren't in Portugal, where were we, and more importantly, how was Leon going to find me?



Four

The only frame of reference I had for being abducted was what I had seen in movies. I'd never been through something like this, and I didn't know anyone who had. I tried to remember everything I could, hoping that something I committed to memory might help me escape. The plane landed heavily on a long stretch of dirt. I held my breath as it skidded to a halt. I couldn't make out much from the windows, but I knew we weren't at an airport. There was nothing but trees around us. They were full and green, and I could only guess that we were somewhere tropical.

My captor stalked over to me and once again cuffed me to my seat.

"Stay here," he said gruffly before he left me alone in the aircraft.

The cuffs were loose this time, perhaps even loose enough that I could get myself free. I thought about trying to find someplace to hide or some other way off the plane, but the truth remained that I didn't even know what country I was in, let alone what I would do if I escaped. The best chance I had was to bide my time and find out as much as I could before trying to run for it.

When Leon's cousin returned it was with two men. The first I recognized from the apartment, the other I had never seen before. A chill went down my spine as they glanced me up and down. Silently, my captor knelt in front of me. He didn't make eye contact as he started to undo my handcuffs.

"Don't look at me," he whispered.

I had no idea what was going on but I did as he asked me to and stared straight ahead.

"You're safer with me than you are with them, so just do what I say," he warned.

I didn't say a word. I didn't react though my stomach began twisting tightly into knots. There wasn't much of a choice. I either had to trust this man or take my chances with the terrifying strangers leering at me from across the plane, one of which I knew had no problem being violent towards me. I knew nothing about Leon's cousin, but I knew that he had every opportunity to harm me further, and he hadn't, so the choice seemed obvious.

"Levanta-te!" Stand up!

His voice was more commanding than it had been only moments ago. It almost seemed performative. Leon's cousin grabbed my arm roughly, pulled me to my feet, guided me past the onlookers and out of the plane.

I was right, it wasn't an airport. The place looked more like a compound of some kind. On the right was a large concrete building in the distance and a long dirt road stretching out into a lush jungle of trees in front of us.

I was ushered to a waiting town car. It was all black, and the windows were so tinted there was no way I could even begin to see inside. My captor opened the back door and shoved me in before slamming it on me. I sat quietly for several minutes. The car didn't move, and I could no longer see outside it. I tried to remind myself that if these people intended to kill me, they could have. Just as the fear of how I was going to get myself out of this started to rise in me again the door opened, and my captor slid into the seat next to me.

The car began moving, and we both sat in uncomfortable silence.

“Are you really pregnant?” he finally asked.

I glanced out the window, unsure about what answering that question honestly would cost me.

“Yes,” I finally responded, trying to keep any emotion out of my voice.

I may have told these men I was pregnant to keep them from hurting me, but it was the truth. A truth I had been terrified to tell Leon even before I’d come home. He had been telling me for years that he didn’t want children and about the *genes* he didn’t want to pass down. I understood now that those genes were his abilities, ones I had no idea if my child would have.

It all flooded back to me as I continued to gaze out the heavily tinted window. I’d realized my cycle had been off the day before I came home. While Gabe was at work, I bought nearly every test at the local pharmacy. I took them all, each of them had the same results.

Two lines. Plus Sign. Pregnant.

When Gabe found me, I was hysterical. The moment he saw the pregnancy tests in my hands, he froze. Gabe just sat there completely stunned for a long time before he was finally snapped back to reality by the sound of me sobbing on his bathroom floor.

“Hey... No... We’re not doing that...” Gabe said to me as he wiped the tears from my face.

“It’s Leon’s?” he asked me.

I nodded.

“Okay, let me think...”

I couldn’t imagine what Gabe had to think about. This wasn’t his problem. It was sweet of him to care for me, but we had long passed the point where it was reasonable for him to do so. I didn’t know what I was going to do next, but I knew I had to do it on my own.

“Does it have to be?”

My eyes shifted back and forth as I tried to process what the hell Gabe was asking me.

“Does *what* have to be?”

“The baby.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Does it have to be Leon’s?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What if you and I...”

I audibly gasped at Gabe’s offer. I hadn’t even had a second to process what my options were, and here he was offering to help me raise a child.

“Are you serious?”

“Why not? We could get a bigger place and—”

“Why would you want that? I mean, thank you, but Gabe, this isn’t your problem.”

“I want you, so it is my problem.”

I closed my eyes tightly trying to drive the thought out of my head. I’d always known that Gabe was a better man than I could have possibly deserved.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement and I turned as Leon’s cousin dropped his head back onto the headrest behind him as if he were relieved by my answer.

“He’s going to make you prove it...” he said.

“Who is *he*?”

He didn’t answer my question, and the heavy silence between us resumed. It was just as well. I tried to count the seconds we were driving and take mental notes of any turns we took. I didn’t know what information I might need, so no matter how tiny, I knew I had to try and hold onto every detail.

After five and a half minutes and one right turn, the car slowed to a stop. I turned to ask what was going on or where I was being transported. Before I could, the door closest to me

was yanked open, and a rough hand reached in, yanking me out of the car.

“What the— I started. Before I could speak, Leon’s cousin was out of the car with a look of pure rage on his face.

“*Vitor, estás louco? Ela está grávida!*” *Victor, are you crazy? She’s pregnant!* Leon’s cousin yelled at the same bald man who’d been with him in my apartment.

“*O bebé é do Leondro. Alguém devia dar uma lição àquele rapaz.*” I wasn’t sure what the man was saying. I only understood something about Leon’s baby and a class? A lesson?

The next thing I knew Leon’s cousin had a gun out, pointed directly at the man restraining me.

“*Não vais ser tu,*” my captor responded. *It’s not going to be you!*

Wait, is Leon’s cousin defending me? Why? The two of them continued shouting back and forth in Portuguese. Victor pulled out a gun and aimed it back at Leon’s cousin. They were speaking so fast that I couldn’t translate. *I thought they weren’t allowed to hurt each other.* I looked around. We appeared to be in front of a house. It was huge and covered in vines, but I was still no closer to figuring out where I was or how to escape.

The arguing only escalated, and I was starting to worry that I was going to wind up on the wrong end of a firefight when an immaculately dressed woman in her fifties, with deeply tanned skin and a mane of jet black hair, emerged from the house like some kind of angel. Her face was stern, and her fiery gaze told me she was not pleased about what was happening.

“*Largue isso!*” she commanded.

Leon’s cousin sighed heavily and then lowered the weapon. The man who was still gripping my arm did the same. It seemed she held some authority over them, though I couldn’t tell why.

“Give her to me,” she commanded.

The man let me go, and she gently placed an arm around my shoulder as she guided me toward the house, leaving both men behind us.

“Don’t worry, no one is going to touch you again,” she said.

The sound of her voice was kind, and I had to admit that having another woman there made me feel somehow safer despite not knowing who she was.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“Brazil,” she said as we made our way through the foyer.

I stopped in my tracks. *Brazil? Why were we in Brazil?* On some level, it made sense, the national language of Brazil was Portuguese. Now I understood why I saw so much dense forest while we were landing. The problem was I didn’t know how Leon was going to find me in Brazil and if he didn’t, how on earth was I going to get out of Brazil on my own?

The woman noticed the startled look on my face as I stood, frozen, in the middle of the room.

“Everything is going to be fine,” she said.

I couldn’t tell if she was trying to be comforting or dismissive. Her accent made the tone of her voice hard to read.

“Why am I here?”

“Come with me,” she said, motioning for me to follow her.

I didn’t know why I expected anyone to answer me. I slowly trailed behind the woman. She was so beautiful it was almost startling. She looked like she had stepped out of a painting somewhere. I wondered if she was related to Leon as well.

She led me down a long hallway. The left side was covered in giant windows that overlooked a lush courtyard. The right was nothing but dark wooden doors, each closed tightly with no indication of what might be on the other side.

Once we reached the end of the hall, the woman took a silver key out of her pocket and unlocked the door. She shoved the door open and then gestured for me to enter.

I found myself in what looked like an apartment. I stood in a small living room with an off-white couch in the middle and a tiny kitchen with a pair of exposed birch bar stools facing the counter. I glanced down a short hallway to a pair of white french doors that led to what looked like a bedroom. There were windows that looked out onto the same courtyard we passed on the way in, and the entire apartment was filled with light.

“What is this?”

The woman looked at me as if the question were silly. “This is where you will be staying.”

I didn’t know what I expected, but it certainly wasn’t something out of Better Homes and Gardens.

“For how long?” I asked.

She shrugged her narrow shoulders. I wasn’t sure if she didn’t understand or just didn’t know. She turned to leave the room, but I hurried to stop her. She was the only person I’d encountered willing to give me information. I had to try and find out anything I possibly could.

“What’s your name?”

“Estela,” she told me.

“I’m Jacey,” I said awkwardly.

“I know.”

My eyes shifted back and forth as I tried to figure out a way to connect with this woman. She looked around my mother’s age and old enough to have children, so I grasped at straws.

“Do you have any children?” I asked her.

She nodded. “You met my son, Domingos.”

I knew the man who grabbed me outside was much too old to be this woman’s son, so she had to mean Leon’s cousin. *Good to know*. I was starting to put pieces together.

“This is my first,” I said, moving my hand to my stomach.

She turned again, so I tried to keep her talking before she could reach the door.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I admitted.

She sighed and then beckoned for me to follow her into the kitchen. She opened up a cabinet, setting bottles of vitamins on the counter. The labels were in Portuguese, so I couldn’t read them quickly enough to figure out what they were.

“Take these in the morning,” she said before grabbing another bottle and holding it out to me. “This if you feel sick.”

“Thank you,” I told her as I looked over the bottle in my hand.

“How long?” she asked me.

I realized she was asking me how long I’d be pregnant. The problem was, I didn’t know. I hadn’t even seen a doctor yet. I tried to do the math as quickly as possible. I’d missed two periods. I had to guess it happened shortly before Tavira.

“Eight weeks,” I guessed.

There was a world of things I didn’t know about the situation I was in but there were a few cards I held that Leon’s family didn’t know either. They didn’t know that this baby was an accident or that until I was captured Leon didn’t know about it. I planned to keep both of those facts close to my chest.

“The sickness gets worse at ten,” she warned me.

“I’m really scared,” I admitted. Though it was true, I hadn’t suddenly decided to open up to Estela. I just hoped that in an attempt to reassure me, she might tell me something useful.

“It’s okay. Leondro will come for you soon,” she said, patting my shoulder.

I didn’t know what that meant. Was she assuring me that Leon was going to rescue me? Or that Leon was somehow already here? I didn’t understand, but before I could ask any more, she moved swiftly out of the room. As the door shut, I heard the distinct click of a lock. This may have been an apartment but it was also a prison.



Five

Four Hours. I sat cross-legged on the hardwood floor of my strange little apartment for four hours. It could have been the shock of being kidnapped or the fact that I had nothing to do but wait. All I knew was I couldn't get myself to do anything else. In those hours, my mind twisted and spun circles around itself. I thought of every possible scenario and conceivable outcome, yet I got nowhere.

Leonro will come for you soon.

I could still hear Estela's voice in my head. *What did she mean?* On the one hand, maybe their intention was only to take me so that Leon would come here. On the other, perhaps all of this was his doing. What if none of it was even happening to me? What if Leon suddenly waltzed through that door, as he had in Tavira? I hated that I even had to consider that possibility, but Leon was no stranger to manipulating me.

I shook my head, coming to my senses for the first time in hours. This couldn't be Leon. I still hadn't come to terms with the things he had done over the last year, but I knew Leon loved me. He always had. He might have had a few misguided ways of showing it, but he wasn't some maniacal villain manipulating me for sport. Plus, Leon had already gotten what he wanted. I came back to him. There was no reason for him to orchestrate all this.

My breathing hitched as I heard the door unlock. I had no idea who would be on the other side. To my relief, I recognized the face that came into view. It was Estela once again. Her brows shot up as soon as she noticed me sitting on the floor with the lights off.

“Come with me.”

I was surprised that her son or one of the goons outside hadn't come to fetch me. I clung to the thought that perhaps she was protective over me. I certainly needed protection.

I followed Estela quietly, without argument. I didn't know where I was going, but the fact remained, I had no choice. We went back out into the hallway, passed a number of the wooden doors, and then stopped suddenly. I wasn't sure how you could tell one room from another in this place, but Estela stopped at the third door from the foyer and knocked loudly.

“*Entra.*” said a muffled, masculine-sounding voice from the other side of the door.

Estela opened the door and held it for me. The room was dimly lit, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the stark change in lighting from the bright hallway. When they did, I realized I was in a large study with dark mahogany furniture and an intimidating man staring at me from behind a colossal desk. I could only assume that this was who Leon's cousin was trying to warn me about.

“Have a seat,” he said.

He was direct. His voice wasn't threatening or angry, but I had the sense that this man was used to people following orders. I silently took a seat in a brown leather chair facing his desk. I watched as Estela approached him, kissed his cheek, and left. I had to assume that meant they were together in some way.

“Do you know why you're here?” he asked me.

“No one seems to want to answer that question, but I'm guessing you want my baby,” I said frankly.

He smirked, seeming amused with that statement.

“Do you know who I am?”

I took stock of the man in front of me. I hadn't realized it at first, but he bore a striking resemblance to the man who'd stormed into Constança's house in Tavira. The man in front of me was a bit older, his jaw was more square, and his hands were covered in tattoos, but there was no denying how similar they were.

"I'm guessing you're related to Leon," I said carefully.

"Uncle."

"So the man I met in Tavira?"

"My brother."

"And Leon's father?"

"Also my brother."

"And the man that abducted me?"

He chuckled at my assessment of the situation. I found it irritating how much I seemed to amuse this man.

"My son."

I nodded, committing what few facts I had been given to memory.

"So what am I doing here?"

Perhaps I was being a bit bold for someone who had just been abducted, but I also knew that cowering in a corner wasn't going to do me, or my baby, any good. I sat up straighter in the chair, trying to make myself look more in control than I ultimately was.

"You're pregnant, yes?"

"Do you intend on hurting my child?"

"Not if your husband does as he's told."

I paused for a moment. It was the first time anyone had ever referred to Leon as my husband. He wasn't, I wasn't exactly sure what he was—we hadn't had time to work it out, but I glanced down at the ring on my finger and decided to let his family believe what they wanted, at least for now.

"Do you intend on hurting me?"

He took a long and uncomfortable pause. His dark, unblinking eyes fixed on me as if he was deciding my fate right then and there.

“Not if you do as you’re told,” he said, his tone and eyes only growing darker as he spoke.

I didn’t flinch as I held this man’s gaze.

“I haven’t been told anything. I’ve just been abducted, man-handled, and locked in a room,” I shot back at him.

His recurring smirk reminded me of a cat playing with its dinner. I wanted to get away from that smirk as quickly as possible, but I knew there wasn’t anywhere for me to go.

“I can see why he picked you.”

Picked me?

“How long has the gene been in your family?”

I forced myself not to react. I had no idea what this man was talking about, but I knew the question most likely circled back to my child, so I had to tread carefully.

“I don’t know,” I said, choosing not to confirm or deny whatever he was asking me.

“Really?” he said, leaning forward in his seat. “It’s been that long?” He was pleased with the answer I didn’t give. Now, I just had to find some way to figure out what I’d implied.

I nodded, praying that my implication was enough to keep us safe.

“How long are you planning to hold me here?”

“Leondro already knows where you are. He decides to come back to his family, where he belongs, and you can go anywhere you want,” he said as if what he was implying was no big deal.

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then you’ll leave your son with his family, where he belongs,” he nearly growled at me.

My son.

I didn't know if shifters had some uncanny ability to tell the gender of babies before they were born or if this man was speaking hopefully. Nonetheless, I instinctively placed my hand protectively on my stomach. Son or daughter, they were mine.

"So let me just make sure I've got this straight. You plan to hold me prisoner until either Leon agrees to spend the rest of his life here or I have my child, and give him to you?"

He clicked his tongue. "You're not a prisoner. You're a guest."

"I'm here against my will," I asserted.

"This doesn't have to be as difficult as you're making it."

"Oh really? And how do you suppose we make this easy?" There was a bite in my voice. While it might have been wiser to play nice, I now knew that this man, whoever he was, wanted one of two things, my child or the man I loved. Something told me that even if he got one, what he wanted was both.

"How long have you and my nephew been together?"

"Ten years." Another lie, though it wasn't much of one. Truthfully, I didn't know what answers were right, and what answers were wrong. I just said anything I thought might help me.

"And when were you bound?"

Bound?

"A year ago."

His brows shot up, and immediately my heart rate picked up. Had I picked the wrong answer?

"They don't know?" he questioned.

"Who?" I asked carefully.

"Your family. They don't know what Leondro can do?"

My family. I couldn't imagine how scared Elise and my parents would be once they realized I was missing. I could feel my heart rate pick up as I imagined it. If the tables were turned I would have been terrified.

“No one does,” I admitted. Shaking the thoughts of my family from my mind. Thinking of them wouldn’t help me, not now.

“You protected him?”

“Of course, I did,” I snapped back.

I didn’t even know what we were talking about anymore. I had spun myself into a hole I couldn’t get out of.

The man suddenly stood up from his chair, a sound of excitement escaping him. It was something between a laugh and a cheer. He briskly came around the desk. I jumped out of my seat, unsure what he was doing or why he was coming toward me.

“I knew you belonged here!” he said before grabbing me by the shoulders and kissing both of my cheeks. “Such a clever girl!” he remarked before returning to his side of the desk.

What did I just say?

“You know as well as I do you that once there’s a bond, he has to come. So just *relax*,” he said. It sounded like I was talking to a completely different person. All of a sudden, his tone was so light and jovial.

“It’s hard to relax when I’m getting hit in the head and yanked out of cars.”

His face dropped a little. I knew this man ordered my kidnapping, but it seemed he didn’t know about the rest.

“I promise you, no more harm will come to you.”

I nodded.

Before we could continue this strange, spinning conversation, Estela popped her head in.

“Miguel, está na hora.”

Miguel, his name was Miguel.

“We’ll talk again soon,” he assured me.

Estela came toward me, about to usher me out of the room, but Miguel stopped her.

“Espera!” he said, commanding that we wait.

We both turned in his direction. Miguel pulled a small white box, covered in blue and pink text out of a drawer. He slapped it onto the desk in front of him. The movement was so abrupt that it made me jump.

“Make sure you take that,” he said assertively.

My hand shook as I reached out and grabbed the box. I didn’t understand all the words on the package, but the brand was familiar to me, and I knew it was a pregnancy test.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked though the request made that question redundant.

“Let’s just be sure,” he said before waving me dismissively out of his office.

I tried not to wonder what Miguel or anyone else here would do to me if I hadn’t been pregnant. I had no doubt what this or any pregnancy test would say, but I wondered if Domingos and the man with him had been in our apartment intending to kidnap me regardless or if the only reason I was here was because of the child growing inside of me.

When I got back to my apartment, Estela made an exaggerated point of turning on every light fixture and lamp in the place.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to the sofa in the center of the room.

I did as she asked and watched her shuffle into the kitchen. She put a kettle on and dug out two different boxes of tea from one of the cupboards.

“Which one?” she asked, holding them both up.

“I…” I didn’t even know that I wanted tea, but I wasn’t sure she was going to take no for an answer.

She rolled her eyes and seemed to decide on the darker of the two boxes without my input.

Moments later, she brought me a speckled turquoise mug, handed me the remote to the television mounted to the wall across from me, and gave me a pointed look.

“Don’t sit here in the dark,” was all she said before turning and once again locking me inside.



Six

Losing track of time was easy. There was an analog clock in the bedroom and another in the kitchen, but I didn't know what day it was, and I wasn't familiar enough with the time zones in South America to know what time it was back home. I fell asleep on the couch watching *Pantanal*, a Brazilian telenovela I couldn't make heads or tails of. My Portuguese was bad enough, but add in Brazilian accents and affectations to it and I was hopeless. At least the actors were pleasant to look at, and it gave me a momentary distraction from the terrifying reality of my situation.

The next thing I knew I was in a dorm room. I looked back and forth rapidly trying to figure out where I was. I stopped suddenly at the sight of Leon underneath the first of many tall blondes he dated during our friendship. The sight immediately made my stomach turn. They were making out like teenagers, but that was, of course, because they were in fact, teenagers. I was in yet another vision.

“Jesus Christ!” I exclaimed as I threw my head back in annoyance. Of all the things I could have been seeing, watching Leon make out with Elise's college roommate was the last thing I wanted.

Why was I seeing this?

The makeout session continued for so long that I covered my eyes to avoid watching it.

Suddenly, I heard the distinct and rather annoying sound of Leon's ringtone. It was 2013, which meant that instead of the standard factory ring, people were still using those tacky fifteen-second clips of songs. Leon, at the time, had one ringtone for everyone else and one that told him immediately it was me—the opening guitar riff to Metallica's *Nothing Else Matters*. Thinking back on it, that should have been a dead giveaway that he had feelings for me, but I was painfully oblivious.

Leon reached for his phone on the nightstand next to Emma's bed.

The combination of Leon reaching for his phone and Emma hearing that specific ring caused her to immediately get off of him.

“You've got to be kidding me!” she groaned.

Leon just stared down at the phone as it rang.

“Leon!”

He didn't even look up at her.

“Leon, do not pick up the phone,” she warned.

He glanced up at her for only a second before he picked up. There was a part of me that almost wanted to laugh at the way he so blatantly ignored her.

“Hey, is everything okay?”

It wasn't. My grandmother was in the hospital, and I called Leon to tell him I was going home to Connecticut for the weekend. I could hear that version of myself crying on the phone.

“Leon!” Emma shouted.

Leon glared at her from his seat on the bed. “Jace, I'm so sorry. Just stay there. I'll come with you.”

I remembered telling him that he didn't have to do that.

“I'm not letting you take the train all the way to Connecticut when you're like this. I'll be right there,” he said.

I tried to tell him that it probably wouldn't be a lot of fun dealing with my emotional family all weekend.

"It doesn't matter. You're my family, and so are they. I'm coming. Give me 20 minutes."

Leon didn't even seem to be planning to explain the situation to his angry girlfriend. He just hung up the phone and gathered his things.

"Where exactly are you going?" she demanded.

"I have to go," he said, brushing her off.

"You're seriously going to see Jacey? Right now?"

"Her grandma is in the hospital. Elise is already on the way down there with her boyfriend, and I don't want her taking the train alone," he finally explained.

"She's twenty years old. She can ride a train by herself," Emma countered, crossing her arms as she spoke.

I was dumbfounded by what I was seeing. Leon never told me he was with Emma when this happened. He just came running the moment I called like he always did.

"Her grandmother is dying! I wouldn't let you ride the train for four hours when you were scared of losing a family member, either!" he practically shouted back at her.

"We both know that isn't what this is!"

"Emma..." Leon warned.

"Just admit it!"

"Stop!"

"Everyone warned me about this!" Emma said as she started pacing the room.

"Leave it alone!"

"You're in love with her!"

They both just froze. I expected Leon to deny it, but he just ran a hand through his dark hair and looked away from her. His face dropped with guilt.

"I have to go," Leon finally said.

“If you go this is over,” she fired.

“Goodbye, Emma.”

I watched Leon rush out the door. Suddenly, it made sense why Emma had maintained that she broke up with him because he was in love with me. She had been saying it for years. I always thought she was crazy or jealous, but it turned out, not only was it true, but without saying a word Leon had told her as much.

I woke to the sound of someone throwing the front door open so hard that it hit the wall behind it. I jolted upright and blinked several times as my brain struggled to remember where I was or the man standing in the doorway.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” Domingos asked me angrily.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. “What are you talking about?” I whined.

Nervously, he looked behind him, checking down the hall, before he stepped into the apartment and closed the door.

“You told him you were a shifter!”

I continued to look at Domingos in complete confusion when it dawned on me. He was talking about the conversation I had with his father.

“I did no such thing,” I protested, glaring at him from across the room.

“He asked you how long the gene had been in your family,” Domingos shot back.

“So? I told him I didn’t know!”

“He thinks that means your line is so long that you don’t know the answer,” he responded angrily.

“Maybe it is,” I said with a shrug.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. No, it’s not!” he challenged me, crossing his tanned arms over his chest.

“How do you know?”

I watched his defined jaw clench as he looked down at me from where he stood. I still found it hard to look at him for very long. He looked too much like Leon. There were small differences. Domingos was younger and a little shorter than Leon was. He looked more like the version of Leon I met when I was nineteen than the Leon I knew now, but the similarities still made my chest ache.

“When was the first time you changed faces, *linda*?” he asked, narrowing his eyes on me.

“I...” I started, but couldn’t seem to come up with an answer quickly enough.

“Women can’t shift! If you’d come from shifters you would fucking know that!” he was somehow managing to whisper and yell at me all at the same time.

“Fine, I lied!” I said, throwing my hands up in the air.

I hadn’t exactly lied. I just let the man who’d ordered my abduction believe what he wanted to believe. I couldn’t exactly be blamed for that.

“Why? Why would you do that?” he demanded.

“I’m just trying to protect my baby!”

“You just made your baby seem ten times more valuable to him!”

Fuck. My heart sank into my stomach, and I covered my face with my hands. I had no idea what I was doing.

I could hear Domingos’ footsteps as he paced back and forth across the living room in frustration, but I refused to look up at him.

“Why the hell do you care?” I muttered through my hands.

My question stopped his pacing, but I still wouldn’t glance up. I couldn’t keep looking at that face. It was torture.

“Because if he finds out, he’s not going to kill you himself. He’s going to make me do it.”

I felt a sickening chill crawl up my spine. Until that moment, I didn’t realize just how serious all of this was. I remained eerily calm. His words should have rocked me to my core. They

should have sent me screaming, clawing at the walls to get out. Instead, I felt something else come over me. Something steely and determined that I didn't recognize in myself.

You have to get out of here, Jacey. You have to find a way.

I finally made myself look up, and to my surprise, Domingos had a very real look of concern on his face. I had a hard time believing this was the same man who'd kidnapped me. There was no doubt in my mind that he was dangerous, but he also protected me, and he seemed to still be trying to do that. I didn't understand, but I could use any ally I could get, even an unlikely one.

"How do we keep him from finding out?" I asked before biting my bottom lip to keep it from trembling.

One of his dark brows shot up immediately. "*We?*"

"Do you want to kill me?"

"I don't take pleasure in murdering defenseless pregnant women," he shot back at me angrily.

"Then I don't see an alternative."

"I'm not doing this," Domingos said as he shook his head and turned toward the door. I could only imagine what was at risk for him, but I knew exactly what was at risk for me if he didn't help. I had to do something.

"Domingos..." I called out.

He froze at the sound of his name.

"Dom," he corrected me. "And where did you pick that up, *linda?*" he said over his shoulder.

"Your mom," I told him honestly.

I opened my mouth to speak again, to implore him to help me, but I realized I had no idea how to appeal to him. I knew almost nothing about the man in front of me other than he was completely obnoxious, wouldn't stop calling me beautiful, and while he had no qualms about abducting me, he didn't want to kill me.

"I just need your help until Leon gets here," I admitted.

Dom snorted as he turned to face me fully. “If you were my wife and I knew Miguel was out there, I never would have left you alone in the first place. *Que estupidez!*” *Fucking stupid!*

“I’m not,” I interrupted.

I probably shouldn’t have offered that information, but I hoped that in trusting him, even a little, I might win him over.

Dom tilted his head to the side, a confused look on his handsome face.

“I’m not his wife. We... were engaged, and I got pregnant but...” I thought for a split second about telling him that we’d broken up, but there were some cards I had to keep close to my chest. “I’m not his wife.”

“You are now.”

“What?”

“You told Miguel the two of you were bound.”

“What does that mean?”

Dom rolled his eyes and stalked across the room, sitting next to me on the couch.

“I guess the easy way to explain is that it’s the way shifters pledge their lives to each other,” he said.

“So like a shifter wedding?” I asked skeptically. The idea sounded rather ridiculous.

“Yes, but it’s more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no ‘shifter divorce’. Once you’re bound you’re with that person for the rest of your life. If you try to break it, hell even if you’re separated for too long, it causes pain, a lot of pain.”

I quietly took in the information. That explained why Estela and Miguel thought that Leon would be here soon. As far as they knew, he physically wouldn’t be able to stay away.

“What does it feel like?”

Dom turned and looked at me. He held my gaze so long it was unnerving. I had to look away.

“I don’t know,” he muttered.

“You aren’t...”

“Are you asking if I’m single, *linda*?” he said, making yet another show of flirting with me.

“*Jesus Christ*, can you get over yourself for two minutes?” I said, rolling my eyes. This little game he was playing was not only annoying but it wasn’t helping. “How is it supposed to feel?” I pressed on.

“When it’s good, it’s supposed to feel safe. Like you’re tied to something bigger than yourself. When it’s bad, it’s like your rib cage is trying to rip its way out of your chest.”

“So it’s like being in love?”

“I wouldn’t know that, either,” Dom mumbled.

“What if you’re bound to the wrong person?”

Dom let out an empty laugh. I didn’t know how to interpret it, but it was clear he had feelings on the subject.

“Too bad,” he shrugged.

“That seems cruel.”

“You’ll learn a lot about how cruel our world is,” he said, his voice lower than before.

Again I felt chills but I tried not to let him shake me. If kidnappings and murder were any indication of what this world was like, it was no wonder that Constança had been so desperate to shield Leon from it.

I thought back to my conversation with Miguel. If Dom was going to give me information, I needed to ask as many questions as I possibly could before he could change his mind or think better of helping me.

“Miguel was surprised that my *family* didn’t know what Leon can do...”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t...” I shifted uncomfortably.

“Wait! You don’t know?” Dom asked, sounding genuinely shocked.

I shrugged my shoulders. All I knew about Leon’s abilities were that they were “uncommon” and that his father’s abilities were too, but I didn’t know *how* they were different or why that was so important.

Dom shook his head in disbelief.

“So not only did my cousin knock up a human, but he didn’t even bother to tell you what he’s capable of?”

“Obviously not!” I snapped.

His laughter this time wasn’t hollow. It was full and booming. The entire room was filled with it.

“Are you done?” I finally asked when his laughter didn’t subside.

“This is just too good! I spent my whole life hearing about how *great* and *powerful* Matheo was and how Leondro was just like his father. Miguel would have a heart attack if he heard this!”

“Just tell me!”

“When a shifter changes faces they can only stay that way for a few hours, at most. If we don’t turn back it’s... messy. Leondro doesn’t have to turn back.”

Leon’s words echoed in my head. “*I was prepared to be whoever you chose for the rest of my life.*”

“What do you mean by messy?” I dared to ask. Though I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to know the answer.

“Have you ever seen Cabin Fever?”

“Of course, I have. Who hasn’t—” I immediately froze, and my face contorted in disgust. Images of flesh and blood graphically melting off bodies until they were nothing but bone filled my head. “Holy shit!” was the only thing I could think to say.

“Exactly.”

I shook my head and took in a sharp breath. I loved horror films, but given the situation, the last thing I wanted to picture was gory deaths.

“So why doesn’t it happen to Leon?” I asked.

“We don’t know. Mutated genes, maybe? Matheo was the only other shifter that could do it.”

I leaned in, completely fascinated by the idea that the only two shifters that were capable of this were Leon and his father. “Why is that so important?”

“I can’t tell you that, *linda*,” Dom said, leaning away from me.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“You wanted me to tell you what you needed to know in order to stay alive.”

“Okay but—”

“That also means *only* telling you what you need to know in order to stay alive.”

The longer I sat there with Dom, the more I felt a sort of guilt pool in my stomach. This was everything I had been so desperate for Leon to hide. When I found out what he could do, I insisted that we go back to New York and pretend it didn’t exist. Not only was I forcing the man I love to hide a part of himself for my benefit, but maybe if I hadn’t there was a possibility that I might have been prepared, that I might not have ended up in Brazil with strange men threatening my life.

Dom’s head snapped to the door as the sound of footsteps echoed in the hall.

“I should go,” he said softly.

“But—” I started to protest.

Dom placed a finger to his lips. “I’ll be back. Just try to avoid answering any more questions,” he whispered.

I nodded and then watched as he quietly slid out the door.



Seven

Following the instructions Dom gave me was easy. It wasn't exactly hard to avoid answering questions when no one was there to ask any. I was left alone for days. The only person who came in or out was an old woman with wispy, gray hair and wrinkled, olive skin. She would bring me food and clean the apartment, but never said a word. In fact, she didn't so much as look me in the eye. I should have been grateful that there were no more interrogations. No men came bursting through the front door, but neither did Leon. I would stare out the window for hours and imagine him swooping in to save me as he had so many times before, but the longer it took, the more alone I felt.

I didn't understand his absence. My emotions ranged from anger to fear, but I spent most of my time trying to dissect any possible reason he would leave me here. Millions of scenarios filled my head, but none of them made sense. At best, I thought Leon might be coming up with some elaborate rescue plan. At worst, I thought he might value his freedom more than he did me and certainly more than a child he never wanted. The man I knew would have moved mountains for me. Leon wanted me so badly he spent a year physically becoming other people to be near me, and now, I was being held hostage and in very real danger, and he did nothing. *Nothing.*

By the fifth day, I was starting to accept that if I wanted out of this mess, I was going to have to find a way out on my own. I

couldn't trust that I would be safe once Leon's family put all the pieces together, so I had to escape before they figured out I'd lied to them. The problem was the longer Leon stayed away, the less time he gave me. How long were they going to believe that Leon was in physical pain being apart from me when he refused to show up?

Night fell. I hated night most of all. It had been eerily quiet since the last time I'd seen a face I recognized. When I wasn't trying to drown out the silence with TV shows I didn't understand, it was so unbearably dead I could hear a pin drop in the hallway. There were no voices, no footsteps, just an almost maddening stillness. My stomach lurched as I considered the possibility that maybe it wasn't just Leon that abandoned me. Maybe Dom and Estela had too. I didn't put it past anyone here to lock me up until I gave birth. Why would they need to interact with me?

Nausea started to rise as the idea of giving birth in a tiny apartment in a foreign country, completely alone, began slithering its way into my mind. I knew next to nothing about childbirth, and what little Nia told me after giving birth to Nichelle didn't exactly make it seem like a walk in the park. My breathing started to pick up even though it would be months before I was anywhere near giving birth. My thoughts became more and more disjointed and irrational. I stood up from the couch and paced the room, trying to get my head straight. I thought back to Leon, back to the way he could always calm me down when panic attacks set in. *Where are you?*

Tears started to stream down my face when I heard the door to my apartment unlock. I was so worked up that I couldn't form a reasonable thought or reaction, and so instead of waiting for the door to open and reveal the person standing on the other side, I let out a blood-curdling scream that echoed through the empty house.

"Fuck!" Dom rushed into the room, shoving the door shut behind him. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I didn't respond. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that I should have been relieved, but I couldn't get words out of my mouth. I bent forward, another wave of nausea hitting me like a truck.

“*Meu Deus!* O-okay, just um...” Dom rushed toward me but had no idea what to do. He reached a hand out to touch me but thought better of it. Instead, he crouched down to meet me at eye level.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked again. If I had any lingering doubts that Dom was Leon, they were gone. Dom was staring at me, eyes wide and palms clenched. I could tell that my panic was making him panic.

“I need air!” I managed to gasp out. The longer I was stuck in that apartment, the more I started to feel the walls closing in on me.

“Okay, okay, *linda*. Just... hold on...” he stammered out before I heard the sound of a glass door sliding open and felt the night air rush into the room. I snapped my head toward the window to the courtyard. I didn’t know why I hadn’t realized that it was a door, more importantly, it was a door that wasn’t locked.

Dom returned to me, holding out a hand for me to take. I grabbed onto him just long enough to pull myself upright but let go as I clamored out the door and into the courtyard. It was much cooler outside, but the humidity instantly made my clothes stick to my body. I looked up above me, and for the first time in nearly a week, I could see the sky. The relief of even a moment of freedom was enough to snap me out of my attack.

“Are you okay?” Dom finally asked me after a long moment of staring at me from a safe distance.

I nodded as he cautiously came closer.

“I like the idea of making you scream, but that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” he said with a grin that was nothing short of feline.

“Fuck you,” I responded, shooting him a dirty look.

“Lead the way...” he said, gesturing back toward the apartment.

“What are you doing here?”

“Answer my question first...”

“You didn’t ask one.”

“What. Is. Wrong?” he asked, over-enunciating each word in the sentence to further drive the point home that he was repeating himself.

“I—” There weren’t any words for what I just experienced, at least not any that I thought Dom would understand. “I panic sometimes,” was all I could settle on. I didn’t know how to explain to him that I had somehow convinced myself that his family planned to lock me up for months and let me give birth alone, with no medical intervention. Visions of bleeding out on the floor of that apartment had coiled themselves around the only reasoning I had left.

“You panic?”

“What are you doing here?”

Dom rolled his dark brown eyes at me. “I’m checking on you. What else would I be doing here?”

It wasn’t until that moment that I took stock of what Dom looked like. He was a mess. His hair was disheveled, his right eye was reasonably bruised, and his left had a gash next to it that looked like it met someone’s fist more than a few times. Both of his hands were poorly wrapped and injured as well.

“What happened?” I gapped.

His familiar and rather annoying smirk reappeared. “Aw, are you worried about me, *linda*?”

“I just want to know who to thank,” I shot back.

“It’s nothing.”

“Seriously, what happened?”

Dom signed heavily. He looked around as he so often did. He always seemed to be concerned that we were being watched.

“You know how I said there were things I won’t tell you to keep you alive?”

I nodded though I was still in the dark about what exactly he was referring to.

“It’s one of those things.”

I ran a hand over my face. I reassessed what information I had. The reason Leon's abilities were so important was both something Dom wouldn't tell me and somehow led to him looking like he'd been in a bar fight. I was no closer to answers, but I held on tightly to everything I knew. I wanted to press Dom for more information, but I seriously doubted that he would tell me more than he already had.

I glanced at his hands again before holding mine out to him expectantly. "Let me see."

Dom's dark brows knit together as he looked down at my hand. He lifted his right hand very slowly and placed it in mine.

"We seriously need to work on your first aid skills," I said as I lifted the bandage and examined the raw, exposed flesh over his bruised knuckles.

I let go of his hand and started walking back into the apartment. "Come on..." I said over my shoulder as I motioned for him to follow me.

To my surprise, Dom didn't put up a fight or even question me. He just followed me through the living room and into the bedroom.

"Sit," I commanded, pointing to the edge of my bed. Again, he did what I said without so much as a snarky remark. I would have taken the time to wonder what was wrong with him, but instead, I focused on the adjoining bathroom and pulled out anything I could find that might be useful. There wasn't alcohol or peroxide, but there was iodine, bandages, and what looked to be an antibiotic ointment of some kind.

I brought the collection of items back into the room and dropped them in a pile on the bed. I grabbed both of Dom's hands and slowly unwrapped the sorry excuse for bandages around them.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked me, his gaze never leaving my hands.

"You're helping me. The least I can do is help you."

Once again, he didn't argue, he just watched.

“This is going to suck,” I warned before dabbing an iodine-soaked cotton ball over his badly scraped knuckles. Dom let out a hiss and tried to pull away. I grabbed his wrists and pulled them back in front of me.

“You’re fine.”

“If you’re going to be a mother, you’re going to have to be more sympathetic,” he grumbled.

“If you’re going to get into fights, you’re going to have to be less of a baby.”

I continued my work on his hands until they were properly cleaned and bandaged. I then moved on to his face. Gently, I reached forward and pressed my fingertips against the bruise around his eye. Another hiss.

“Does that hurt?” I teased him.

“I’m starting to think you’re enjoying this,” he said.

I couldn’t help but smile. As I cleaned up the gash underneath his other eye, I could have sworn I heard his breathing slow. When I pulled back to look at him, Dom still seemed confused.

“What?”

“Nothing I just...”

“You just... what?” I prodded.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever cared enough to do that,” he said, looking up at me through his dark lashes.

My face dropped as I remembered Leon saying something similar to me once. When I admitted that I was learning Portuguese in case anything ever happened to him, he said he didn’t think anyone had ever cared that much.

The idea that both men had been so neglected that something so small seemed so monumental made my heart hurt. Dom warned me that I would learn quickly just how cruel their world was, and it was clear he was right.

“Just because I don’t want you to get an infection doesn’t mean I care,” I said, before shuffling back off to the bathroom.

A small chuckle escaped him. "I guess I owe you one," he called after me as I started to return my pile of first aid supplies to the drawers they came from.

"No, you owe me three. Two hands, one eye. Three."

"Three it is, *linda*"



Eight

The following morning, the silence in the house seemed to have come to an end. I heard more people in the hallway in the first hour I was awake than I had in days. I couldn't make out the conversations they were having or where they were going, but knowing that I wasn't alone made me feel slightly more optimistic about Leon's family and their plans for me. I wondered why the house was deserted in the first place. Had it really been empty, or had they just been avoiding this side of the house for some reason?

I made a cup of tea, sat on the tiny couch in the living room, and just listened. It seemed strange that the presence of other people would make me feel relief in a situation like this, but being alone seemed infinitely more frightening. I looked over my shoulder at the glass door I now knew wasn't locked. It only led to an inner courtyard but it was a way out of my apartment. A way out of my apartment was a start.

Before I could dive further into hatching an escape plan, my thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. *A knock?* So far, no one bothered to knock. Dom, Estela, and even the housekeeper all barged in the room unannounced anytime they wanted to. I sat there looking puzzled, but the person on the other side of the door persisted and knocked again. Slowly I got up to speak to whoever it was. I was locked in. I couldn't exactly let them inside.

“Yes?” I said, raising my voice enough that I could be heard.

“Can I come in?” I heard Dom’s unmistakable accent say from the other side of the door.

“You’re knocking?” I asked.

“I didn’t want you to scream your head off again,” he answered.

My mouth dropped open. I was genuinely shocked. *He didn’t want to scare me.* I was beginning to figure out that Dom wasn’t the monster I originally thought he was. I wasn’t naive enough to trust him, and I was still aware of the fact that he and Victor brought me here in the first place, but for whatever reason, he seemed to genuinely want to help me. Now he was even being considerate.

“Um... yeah... come in...”

When he unlocked the door, I was again surprised when I noticed people moving past him in the hallway. Usually, Dom seemed to be sneaking in and out of my apartment. He was always on constant guard, fearful someone might be watching. This time, he didn’t seem phased at all that he could be spotted.

I shook my head, hoping to shake off the stunned look on my face, and stepped aside to let him in.

“What do you want?”

“You should get dressed,” he said.

It was then I noticed that Dom was uncharacteristically put together. It wasn’t the designer suits I was so used to seeing Leon wear, but the shirt had buttons and a collar. His pants were pressed, and that wavy, dark hair of his had been carefully styled.

“In what?” I said, my brows furrowed in confusion.

“Oh, you don’t—”

“You didn’t exactly give me time to pack a bag,” I snipped

When I arrived, I had the clothes on my back and what few items of clothing were in the apartment, left behind by god knows who. There was a nightgown, a pair of sweatpants, a cardigan sweater, and a couple of camisoles. They were neither

my style nor my size, but I didn't exactly have any other options.

"I'll see if Taia has something," he muttered.

"Who's—"

Before I could finish asking who exactly was supposed to have something for me to wear, Dom was gone.

Fifteen minutes later, another knock.

This time Dom had a pistachio-colored sundress in his right hand.

"Put this on."

I reached for the garment. The color was all wrong. I was far too pale to look even halfway decent in that shade of green. I looked up at Dom, intent on saying something snarky about it, but I noticed the look on his face. He was always nervous, but this was different. Instead of being on high alert the way he usually was, there was a shadow of dread hovering over his expression.

"Give me a minute," I said, shutting the door on him.

I didn't know how to read the situation. I had a million questions. Was something wrong? Had Leon's family figured out the truth? If so, why would they have me dress up for the occasion?

I went into the bathroom, and with trembling hands, I put on the dress. Despite the unappealing color, it fit perfectly. I looked at myself in the mirror as I finished tying myself into it. *You can do this, Jacey. Whatever it is. You can do this.*

As soon as I was satisfied with how I looked, I walked back to the front door and opened it for Dom.

"Okay, I'm dressed," I shrugged.

"Okay, let's go..."

I took an unsteady step out into the hallway, and without looking back at me, Dom just started walking.

"Where are we going?" I asked as I hurried to catch up with him.

“Church,” Dom said dryly.

“What! Why?” I asked, stopping suddenly.

Dom whipped around to face me.

“You’re not Catholic?”

“No!”

“You are now,” Dom said before continuing his march down the hallway.

I hurried to catch up with him.

“Why am I suddenly Catholic?”

“Miguel isn’t going to believe you’ve been with a Portuguese man for ten years, and you’re not a Catholic,” Dom said under his breath.

“Leon’s an atheist!” I whispered, matching his tone.

Dom shook his head. “Does he just hate everything about this family?”

“Yes...” I responded without really thinking.

“You’re not helping,” he grumbled.

Outside the front door, a black town car waited for us. We were alone. Whoever was in the hallway must have gone ahead. Dom took a step toward the car, but I reached out and grabbed his arm.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I admitted.

“Don’t worry, *linda*. I won’t let anything happen to you,” he assured me.

The drive was silent and tense. I found myself twisting uncomfortably in the leather seats. The dress itself wasn’t uncomfortable, but the turning in my stomach was. I couldn’t tell anymore what was anxiety and what was the baby.

“It’s just church,” Dom reassured me.

It wasn’t just church if Leon’s entire family was going to be there. I now had to pull off pretending to be a Catholic as well as a shifter, and I knew nothing about either.

Eventually, we pulled up to a long Mediterranean blue staircase. As I stepped out of the car, my eyes followed the steps up to a small white building surrounded by thick greenery. There was something oddly comforting about the sight of it. I didn't believe the almighty was hanging out there, but it reminded me of Constança's house in Tavira. That house had once been Leon's home and, for better or worse, Leon was my home. It was a flimsy association at best, but I was grasping at anything to keep my fears at bay.

Dom motioned for me to follow him. I trailed behind slowly, step by ominous step. He waited at the heavy wooden door, and as soon as my foot hit the top step, he held it open for me.

Every head in the room, including the priest turned to the open door, and the intrusive light that filled the dark sanctuary. My shoulders lifted instinctively, and I crossed my arms over my chest as I shuffled into the last pew. I expected the attention to turn back to the sermon at hand, but the eyes on me lingered for much longer than I was comfortable with. I recognized a few faces. Estela and Miguel were at the front of the room. Victor sat in the pew directly across from them with a curly-haired woman I didn't recognize sitting close to him. Eventually, the interest in my entrance wore off, and everyone started to turn around as the priest resumed speaking. *Almost everyone.*

Still staring was a tall, slender girl in her early twenties. She had golden brown hair and pale, freckled skin. I couldn't help but notice that she looked just as out of place as I did. It was the unmistakable Selkie dress she was wearing, however, that led me to believe she might be American. She subtly tried to make a come-here motion with her hand, but it wasn't me she was looking at, it was Dom. I turned to watch him hastily shake his head before the effervescent expression dropped from her youthful face, and she abruptly turned around.

I wanted to ask him about her. Dom said he wasn't bound to anyone, but this girl didn't look like a relative, and she certainly didn't look at Dom like family would. However, before I got the chance to say anything, Dom reached forward and pulled the kneeler down in front of us.

"Just follow along," he instructed.

I kneeled next to him in the pew, and so started some strange call and response ritual where the priest would say something, and everyone in the room would repeat a phrase back to him. My limited Portuguese didn't exactly include religious words, so I didn't know what I was saying. All I could do was try not to look confused.

The whole thing kept going and going. Eventually, out of boredom I looked over at Dom. He smiled at me, and I immediately knew what was coming.

“Don't you dare!” I whispered, immediately directing my focus back at the priest.

“You look good on your knees, *linda*.”

Normally, I found Dom's shameless advances obnoxious, but this time I slapped a hand over my mouth as I snorted back laughter.

Thankfully, no one seemed to notice. No one, except the girl in the Selkie dress.

“We're in a church!” I scolded him, still trying to keep my voice as low as possible.

“Remind me to tell you about the things I want to do in a church,” he said with a grin.

This time I did roll my eyes. The priest started his sermon, or whatever the Catholic version of that might have been, and we sat back down on the pew. I took a deep breath. I wasn't sure how long it would be before I had to participate again, but at least for the moment, all I had to do was look like I was listening.

“Who is that?” I murmured as I leaned slightly into Dom, nodding in the direction of our audience.

Dom shot a glance at her and then gestured at her to turn around. She did, but she didn't look happy about it.

“Caroline,” he responded, his voice unreadable.

Caroline wasn't a Portuguese name, so I had to assume I was right about her nationality. Now I needed to know why she was here.

“And why can’t she stop looking at you?”

“She’s my—”

Before Dom could answer, the priest said something, and I watched him visibly cringe.

“Shit!” he coughed out under his breath.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sacrament,” he responded.

“So?” I asked, having no clue why that was a problem.

“You’re not really Catholic,” he said, though I still wasn’t following.

“And?”

“You can’t take the sacrament if you aren’t a Catholic.”

I watched the room get up and slowly form a line in front of the priest.

“I am now,” I said, tossing my hands in the air and repeating what was becoming Dom’s catchphrase, and without his help or permission, I got up from my seat.

“I’m going to hell,” Dom muttered as he followed after me.

“I guess we’re going together then,” I whispered before reaching the end of the line.

I immediately wished I hadn’t gotten up before Dom because I couldn’t use him as an example. The only hope I had now was watching the people in front of me and doing the same thing they did.

Hands together, step forward, bow your head, the priest says something, say Amen, open your mouth, have a circle cracker put in your mouth, and step away.

The steps were simple enough though not altogether sanitary. I just kept repeating them in my head while trying to look reverent.

I could feel my body tense up as I reached the front of the line, but I managed to get through it without incident.

I returned to my seat, and Dom followed after me. We both sat silently for a moment before he leaned in.

“Linda menina,” Good Girl, he whispered.

I feigned a smile, and tried to pretend I didn't know what those words meant and tried even harder to pretend they hadn't affected me.



Nine

If I believed in a God, I would have been on my knees praising him for getting me through that service undetected. I wasn't out of the woods yet, but small victories were all I had.

The rest of the congregation filed out of the sanctuary, but Dom and I stayed seated. There were more than a few glances in my direction, some were curious, others indifferent, and there were even a few looks that seemed to pity me. I didn't know how to interpret any of them. I wasn't even sure who these people were.

When the room was clear, Dom finally turned to me.

"It's not over yet," he said, and my heart sank. The moment I thought I might be getting my footing, another obstacle appeared.

"What do you mean?"

"That was the easy part," he said. "Now we gather."

"Gather?"

First, church, now family gatherings? I didn't understand. Wasn't I just a means to an end? As far as I knew, I was bait to get Leon to come to them. Why not just lock me in a room until he showed up?

“It’s just lunch,” he said. It was the same emotionless way he told me it was *just church* hours ago. In Dom’s mind, it probably was, but in mine, it was another threat.

I leaned forward, placing my elbows on my knees and covering my face with my hands. I knew falling head first into another panic attack wouldn’t do me any good, but it was getting increasingly difficult to keep it together. Despite all my determination, I wasn’t sure I could keep doing this. I didn’t know anything about the things I was pretending to be.

“Stop that,” Dom commanded, and though I couldn’t see him it was like I could hear him rolling his eyes at me. He reached for me, pulling my hands from my face and then grabbing my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“I will not let anything happen to you,” he repeated slowly.

We just stared at each other for a long moment. I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could, the doors behind us swung open, and two women were standing in the middle of the aisle. Caroline was staring daggers into the back of Dom’s head as he held my face. Next to her was a woman I didn’t recognize but who bore a striking resemblance to Estela.

I pulled away from Dom quickly, nodding toward our audience.

“*O que é que queres?*” *What do you want?* Dom grumbled.

“English, please!”

Well, that settled it. Selkie had a sickeningly sweet, high-pitched voice, peppered with a Southern twang. She was undeniably American. Now I had to figure out what she was doing here.

“What do you want?” Dom said, sounding even grouchier than he had before.

“Miguel wants you,” the other woman said, as she nodded toward the door.

Dom looked from me to them and back again several times. He seemed to be fighting some internal battle. Ultimately, with a very guilty glance in my direction, he chose the door and left me behind.

Neither woman missed a beat. The one that looked like Estela immediately took Dom's seat, and the American sat down in the pew in front of me, twisting herself around to face us.

"You're Leandro's wife? Jacey, right?"

I nodded as I looked between the two of them.

"I'm Taia. This is Caroline."

I remembered Dom saying he would ask Taia for a dress. I figured it was a safe enough topic.

"Thank you for letting me borrow this," I said, cautiously, looking down at the off-colored green garment.

"It looks better on you than it does on me anyway," she responded.

I looked at the woman next to me and immediately knew that wasn't true. She could have easily been one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen up close. Taia was tall and curvaceous with a deep tan and a mane of raven hair that fell to the middle of her back. She seriously looked like she belonged in one of the telenovelas that I had been using to keep me company in that terrible apartment.

"I doubt that," I said honestly.

"Where are you from?" Caroline finally piped in.

"New York." That was one of the few things I knew I could be honest about without saying the wrong thing. "What about you?"

"Texas."

"What are you doing here?" I asked, without taking a moment to filter myself.

I realized my error as soon as a quizzical look appeared on her freckled face. "Same as you, honey," she said as if the answer were obvious.

Oh great, she's waiting for Leon to come to rescue her and their unborn child too?

"She's my brother's intended," Taia explained.

It took me a minute to put the pieces together, but I quickly realized that by her brother, she meant Dom. The resemblance to Estela made it obvious.

Intended? Like Fiancé? My eyes settled on the ring on Caroline's left finger. He said he wasn't bound to anyone. Clearly, that was a lie. Suddenly, a sense of guilt crept in. I had no interest in Dom but I didn't exactly fight him when he hit on me so relentlessly. He also had no problem kissing me on the plane. I hated to admit it, but there were even a few moments I enjoyed the distraction of his attention. I didn't know Caroline, but I still felt somewhat responsible.

"Congratulations," I said, trying not to let my face reveal how my mind was twisting in circles.

"Thank you!" she said, still sounding as saccharin as ever, but there was just the tiniest hint of an edge in her voice. Most people wouldn't have noticed, but it stood out to me. No wonder she was staring at Dom and me through the entire service.

"Are you coming to the gathering?" Taia asked me.

The gathering sounded like it came complete with white cloaks and blood sacrifices, but I had two jobs: pretend and survive. No matter what kind of gathering this was, I had to act like it was normal.

"Yeah, of course," I said with a shrug.

"Ride with us, then!" Taia said, standing up quickly and extending a hand to me.

I didn't know where Dom was, but I didn't dare mention him in front of Caroline. I reached for Taia's hand and let her help me up. Once I'd stepped out of the pew and into the aisle, both women slid their arms into mine and escorted me out of the church.

I had never been a *girl's girl*. There was a reason my best friend was a man, after all. There were a handful of women I got along with, but typically I felt out of place amongst them. This situation was no exception.

Outside the church, the two women ushered me toward a car. In the distance, Dom was talking to his father with a rather

solemn look on his face. The moment he caught a glimpse of his fiancé and his sister escorting me out of the church, his expression turned both concerned and apologetic.

Just act like this is normal.

The focus swung right back in my direction as the three of us got situated in the car.

“Everyone has been talking about the baby. You must be so excited!” Taia said.

That did nothing to ease my nerves. I didn’t want anyone talking about *my* baby. However, I knew the only way to keep us both safe was to pretend like I was complying.

“It was a bit of a surprise. I think I’m still getting used to it,” I admitted.

I figured that the best policy was to use the truth whenever possible. I’d have less to remember that way.

“Wait. You mean you and Leondro were bound, and you weren’t trying?” Caroline piped in.

I could tell I hadn’t given the right answer, but Caroline’s confusion told me a lot about the part women played in this world.

“Well, we certainly weren’t preventing it,” I said with a laugh. “It’s just my first, so I wasn’t sure how soon it would happen,” I added.

The confused look disappeared from Caroline’s face, and she nodded in understanding. I may not have known what was going on, but I was good at getting myself out of sticky situations.

“He’ll be the first in his generation of the family. He’ll probably get everything,” Taia mused.

“Hey!” Caroline warned. I assumed she was concerned about the inheritance of whatever children she and Dom might have.

“It’s not her fault, she was first,” Taia said.

There was that mysterious him again. Why did everyone seem to be sure that my baby was a boy?

“No one else has children?” I asked instead, knowing the question was safer and more likely to be answered.

“Victor has three, a girl and two boys but they’re *inútil*,” Taia explained.

“*Inútil*?” I repeated. The words meant *useless*, but I didn’t understand it in this context.

“Oh, right! What’s the word American shifters use for it?” Taia said, turning to Caroline.

“Scrap,” she said without even a flicker of emotion in her adorably freckled face.

I still had no idea what that meant, but I didn’t like the sound of it. My stomach twisted, but I refused to let my expression hint at my feelings. I just nodded and pretended to know what they meant.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said diplomatically.

Taia let out an unexpected laugh. “Yeah, so is Victor!” she responded.

Caroline immediately joined her laughter.

I smiled and took a certain amount of relief in the fact they clearly didn’t like Victor either, but I still felt queasy at any possible reason I could come up with for calling a child *scrap*.

“Don’t worry, it won’t happen to your son. Matheo’s genes are strong. Look how Leondro turned out!” Taia reassured me, reaching over and squeezing my arm gently.

She was a lot more perceptive than I’d guessed.

“How did you and Leondro meet?” Caroline asked me.

This time the truth wouldn’t do. I still knew next to nothing about this world, but I knew they weren’t going to believe that we both carried this gene and just happened upon each other in college.

“My parents found him,” I said, being as intentionally vague as possible.

“Miguel and Estela found me too,” Caroline said.

I let out a quiet sigh of relief. It was a guess, but at least it was a good one.

“What about you, Taia? Are you bound?”

There was a pause and I watched Taia’s gaze shoot across the car to Caroline. It was like the two of them were communicating in some unspoken language but I had no idea what they *weren’t* saying.

“What?” I asked as they continued to look at each other. The question hadn’t seemed like that big of a deal, yet the answer seemed loaded.

“Tai has a lot of options,” Caroline muttered.

“Options?”

“Miguel has a lot of power, and it’s a long line, so there have been... offers...”

It was starting to become clear that who you were bound to wasn’t often a matter of choice, especially if you were a woman. Perhaps, that was why Dom seemed so annoyed with the concept the first time we discussed it.

“How many offers are we talking about here?”

“I’ve lost count,” she said. Taia rolled her dark eyes. It reminded me of the way Dom reacted when I asked him similar questions. Neither sibling seemed all that interested in settling down.

“Basically, if they’re one of ours and they’re unbound, they’ve offered. Hell, even if they are bound, there are probably more than a few shifters running around looking for witches to unbind them,” Caroline said.

Witches. I wasn’t exactly thrilled about the idea of getting in the car with Dom’s sister and his fiancé, but it seemed like the more I let them talk, the more information I was let in on. Apparently, witches were capable of doing an unbinding. If that was true, I wondered how Constança fit into all of this.

“I wonder if that’s ever happened,” Taia mused.

“I would literally die!” Caroline exclaimed.

“Dom would never do that. He cares about you,” Taia assured her. The guilt of letting Caroline’s fiancé flirt with me popped up again. “Plus, we all know what happened the last time this family dealt with witches,” she added.

I held my breath, hoping that something might be revealed to me, but instead Taia jumped back in.

“I’m sorry, I know she’s your mother-in-law,” she said, though she didn’t sound sorry.

“She must have hated that you’re one of us,” Caroline giggled.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the car finally reached its destination. To my surprise, we were back at the house, only this time there was a line of town cars leading up to the entrance and far more people than had been in that tiny church. Apparently, *the gathering* was a much bigger deal than I thought it was.



Ten

Walking through the enormous house felt surreal. I purposefully fell behind Taia and Caroline, so the expressions on my face were hidden. When we passed the door to my apartment, I couldn't help but remember that it was only hours ago that I was trapped there. Now, I was dining with my captors.

When we turned down a hallway I'd never seen before I started to realize just how much of the house I was unaware of. It was a labyrinth of hallways and unmarked doors. While I might have been quietly dreading this gathering, it did give me a chance to collect more information. The most important of that information was that if I made it to the end of the hallway, went right at the end of another, and straight on at the third, I would find a backdoor. *A way out.* The backyard it led to was the size of a football field. I glanced to my left at a massive vine-covered gazebo, then to the right at a giant span of deep green, perfectly manicured grass, between them was a long, rectangular swimming pool that seemed unnaturally clear.

On the vast lawn was the longest banquet table I had ever seen in my life. It could easily seat dozens of people. The whole thing reminded me more of a wedding reception than a family lunch. I was left staring at the entire scene in shock. I had been wrong about the blood sacrifices and the robes, but I wasn't

wrong in thinking this was a bigger deal than some post-church brunch.

Caroline and Taia left me standing there, without so much as a glance in my direction.

I watched as guests started to fill the elegant white chairs surrounding the table. They all seemed to know exactly where they were supposed to be seated. I, however, had no idea.

I felt his breath close to my ear before I heard him speak.

“*Vem comigo, linda,*” *Come with me, beautiful,* Dom whispered.

I snapped my head to look at him, but he breezed past me as if he hadn’t said a word.

What choice did I have? I still had no idea if I could trust Dom, but he was the only person in this place who made any effort to help me, so I had to at least hope that accepting his help was the right decision.

I trailed behind him, slowly making my way over to the table. When I approached, I realized why everyone seemed to know where they were supposed to be. At each seat was a white plate with cobalt blue trim, and sitting atop a spring of rosemary in the center of the table setting was a rustic-looking place card. I breathed a sigh of relief as I noticed that next to Dom was a tiny card that read: *Jacey*.

I wondered who took the time to arrange perfect place settings and pick out matching linens. Estela, perhaps? Did they have shifter party planners? It definitely wasn’t Miguel, unless alongside being the terrifying patriarch of this makeshift family, he was also an avid reader of *Martha Stewart Living*.

Before I could get too lost in my thoughts, the last of the guests sat down, and Miguel stood up, silencing the group in a matter of seconds. As I looked up at him, I noticed he somehow seemed larger when addressing all of these people, who for better or worse, hung on his every word.

“For years, this family has mourned the loss of my brother, Matheo, and his son, Leondro. Despite the absence of their power...”

There was so much I didn't know. I wasn't sure why Miguel was addressing them all in English, but as I scanned the faces around the table, no one seemed to be confused about what he was saying. I also couldn't understand why we were talking about Leon. Did they do this at every gathering?

"Now fate has finally decided to return to us what was lost. This is Jacey, Leondro's wife, and soon my nephew will be returning to us to raise his son here, among his kind..."

The crowd cheered but rage burned behind my eyes. I was not raising my child anywhere near these people. A thousand poisonous words raced through my head, but as the anger searing away at my reasoning reached its peak and I was about to stand up, Dom grabbed my wrist under the table.

"Do not move," Dom said through gritted teeth, his voice barely above a whisper.

When Miguel sat down, the group began to chatter again. In an attempt to hide my outrage, I turned my head away from Miguel. As I did, I noticed the empty seat beside me. It wouldn't have stood out to me, except for the fact that every other seat at the table was taken. I peered over at the name card. *Leandro*. Strange to be so obsessed with someone who's name you couldn't even spell.

"Why do you look so confused, Jacey?" Miguel asked.

"Do you always leave a seat open for Leon?"

He raised an eyebrow, seemingly surprised by my question.

"If you were taken from your family, don't you think they would save a seat for you?"

The group all seemed to quiet around him. As if waiting to see how I would react.

This man was insane. *Taken?* Leon wasn't taken. He was saved. And I *was* taken from my family by him! I kept trying not to think of them, not to think of how scared Leon, Elise, and even Gabe might have been. I could feel the tears forming behind my eyes, but I took in a slow breath and willed myself to remain impassive. He was trying to rattle me. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

“I can see how much you care about him,” I said with a nod.

“He’s family.”

I’d always been so skeptical of Leon’s distaste for his family. I would hear him arguing with them on the phone or listen to him artfully dodge any question about them that came his way but somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought they couldn’t be that bad. I was wrong. They were worse, and I suspected I hadn’t even scratched the surface yet.

“You look like you have something to say,” Miguel said.

“Actually—”

“Now that we’re all here, we should talk about the binding!” Caroline exclaimed. She was a bit louder and far more Southern sounding than she had been in the car.

Miguel let out a laugh as he turned his attention to Dom, who was seated on his left.

“Looks like you have an eager one, Domingos,” he chuckled as he nudged his son.

“We haven’t set a date yet, and my family has to get here from San Antonio!”

Relief washed over me as I realized Miguel was no longer testing me. In fact, no one around me even seemed to be aware of my existence.

No one, except Caroline.

“Thank you,” I mouthed as we made eye contact across the table.

She nodded just enough to tell me she had interjected on purpose.

I wasn’t sure I liked Caroline when I met her. She was much younger than I was and seemed not only jealous, but rather spoiled. However, I wasn’t afraid to admit that I might have been wrong about her, and I was willing to take any friend I could get.

As the conversation around the table continued to circle around the pending nuptials, I couldn’t help but look over at Dom.

I didn't think I'd ever seen anyone disassociate in such an obvious way and yet no one around him seemed to notice. His breath was slow and shallow as he maintained a staring contest with his wine glass. Everyone at the table was literally talking about him, and he couldn't even bring himself to look up at them.

I grabbed his wrist under the table, just as he had mine. "*Vem comigo,*" I whispered to him before turning my attention to Estela.

"*Onde é a casa de banho?*" *Where is the bathroom?* I asked her.

Estela pointed toward a second glass door on the other side of the yard. Miguel paused, a small smirk crossing his face as he noticed my unexpected Portuguese before rejoining the wedding conversation.

I stood slowly and made my way across the yard with no real sense of urgency. I didn't know if Dom would follow, but I hoped he would. He clearly needed to get away from that table as much as I did.

I pushed past the door and found myself in another hallway full of unmarked doors. Thankfully, I didn't actually need the bathroom, otherwise I would have easily gotten lost trying to find it.

I leaned against a wall, crossing my arms over my chest and enjoying the brief moment of silence. That morning I had been so relieved to finally hear the presence of people. Now I longed to be as far away from them as possible. Just when I considered turning back, the door opened, and Dom dragged himself through it.

"Are you crazy?"

"I thought we'd already established this," I teased.

"Someone's going to see us."

"Talking? Oh, no!"

He glared at me before he spoke again. "They can't know I'm helping you," he reminded me.

"Well, right now, *I'm helping you.*"

Dom raised an eyebrow at that. “How exactly are you going to do that?”

“By helping you escape the wedding planning,” I responded.

He nodded and I could have sworn I saw gratitude in the way he looked at me.

“You don’t want to marry her, do you?” I pushed. It was a personal question and one I wasn’t sure he would answer, but it was glaringly obvious in every interaction she had with him. I didn’t know how Dom felt about Caroline, but he certainly wasn’t in love with her.

“You say that like I have a choice,” he bit back at me.

“Don’t you?”

He looked at me as if I were dumb for even asking. “No,” he finally explained.

“Why?”

Dom looked around, making sure no one was headed our way. “Not here,” he said softly, before he grabbed my arm and led me into an empty bedroom, closing the door behind us.

“Well, if you’re worried about getting caught, hiding in an empty bedroom is a lot more incriminating.”

Dom just shook his head at me.

“Miguel decides who gets married and when based on what’s best for the family,” he explained.

“So everyone’s in an arranged marriage?” I asked with a slight laugh. I didn’t exactly believe what he was saying. This wasn’t the 1600s. That couldn’t possibly be true.

“If you want to call it that,” he shrugged.

“Does she want to marry you?” I questioned.

“I think that’s the only thing she wants.”

“Why? If you don’t—” I noticed the way he started to shift uncomfortably as I looked at him, and suddenly the pieces snapped into place. “You didn’t!”

“What? I was supposed to say no?”

“Dude!”

“What?”

“If you don’t like her, don’t sleep with her!” I lectured.

“Do you have a better offer?” he said as he looked me up and down slowly.

“You are impossible.”

“And you’re not married yet,” he reminded me.

His statement was true, but it still pulled at something inside me. *Yet*. I wasn’t married, yet. As if Leon and I might still have some hope of forever. I didn’t know if I could still believe we did.

“Maybe not, but you’re about to be.” I challenged him.

“Don’t remind me,” he groaned.

Before I could come up with some sarcastic remark, there was a knock at the door.

“Shit!” I whispered.

“Jacey? Jacey, are you in there, honey?”

My eyes widened at the sound of Caroline’s voice. I turned to Dom, unsure of what to do.

He quickly held up one finger, indicating I should wait.

“Uh... one second...” I stuttered, sounding confused.

Thick, black smoke unexpectedly filled the room around me. Though I’d only seen it happen once before, I knew exactly what was happening. When it cleared, it was no longer Dom standing in the room with me, it was the elderly woman who came in to clean my apartment every morning.

I blinked slowly as I stared at what used to be Dom. No matter how many times I experienced it, I would never get over the shock of someone suddenly becoming an entirely different human being.

“Are you okay in there?” Caroline asked when I still hadn’t opened the door.

Once I was sure there was no more smoke in the room, I reached for the door handle.

“Yeah, I’m fine. The baby was just making me nauseous, so I decided to sit down for a few minutes,” I said.

Caroline looked a bit skeptical and craned her neck to look around me into the room. When all she saw was the housekeeper, the confusion cleared from her face.

“Do you know where Dom went?”

“I haven’t seen him. Maybe check his room?” I said with a shrug.

Caroline nodded. “You should get back out there. They’re asking about you,” she said before she headed down the hall.

I watched her until she turned down another hallway and I could no longer see her. By the time I turned back around Dom was himself again.

“Go, I’ll be right behind you.”



Eleven

I was exhausted. Between the mental gymnastics of church, the gathering, Miguel announcing to a banquet full of people that I was raising my child in Brazil, and whatever the hell was going on with Dom and Caroline, I felt like my head was going to explode. On the one hand, it wasn't a bad problem to have after being kept in seclusion. On the other hand, I just wanted my life back.

I missed everything about New York. My friends, my family, my apartment, my studio, *Leon*. It all seemed like some terrible nightmare, and I couldn't bring myself to wake up.

Where the hell are you, Leon?

The gathering lasted into the early evening. I spent most of it letting Miguel and his collection of loyal subjects talk at me rather than to me. Thankfully, there weren't many questions, and so it seemed, at least for the time being, I had managed to keep the fact that I wasn't one of them under the radar. I didn't know how long I could keep it up or how long I would have to, but I had to take things one step at a time.

When I finally returned to my apartment, I felt a little less like a prisoner. I managed to find my way back to my room unescorted, which gave me time to memorize my surroundings as I slowly made my way down the labyrinth of hallways. To my surprise, the door to my apartment remained unlocked, and

though I kept expecting to hear a click behind me as I moved around the space, taking off Taia's dress and sliding on my borrowed jersey nightgown, the click never came.

For a few hours, I busied myself with the same nothingness that filled all my days there. I let the TV run in the background as I made tea, tried to read the random books lining the shelf in the living room, and attempted to give myself just enough to do that I wouldn't focus on the situation I was in.

I expected to spend the rest of my night in solitude but shortly after the sun went down and the courtyard filled with darkness, I heard a sharp knock on the sliding glass door. I jumped and quickly turned my head toward the sound. It shouldn't have surprised me that Dom stood there peering into my living room. I found it funny that I was once afraid of someone who now seemed so much like a needy puppy.

I groaned as I stood up from the couch and pulled the door open for him.

"How did you get out there?"

"What do you mean? All the rooms on the bottom floor have a door that connects to the courtyard."

That was information I needed, and I immediately filed it away in the escape plan slowly forming in my head.

"So your room is..."

A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Why do you want to know where my room is, *linda*?"

"So I can strangle you in your sleep," I said, my face completely deadpan.

"Choking could be fun."

"I wonder what your wife would have to say about that," I threw back at him.

"She's not my wife," he warned. "Plus, I wonder what your *husband* would have to say about the way you look at me," he added.

I laughed. I knew exactly why I looked at Dom in a way he perceived as romantic or seductive, and it wasn't because I

wanted him.

“That’s only because you look like him,” I admitted.

Dom’s face dropped, but only for the brief second it took for him to come up with a comeback.

“I told you, *linda*,” he said before moving towards me. He didn’t stop until there were mere centimeters between us and then lowered his mouth close to my ear. “I can be anyone you want me to be.”

I shook my head. I refused to allow myself to get distracted by whatever it was that Dom thought he was doing. I took a step back and placed my hands on my hips.

“What do you want, Dom?” I asked him.

He took a loaded pause, his eyes making a slow, exaggerated sweep over my body before he responded. The look on his face told me all I needed to know about what he *wanted*.

“I just wanted to tell you, you did a good job,” he said earnestly, shoving his hands into the pockets of the dark-washed denim he was wearing.

“Thank you.”

“I also wanted to check if you had any questions... about anything...” he added.

I wasn’t sure if that was true or if he just wanted an excuse to be near me. I was starting to get the impression that I might have been Dom’s only friend. If I could even call us that.

I had thousands of questions to ask, but the truth was I was too tired to process any more information, so I asked the only one that had been bothering me.

“Why does everyone keep saying I’m having a boy?”

“Wow, he really told you nothing about us.”

“I didn’t ask for the commentary,” I snipped. I had a tendency to be a bit harsh with Dom. Maybe it was the annoyance of his constant flirting or simply a reaction to everything going on around me, I wasn’t sure.

Dom sighed. “It’s just another weird thing about the gene. It only passes to first born males.”

“Okay, then how can Miguel shift if Matheo was first?” I asked.

Dom seemed impressed that I was keeping such a close track of the family tree.

“They were twins,” he said.

I suddenly had an understanding of Miguel that I wasn’t expecting. I had a twin of my own. I knew what that bond was like. Losing it would have been devastating. Especially if I knew Elise had a child out there that was being kept from me. It wasn’t that I didn’t think Constança’s choices were justified. There was no doubt in my mind that these people were dangerous, but I now understood Miguel’s obsession with Leon a little better.

“What if you have a girl first?” I asked.

“No matter how many boys you have they’ll all be *inútil*,” he explained

That word again.

“*Inútil* is?”

“The gene didn’t pass to them. They can’t shift.”

My mouth dropped open. “So you call them useless?” I exclaimed. Worse than useless, Caroline called them *scrap*.

“They might as well be human,” he said with a shrug.

“*I’m* human!”

“And if I needed you to look like my grandmother right now, you would be *useless*,” he countered.

“They’re children!”

“I told you this world was cruel,” he said flatly.

“But women can’t shift and *they* aren’t useless,” I countered.

“Because they make more shifters, otherwise they would be.”

It was like a bomb went off, and I just stood there staring at him in horrified silence. This world wasn't just cruel. It was backward and completely misogynistic. If anyone here thought I would raise a child with these people, they had another thing coming.

“I mean—”

“You should go,” I snapped.

“I didn't mean that I just—”

“I think you did, and I think you should fucking go,” I said slowly.

Thankfully Dom didn't argue with me. He looked defeated, maybe even a little sad, but I didn't care. I just wanted him as far away from me as possible.

Quietly he stalked back out into the courtyard. I shut the door behind him. I didn't look back as I made my way into the bedroom. I didn't care if he was still standing there.

The night was young, but I wanted to go to bed. It was the only real respite I had from my thoughts and the drama around me. It took no time at all before I fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke I wasn't in that apartment or even in Brazil. I was on an off-white couch in a brightly lit living room that smelled of oranges and salt water. As I slowly sat up, I realized I had been here before. I was in Constança's living room in Tavira.

“Hello?” I called out, but there wasn't an answer.

I stood up slowly, my eyes dancing over the various herbs in apothecary jars and ritual items that covered the shelves and the walls. Not so long ago, I would have immediately begun panicking at the idea of suddenly waking up somewhere different than where I fell asleep, but since my first time in Tavira, my idea of what was real or even possible had been completely altered.

“We don't need to talk about this.”

My heart stopped at the sound of Constança's voice. It was coming from the kitchen. I slowly turned to see Constança and Leon standing there. While Leon's mother was exactly as I

remembered her: tiny, with wild raven hair and this otherworldly quality about her, Leon didn't quite look like himself.

I rushed toward them, but neither Leon nor his mother glanced in my direction. For a moment, I thought this might have been Leon's way of saving me. That some manner of witchcraft had pulled me from that place and whisked me away to Portugal, but it seemed that I'd just managed to slip back into another weird vision or memory or whatever it was that kept happening to me. The closer I got to Leon, the more I realized he didn't look like himself because I was looking at a version of him from at least four years ago.

I sighed heavily. I was once again a ghost. Unable to control anything happening around me. All I could do was watch.

"I have been asking you what happened since I was a kid, Mom. Please?"

Constança didn't speak English, so once again, while I knew Leon and his mother were speaking Portuguese, I understood the words perfectly. There was no translation happening in my mind. I just heard it and understood.

"I don't want to go back there," Constança said, brushing past Leon and moving toward the living room.

"At least tell me how you got out," Leon said, trailing behind her.

As always, he never let anything go.

"Leon. Stop!" I found myself saying out loud when I noticed how uncomfortable Constança looked. Again, neither of them stirred.

Constança sighed heavily and sat on the couch before motioning for her son to join her.

"I will tell you, but then I don't want to talk about this anymore," she warned.

"Okay," Leon said quietly.

"One day, I got a note under the door. I didn't know if I could trust it, but it explained who he was and gave me instructions on how to escape. I figured I had nothing to lose."

I moved closer, unsure of why I was watching this conversation happen. I didn't even know what they were talking about, but something told me it was important, so I tried to focus on every word coming out of Constança's mouth.

"He told me that all the rooms on the first floor had a sliding glass door that led to the courtyard..."

My eyes widened and my hand swung up to cover my mouth as I realized she was talking about escaping *this* house. Constança had been here, and she'd escaped.

"The third door from mine led to a classroom, they didn't have any reason to lock that glass door, and if I waited until the house went quiet, there would be no one on the first floor to catch me. I snuck through the courtyard, and the classroom led to a hallway."

Please remember this when you wake up. Please remember this when you wake up.

"I followed the hallways to the back of the house, stuck close to the walls to avoid the cameras, and then climbed down the stairs on the side of the house that led into the jungle." "You ran through the jungle?!" Leon asked, unblinking as he looked at his mother.

"The house looks like it's in the middle of nowhere, but it's just outside Manaus. He told me he'd be waiting for me on the other side, and all I had to do was cut straight through."

Who was he? Was this person still in the house? Could they help me? I had so many questions and no one to ask.

"Were you scared?"

Constança gave her son a long, meaningful look before squeezing his arm gently. "No. I had you to protect. I would have done anything to get out of that house."

I was ejected from my dream and sat straight up in bed, trying to catch my breath. I remembered everything. *Everything*. I knew how to get free.



Twelve

Hours passed and I did nothing but toss and turn in bed. The thought of escaping was almost as terrifying as the thought that I might have dreamed the whole thing. What if Constança's directions didn't work, or worse yet, what if they did, but Leon hadn't yet gotten to Manaus? I tried hard to remember the feeling of Leon caressing the side of my face before he kissed me or the way we seemed to fit together so effortlessly, anything to distract me from the way my mind was racing.

I couldn't distract myself enough. I needed to know that what I'd just dreamed was real and there was really a way out. I looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was 2:45 am. The house had to be asleep, or so I hoped. I decided to test the instructions I'd heard. I didn't plan on leaving, but if I could prove to myself that the third glass door from my bedroom was open and that it led to a hallway then I knew that the rest of the plan might work.

Wearing nothing but a nightgown, I quietly crept into the living room. I opened the sliding glass window at a painstaking speed, only a centimeter or so every second, and only enough to slide my body through sideways. I stepped out into the humid night air and looked all around me. There were no lights in any of the windows, and the stillness of the courtyard sent chills up my spine. I looked back at my door and counted. *One. Two.*

Three, over and over, until there was no mistaking which one was the third.

I crept silently toward the door, breathing as quietly as possible and watching the ground to avoid anything that might make a noise if I stepped on it. I reached for the handle, unsure whether the door would even budge, but just as Constança said, the door slid open, and I quietly slipped into the darkness of the room. I tiptoed a few steps in but stopped, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

She was right, this wasn't a bedroom or an office. Instead, I found myself standing in a tiny classroom. Directly across from me was a whiteboard mounted to the wall, and there were child-sized desks and chairs lined up in rows. If I hadn't been so worried about the possibility of being caught, I might have stopped to examine my surroundings. All I needed to know was if I could get to the hall, then I needed to get the hell out before I got caught.

I was sure that there was no one in there, but I still quietly inched toward the door, my heartbeat ringing loudly in my ears. Once again, I reached for a door handle, expecting it to be locked, but just as Constança's story promised, the door knob turned. I opened the door just a crack, only enough to peer out into the hallway. I could have cried at even the tiniest possibility of freedom, but I heard a creak in the floorboards, and though there were no sounds that followed it, I knew I had to get back.

I retraced my steps out of the classroom and into the courtyard, carefully shutting the door behind me. I tiptoed back to my own door and slid into my apartment. I couldn't believe it. *It worked, it actually worked!*

However, I could only celebrate for a quick moment before I realized that now, I needed to come up with a plan. I knew the way out, but I would have to travel at least a short distance through the jungle alone. That would require supplies, and given how little there was in the apartment, I was in for a challenge.

I started to think of anything that might help me. I wasn't sure how long my journey would be, but I might need food. There weren't many portable options in the kitchen, but I gathered what was available. Sitting on the counter, I spotted a

rough, brown grocery tote made of hemp that the housekeeper left behind. I probably needed water, but there were no bottles, only cups, so I had to hope the journey would be a short one. Lastly, I needed a weapon. I didn't like considering it, but there was the possibility that I might get caught. I questioned how capable I was of fighting someone off, but there had to be something that would give me a chance. I grabbed a small steak knife out of one of the kitchen drawers. It wasn't ideal, but it was the best I could do.

I stashed the items under my bed and hoped that none of them were significant enough that someone might notice they were missing.

The rest of the night I stared at my ceiling repeating exactly what Constança said in my head.

I finally slept, and when I did it was well into the afternoon before I was awakened by another knock on the sliding glass door. I groaned loudly, turning over on one side, resolute to ignore the noise. Yet the knocking persisted, becoming louder and more insistent the longer I tried to ignore it.

“Alright!” I shouted as I slowly got out of bed.

I shuffled out into the living room only to find Dom standing there like a scolded puppy in need of affection. I rolled my eyes as I yanked open the door.

“What do you want?” I asked him, crossing my arms as I leaned against the door frame.

“I'm sorry,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. Dom didn't say those words often. His furrowed brow and the distress on his face made that clear.

“For what?” I pressed him. Unwilling to just let him slide by on a two-word apology.

He stared back at me, willing me to let the issue go, but I had no intention of doing that. If Dom couldn't recognize the error in the things he said to me, then whether he had been helpful or not, I wanted nothing more to do with him.

“Look, I know the way we do things isn't...” he hesitated before speaking again, “right.”

Well, that was an understatement.

“But it’s all I know, so can you just”—this time Dom was the one rolling his eyes though I wasn’t sure if it was at himself or at me—“be patient with me?”

His words were refreshingly honest, especially for a man who basically did nothing but throw himself at me from the moment I met him. I decided to let the issue go. I didn’t plan on being around long enough to determine if his apology was earnest, so I just took his word for it.

“Okay,” I said with a nod.

Dom let out a breath I didn’t realize he had been holding. “Can I make it up to you?” he continued.

“How exactly do you plan to do that?”

“By getting you out of here,” Dom said.

I held my breath and hoped that by getting me out, Dom meant that he was going to help me escape.

Instead, what he meant was that he was going to get me out of the house.

After putting on what could pass for an outfit, I followed Dom out front to yet another waiting town car. We slid into the backseat. Now that I knew Dom was engaged, I couldn’t help but feel like I was doing something wrong every time I was in his presence. Caroline certainly wouldn’t have been happy about this little outing if she knew about it.

I thought to say something, although I knew Caroline was certainly not Dom’s favorite topic. I opened my mouth to speak, but the car door opened again. I quickly glanced from Dom to the door, and standing there was his sister.

“Did you seriously think Miguel was going to leave you two alone together?” she asked before motioning for us to scoot over and give her some room.

My stomach lurched at the idea that Miguel had concerns about us being alone. Did that mean he knew Dom was helping me?

“W-why would that matter?” I asked a little unsteadily.

Taia just laughed, closing the door behind her.

“Because my brother here can’t keep it in his pants,” she teased.

“I’m married,” I reminded her, though it couldn’t have been further from the truth.

“I know,” she said with a shrug. “But you wouldn’t be the first married woman he slept with.”

My gaze shot over to Dom, who just rolled his eyes as he settled into the car.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he grumbled at me before shooting an angry look at his sister.

“Do you just sleep with everyone around here?” I asked.

“No!” Dom exclaimed.

“Yes!” Taia said at the exact same time.

I laughed, both because of Taia’s teasing and the relief of knowing that Miguel’s concern was about Dom’s promiscuity and not about the time we spent together. Some part of me wondered why Dom threw himself at every woman with a pulse. But just as I was, he was trapped with his family in the middle of nowhere. What else did I expect him to do to entertain himself?

“Do I get to hear this story?” I asked as the car started to pull away from the house.

I had to admit there was already brevity to this outing that I hadn’t felt since arriving in Brazil. I wasn’t foolish enough to believe these people were my friends; after all, they were happily standing by while I was being kept captive. Yet, I couldn’t help but enjoy the company and the tiny taste of freedom that being away from the house gave me.

“Why are you so concerned with who’s in my bed, *linda*?” he asked me.

I laughed again. “I’m not, but all I’ve had to keep me entertained since I got here are novelas in a language I barely speak. I’ll take whatever I can get,” I explained.

“Then you came to the right place!” Taia exclaimed. I sensed that this girl could probably tell me who everyone on that compound was sleeping with.

“*Como queiras,*” *Whatever,* Dom said, turning his attention out the window as he pretended to ignore us.

“So who was this woman?” I asked Taia. I didn’t particularly care. I just really enjoyed how uncomfortable this was making Dom.

“Her name was Anna. She was Dutch, and she was bound to one of the men that worked for Miguel,” she started.

I wondered why so many people here were from somewhere else. I expected everyone associated with Leon’s family to be Portuguese, but from the sea of faces at the gathering and from the bits of information I picked up, the only people here that actually were from Portugal, were Leon’s direct family members. Everyone else seemed to have migrated from other places. I wanted to ask about it, but it was likely something I would be expected to know if I were a shifter, and so made a mental note to ask Dom about it later.

“I was bored,” Dom said, defending himself as he kept up his staring contest with the window.

“So you decided to seduce some poor married woman?” I asked him.

“Hey! She seduced me!” he said, finally turning in our direction.

“Why do I have a hard time believing that?” I responded.

“Actually, she had a thing for Dom as soon as she got here. It was weird,” Tai explained.

“See!”

“Weird because she was married?” I asked, unsure if I understood what Taia was trying to say.

“No, weird because Dom was still in high school,” Taia explained.

“And she was...?” I asked slowly.

“Thirty-eight,” Dom piped in.

I turned to him slowly. The statement made me see his behavior in a very different light. I wanted to apologize for even bringing up the topic. I didn't know what the age of consent was in Brazil and no one else in the car saw it as questionable. Yet I knew there wasn't anything okay about a married woman twenty years older than Dom sleeping with him when he was still a teenager.

"It was this big dramatic thing, and Miguel ended up kicking her and her husband out of the compound," Taia continued on. The story was no longer funny. She just couldn't quite seem to read the room.

"I'm trying to think of names for the baby, but I'm having the hardest time coming up with something," I said, trying to steer the conversation away from Dom.

Luckily, Taia seemed more than a little excited to give her opinions on the subject. The conversation about Dom's previous conquests quickly faded.

By the time she stopped feeding me dozens of boys' names that she thought were suitable, the driver was pulling up to a shopping center.

"We're going shopping?" I asked my two companions skeptically.

"You don't have any clothes," Dom said flatly, the annoyance from the previous conversation still lingering in the sound of his voice.

I was surprised and even a little touched that Dom remembered that I mentioned not having anything with me. In the back of my mind I recalled that Manaus was the closest town, so as I got out of the car I tried to remember anything I could about my surroundings. I didn't know how Leon would find me or how long that would take, so having some sense of where I was could prove useful.

The shopping center was like any other. It was large, brightly lit, and full of people wandering in and out of different stores. The only real difference between it and any mall in America was the names of the stores, which were all in Portuguese.

Both Dom and I let Taia take the lead, and she merrily dragged us in and out of countless shops. I made a point of picking out the most practical of items. Normally, I took the way I dressed pretty seriously, but if I had any hope of getting home I had to look at everything as an opportunity to help me escape.

After an hour, we had three pairs of jeans, two dresses for church, a pair of running shoes, a pair of heels, a bunch of tops that I could layer with, and a jacket that I had to argue for given the warm Brazilian weather. I claimed the pregnancy was messing with my internal body temperature and that I would randomly get cold. To my surprise, both Dom and Taia seemed to buy that excuse.

It shocked me, but somehow I'd actually managed to enjoy myself. It was easy to forget how dire the situation was when I was running around shopping malls and making fun of Dom all afternoon.

"We should do this more often," Taia said to me.

I knew that was never going to happen. I was getting out of here as soon as possible and I wasn't coming back.

"Yeah, I would like that..." I said, turning my head to look at her.

I immediately felt my shoulder hit another person. It was hard enough to make me stumble back a little.

"*Peço imensa desculpa,*" I heard a man's voice say.

As my eyes lifted to his face, I froze. This wasn't just any man.

There, standing in front of me, was August Henry. But there was no August Henry which meant...

Leon.

"*Estás bem?*" *Are you okay,* he asked me.

I could only nod my head in response. I looked back at Taia and Dom, who seemed confused by my inability to speak. I knew it had already gone on a little too long.

August reached down and picked up a shopping bag that fell to the floor in the shuffle.

My hand grazed his as he held it out to me, and it took everything within me not to react.

“Two days,” he whispered, and then, without a second glance, he continued past me.

He was right in front of me. He was so close. Then he was gone.



Thirteen

He was there. *He was right there!* I couldn't figure out whether I was angry that Leon had me within arm's reach and didn't rescue me from this nightmare or if I was relieved knowing that he was in Manaus. Dom and Taia weren't armed or expecting Leon to show up. It would have been the perfect moment to get me out, yet there I was, back in this prison Leon's family called an apartment.

My surroundings were now much smaller than they were before. It caused a kind of claustrophobia that was strangling me. I wanted to drag my nails down the walls and break everything around me. I felt like a caged animal. Knowing Leon was only miles away, that safety was only miles away, made me want to run even more. I didn't want to wait. I couldn't even understand why I was waiting. Everything I knew seemed so intentionally vague. Dom only told me so much information, and Leon told me even less. Even Constança's story gave me the bare minimum. It was like they were all trying to shield me from something, but I wasn't a child, and every moment I was here, I was in danger. I deserved to know what was actually going on.

Since the gathering, the door to the apartment remained unlocked. I assumed that meant Miguel trusted me, or at the very least trusted that I wasn't trying to escape. To be fair, I hadn't tried to, but little did he know that I spent every waking

moment thinking of it. The moment I saw Leon, or rather August, again, it occurred to me nothing was keeping me in, and no one told me I had to stay put.

I decided to put the theory that I was free to roam to the test. What was the worst that could happen? I would get sent back to my apartment? Even if they locked me in again, I already knew the way out. I had nothing to lose. Plus, learning the lay of the land wasn't exactly a bad idea.

I intentionally changed out of the clothes I wore while shopping and put on the sweatpants I'd borrowed from the previous occupant. I wanted to ensure that if I ran into anyone, I didn't look like I intended to go anywhere.

I slowly opened the door into the familiar empty hallway. Turning right would lead past Miguel's office, into the foyer, and out the front door. I knew I had to turn left to get to the back of the house, which is where I would ultimately need to get to escape, but as for what was behind the dozens of doors on the way, I had no idea. Now was as good a time as any to find out.

I started walking, turning the corner from my door down the uncharted territory of the next hallway. The house was massive, and the layout was strange, but it was otherwise unremarkable. The floors were a deep maple wood that creaked every so often as I padded through the house. I had to remind myself not to cringe every time I made a sound. I wasn't doing anything wrong, after all.

The walls were a shocking, pristine shade of white. There were no scuffs or flaws in the paint. Either everyone who lived there was insanely careful, or the housekeeping staff had their work cut out for them. Aside from that, the decor was minimal, and every single door to every single room was shut. I found myself searching for anything that felt like a home, but there was nothing. It felt like walking through a vaguely Mediterranean office building, everything was cold and barely used.

My thoughts again wandered to Dom. What must it have been like to grow up in a place like this? Knowing what I did about his family and seeing this house in all its sterility, it started to make sense to me why Dom seemed so lonely. Sure,

he had a lot of bravado, but at the end of the day, he seemed very isolated. He had a father who expected him to follow orders, a mother who didn't stand up for him, and a fiancé he didn't want to marry. Not to mention whatever the situation caused him to disappear for days and come back injured. Some part of me wished I could show him more of the world than whatever version of life this was, but the truth remained, I couldn't save Dom and save myself.

I expected after all of the people I'd seen at the gathering, I would hear *something*. Yet all that followed me was an eerie, haunting silence, that felt like an omen.

It was too quiet.

Instead of turning right at the end of the hallway, which would have led me out back, I turned left down yet another long corridor lined with more unmarked doors. In the back of my mind, the girl that had seen hundreds of horror films screamed at me to turn back now, but curiosity and stubbornness pushed me forward. At the end of the hall was a stairwell. One set of stairs led up, and the other led down. I could hear Constança in my head; "*There would be no one on the first floor to catch me.*" I assumed that meant that anyone I wanted to avoid would be on the second floor.

Down it is.

I carefully descended the stairs, unsure of where they would lead me. It was darker below me than it had been above, but there was still enough light to see where I was going. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, the flooring changed from wood to concrete. I looked down the corridor in front of me. The doors on either side now looked like they belonged in a mental institution instead of a house. I could feel my heart start to race, but just as I was about to run up the stairs and back to the safety of my apartment, I heard it.

The scream that echoed down the hallway was like nothing I'd ever heard before. All I could hear was heartbreak as it drew nearer. It was so raw, guttural, and full of suffering that it didn't sound human. I was frozen, completely unable to move.

The sound came closer and closer as I stared down the hallway. I wanted to run from it. No part of me wanted to know

what could cause a creature to make a sound like that, but I couldn't get my body to move an inch.

I watched as Dom and Victor turned a corner, dragging a man I didn't recognize down the hallway as he screamed in agony. Miguel followed behind them with a dark look on his face. I tried to process what I was seeing though I knew I shouldn't be seeing it. The man, covered in blood and badly injured, kept screaming and howling. Between the horrific sounds he was making I could only make out one sentence.

“Bring her back!”

As if he could sense me there, Miguel's dark eyes shot up to meet mine. His face was expressionless and terrifying.

“*Resolve isso,*” *Deal with that,* he barked as both Victor and Dom looked up at me.

Victor lurched forward, but Dom stopped him. I didn't want to think about what Victor would have done if he'd been the one to “deal with me”.

Without looking me in the eye, Dom left the horrifying scene behind him and briskly walked toward me. He said nothing as he roughly grabbed my arm, turned me around, and marched me back up the stairs.

He didn't let go of me as we continued to speed walk through the house in absolute silence. I stared straight ahead, wide-eyed and still shaken. I didn't know what to say. *What the fuck could I say?*

Angrily Dom threw my door open and pushed me through it. He followed me in before slamming it loudly. The sound echoed through the room. At first neither of us spoke, we both just stood there staring at each other for far too long.

“Do you have some kind of death wish?” he finally snapped at me.

“W-what was that?” I managed to get out, still shaken.

“Why were you even down there?”

“What the fuck was that, Dom?” I pressed.

He sighed heavily, running a frustrated hand over his face.

“That was a bond breaking,” he explained.

“I thought only witches could break a binding,” I countered.

“And death,” he said gravely.

I took an unsteady breath and searched around me for the nearest place to sit. I no longer felt steady on my legs.

“His wife is...”

“Gone.”

Again there was silence. Horrible, painful, uncomfortable silence.

“How?” I demanded.

Dom grimaced and looked away from me as if the answer pained him. He didn’t say a word.

“How!” I shouted.

I knew the answer. I didn’t know how or why, I just knew.

“Miguel.”

“Why?” I asked, further demanding answers.

“He betrayed the family. Breaking their bond was the price for that,” he said. The words were emotionless and cold, but I could see his eyes gloss over as he spoke, and I knew it wasn’t something he wanted. I remembered Dom saying that if Miguel wanted me dead, he would have to be the one to do it. I started to wonder if that meant he had killed this woman, but I didn’t dare ask. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“Leon betrayed you, too. Is that what he’s going to do to me?” I fired.

“Stop!”

“Is that the plan? Wait until I have the baby and then punish Leon for not wanting to be in this hell?”

“Jesus! Just stop!”

“How did he do it? Tell me, Dom! If I’m going to be murdered, I might as well know how I’m going to go!”

Angrily Dom slammed his fist against the kitchen countertop, before moving toward me. He didn’t stop until his

face was mere inches from mine.

“How many times do I have to tell you, I won’t let anything happen to you?”

My emotions were running through me faster than I could process them. One second it was fear, then confusion, disgust, rage, and even desire—unwelcome though it was.

“One more,” I managed to squeak out as his eyes dug their claws into me.

Dom’s lips were on mine faster than I knew how to react to them. His fingers slid into the back of my hair. I was once again frozen, but this time it wasn’t terror, it was shock. I didn’t want this. There was *something* between us. I couldn’t deny that, but I had no doubt about what I wanted, and it was waiting for me in Manaus.

“*Domingos, sai daqui!*” I heard Victor shout from down the hallway.

I never thought I would see the day I was grateful for Victor, but his yelling made Dom pull away in such a rush that I doubted he had any idea I hadn’t kissed him back.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, but I promise I’ll keep you safe,” Dom whispered before rushing out the door.

I shook my head. Dom wouldn’t have to worry about my safety. I was getting out, and I was getting out now.



Fourteen

I knew it hadn't been two days, it hadn't even been twenty-four hours, but I knew if I didn't leave, I would likely suffer the same fate as that man's wife. I knew that Leon and I weren't bound, but I couldn't help but imagine what would happen to him if he were in that man's shoes. I knew the image of that stranger helplessly crying out in agony would never leave my mind. The sound of it still echoed inside my head. I couldn't give Leon's family the opportunity to hurt me, and I wasn't going to let them hurt Leon either.

The hours passed slowly. Every minute felt like it took days. I was terrified but refused to let any thought enter my mind that didn't involve getting to Manaus. Leon was there. He was waiting for me. All I had to do was get out of the house, through the jungle, and find a phone. I didn't know what would become of us after I got to him. I didn't know if we could go back to New York or if we'd have to start over somewhere new as his mother had. I didn't care. I now knew what I hadn't known when I walked out of our apartment. There was no life I wanted without Leon in it. I didn't care if he was some hybrid supernatural being. It didn't matter what Leon had done. The only important thing was that there was a future for us on the other side of this. That future now rested in my hands.

It was 2:30 am. Six and a half hours had passed from the time Dom had thrown me back into the apartment. In that time,

there wasn't a single sound throughout the house. I expected Dom to return, especially after his unexpected display of affection, but he didn't, nor did anyone else. Enough time had passed. I had to go.

I quickly changed into the most practical clothing I could and shoved the jacket I insisted on buying inside the tote bag. Glancing up at the mirror mounted to the bedroom wall, I knew I looked ridiculous. Here I was, planning to escape armed men through the Brazilian rainforest with Stella McCartney sneakers and a grocery tote full of nonsense. I slowly walked back into the living room and tried the front door only to find that Dom had locked me in when he left. Everything was dark and still. It was time.

Just as I'd practiced, I gently opened the glass door before sliding myself through it. Some part of me expected someone to jump out of the foliage and force me back inside, but there was no one. No one as I crept toward the third door, no one as I opened it, and no one as I breathlessly made my way through the eerie little classroom. I reached for the tiny kitchen knife in my bag, holding it in my left hand as I opened the door into the dark hallway. Still nothing.

I turned and headed for the back of the house. Every step I took felt like it was made of lead, and my heart banged loudly inside my chest each time the floor beneath me made even the faintest sound. Yet the house was quiet, and I reached the back door without incident.

"Stay close to the walls, avoid the cameras, get to the side of the house," I kept repeating in my head.

I slowly opened the backdoor just enough to poke my head through and see my surroundings.

"Sneaking around again?"

Victor, Dom, and two other men sat lounging on the patio furniture. There were beers scattered about and cigarettes in their hands. The thought of having a few drinks after literally murdering a woman made me sick to my stomach.

"I –"

I started to speak, but I was so startled that I didn't have the words.

“Go back to your room, little girl. Or do you need me to put you there?” Victor growled.

Dom said nothing in my defense. He only stared at me, expressionless.

I shook my head. The woman I wanted to be would have defended herself, but I knew there was nothing safe about being in Victor's presence, so I just nodded and slowly backed away into the darkness. When I was sure I was far enough away from the door that I couldn't be heard, I took off, running down the hallway.

I couldn't go through the back, but if I had to follow the side of the house to get to the stairs, I could go out the front. I just had to be fast. Faster than I had ever been in my life. I got to the front door in seconds, flinging it open and continuing my dash toward freedom. I ran along the side of the house. I could hear the men still laughing in the distance as I descended a giant set of weathered concrete stairs.

The further I got from the house, the more I struggled to see. I wished I'd had the time to find a flashlight, but all I could do now was hope for the best. I couldn't turn back.

I could hear the sounds of crickets chirping and smell the plant life around me as I slowed my pace. I took careful steps into the forest. Straight through, I just had to put one foot in front of the other until I saw city lights. It wouldn't be long now. My heart was drumming in my ears with every step I took. I got far enough away from the house that I thought I might actually make it until I saw headlights and heard male voices shouting in the distance.

They knew I was gone. They were coming for me.

I took off running again. I tried to remember to keep going straight, but the dark was disorienting, and I could hear the voices gaining on me. There were flashlights in every direction I turned. I gripped tighter to the tiny blade in my hand. Running wasn't going to work, so maybe the answer was to hide. I turned sharply and found the closest thicket of plants to duck into. I

couldn't tell in the darkness just how concealed I actually was, but I covered my mouth and nose with my hand to muffle the sound of my breathing and prayed it was enough.

I watched the lights move back and forth as the shouting continued. I crouched there, wondering in terror how long this search would last. Eventually, the lights started to veer off in another direction. I didn't dare move, but I let out a tiny breath of relief. It had been just long enough that I considered venturing from my hiding place, but just as I was about to stand, I felt a pair of hands grab me by the shoulders.

Instinct took over. I let out a high-pitched scream that carried out into the forest around me. I couldn't see whose hands were on me. All I knew was that I had to get away. I turned swiftly toward the form in the darkness and plunged the tiny kitchen knife into what felt like an arm.

"Fuck!" the person hissed. I immediately recognized the voice as Dom's.

Shit.

Clearly, the rest of the search party heard my scream because I could now hear the voices calling out in the darkness. Lights and footsteps again drew nearer. I tried to run, but Dom reached out, gripping me tightly.

"Please!" I whispered.

"I would have gotten you out! Why didn't you just—"

Before Dom could finish whatever he was trying to say, the rest of the group was upon me.

Two men I didn't know dragged me in silence back to the house. I made no attempt to fight them. Including Dom and Victor, there were ten men in total. I lost the only weapon I had when I buried it in Dom's bicep, and even if I still had it, there was no hope of getting away.

Back inside the house, Miguel stood in the foyer, arms crossed over his broad chest. He didn't even bother to look at me.

"You know where to take her," he said.

I knew he didn't mean my apartment.

The two men holding me started to lead me through the house as the rest of the group began to dissipate, but before we'd made it to the hall, I heard Miguel's voice again.

"Wait!" he demanded.

Everyone turned back to him, and I watched as he made his way to Dom, grabbing his still-bleeding arm to inspect the wound.

"Quem é que fez isto?" Who did this?

Dom was silent, but Miguel followed his apologetic gaze as it landed on me.

This was bad. This was really bad.

Miguel gestured to the men holding onto me. They brought me closer before dropping my arms which were still aching from their roughness.

"Não é nada." It's nothing, Dom tried to explain, but Miguel's eyes were cold and hard.

"She knows the laws!" Miguel shot back.

I looked at Dom with pleading eyes, trying to understand what lesson on shifters I missed. *What laws? What did he mean?* Dom just dropped his head.

Miguel held out his hand, and into it, one of the men placed a knife. It was much larger, and far more intimidating than my tiny kitchen utensil. I took a panicked step backward but I was stopped from going any further by my escorts.

Dom still couldn't meet my gaze as Miguel shoved the weapon into his hand. I watched his fingers wrap tightly around the handle, his knuckles almost white from the intensity of his grip.

"Give me some space," Dom demanded, and to my surprise, even Miguel moved to the opposite side of the room.

I didn't know what was going on but I was truly terrified. My entire body was shaking as Dom took a step toward me. I turned to look at the men watching me at a distance.

"Don't look at them. Look at me," Dom murmured.

I turned back slowly to face him.

“Grab my arm,” he instructed, holding his left arm out in front of me.

“What is happening?”

“Just do what I say!” he snapped, though he managed to keep his voice barely above a whisper.

I cautiously wrapped my hand around his forearm, still looking up at him for some way to understand.

“Both hands,” he continued.

I did as he said, gripping tighter as both hands held onto him.

“This is going to hurt—”

“What is—”

“Just focus on me.”

“Dom,”

“Nothing else. Just look at me. I’m here.”

“I don’t under—”

Then I felt it.

The blade was cold but only for a split second before it dug into my arm. It almost felt like being punched. My brain hadn’t yet registered the pain. I only understood what was happening because I could see it in my peripheral vision. As Dom pulled the blade back out of my arm, my pain receptors caught up with me. I cried out loudly. I’d never felt anything like it in my life. I was sure I was going to throw up. My knees buckled underneath me, but Dom scrambled to grab me.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into my hair before Miguel’s men were back at my sides.

They pulled me out of Dom’s arms, and he watched helplessly as they dragged me, still bleeding, away from him.

As they moved me through the house, I put the pieces together. Shifters couldn’t hurt each other because the law was an eye for an eye. I’d stabbed Dom. Dom had to stab me. Miguel still believed I was one of them, so he assumed I knew.

Just as I suspected we passed my apartment entirely. I knew where I was going. I didn't know how long I would be down there or if I'd ever come back out. However, it was no surprise to me that as we descended the stairs, the sounds of the still grieving man echoed through the basement prison.

Directly across from the room they locked him in, Miguel's men shoved me through a heavy metal door and without another word, locked me inside.



Fifteen

The room I was in was nothing more than a cell. It was a cold, white room with a twin-sized bed on one wall and a toilet and sink against the other. The door I was locked behind was made of iron, at the top of it was a small window with no glass barrier and metal bars running vertically over the opening. My arm was still covered in blood, so instead of sitting on the bed I lowered myself onto the floor.

The man across the way from me wasn't well. His sobs echoed off the walls, and after a while, those sobs would turn to desperate screams. Eventually, he would start to yell at people who were not listening. There would be a moment of silence, and then he'd repeat the cycle all over again.

Sobs, screams, swearing.

Sobs, screams, swearing.

He spoke English, with a thick British accent, but English nonetheless. The fact that I could understand him perfectly made it all the more difficult to listen. I could hear the pain raking through his progressively worsening voice. It was terrible, but it distracted me from my own thoughts. I hadn't yet processed that Leon would be waiting for me in Manaus and I would never come, that I had no idea if I would be here for days or weeks or for the rest of my life. I didn't even know how long the rest of my life would be at this point.

After listening to the man in the opposite cell for what felt like hours, I finally spoke up. "I'm sorry about your wife," I called out.

"Amara," was his only response.

"What?"

"Her name. It was Amara," he explained.

"I'm sorry you lost her." I didn't expect that he would be ready to talk about it. I certainly wasn't prepared to talk about what I had been through, but I'd seen his pain firsthand, and though I couldn't do anything to ease it, I could at least offer him some level of kindness. I imagined that if I'd lost someone in the way he had, it might help to know someone cared.

He was quiet for a long moment. It was so long that I wasn't sure he heard me, but eventually, he spoke again. "That's a polite way of putting it," he said flatly.

He was right, he hadn't "lost" his wife. She was murdered, senselessly and ruthlessly murdered.

"I'm Jacey," I called back out to him.

"Leondro's wife? How the hell did you end up down here?"

"I tried to run," I explained.

"Me too," he said with a hollow sort of laugh. I shuddered to think just what he might have been running from.

"You didn't come here on your own, did you?" he asked me.

"They kidnapped me from my apartment in New York," I explained.

"Amara said she thought something was wrong at the gathering. She said there was no way you chose to be here," he mused.

"She was right."

"She usually was," he said. His voice cracked as he spoke.

"Can I ask you something?" I wasn't sure this man would give me any information. He certainly had no reason to, but it didn't hurt to try.

“What do you want to know?”

“Why did you want to leave?” I asked.

“Because it wasn’t worth it,” he explained.

“What do you mean?”

“The things they do, the things they made me do. They weren’t worth it,” he said cryptically.

“I don’t—” I hesitated, but at that point, I had nothing to lose. “I don’t actually know what they do. No one’s ever explained it to me,” I told him.

“Use your head, girl,” he snapped at me. He didn’t seem surprised by my ignorance, only annoyed that I hadn’t figured it out. “Where do you think all this money comes from?”

“I…” He had a good point. I hadn’t thought about it until now, but the house, the town cars, the hired help. All their money had to come from somewhere, yet no one seemed to have a discernible profession. I just assumed that it was family money—passed on, inherited. Clearly, that wasn’t the case.

“The ability to turn into anyone at any time is a pretty valuable tool,” he started. “Miguel has no problem selling that ability to the highest bidder, no matter what they want to do with it.”

My brain twisted around in circles as I thought of all the terrible things someone might need these men and their abilities for. I suddenly understood why Miguel wanted Leon so badly. It wasn’t because he was the long-lost child of his twin brother, it was because he was an asset. If someone that could turn themselves into another person for a few hours was worth one price, one that could turn into someone else indefinitely was worth a great deal more.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, only to hiss at the pain shooting through my arm in reaction.

“Are you hurt?” he called out to me.

“They stabbed me in the arm,” I said through gritted teeth as I waited for the pain to subside.

“Why?”

“I stabbed one of them,” I admitted honestly.

The man laughed again. The sound of it was fuller than before, and I actually found myself smiling at the momentary sense of levity. “She would have liked you,” he said through his laughter.

“You’ll have to tell me about her sometime.”

We were silent for the rest of the night though I could hear my companion quietly weep. What was there to say to each other? What was there to do but wait? I tore fabric from the shirt I was wearing and poorly attempted to wrap my arm before crawling into the tiny bed with its thin, scratchy sheets. The lights were on a timer. Without warning, they shut themselves off, and all that surrounded me was black.

My arm hurt so badly, and I was so anxiety ridden that I was sure I would never get to sleep. However, the adrenaline of running for my life, getting caught, and being stabbed had finally worn off, and I couldn’t keep my eyes open.

I awoke to the sound of the cell door opening. It was still pitch black all around me. I scrambled upright, struggling to see who entered through the darkness.

“It’s me, *linda*,” Dom whispered.

I heard his footsteps draw nearer before he knelt down next to the bed. Dom clicked on the flashlight on his cell phone. It gave off just enough light that I could make out the tangled features of his face and the medical kit he set down on the bed next to me.

“What are you doing?” I whispered back.

I understood why Dom stabbed me. He wasn’t given a choice. What I didn’t understand was why he tried to pull me out of the jungle in the first place. If he had just let me go, he wouldn’t be risking so much by helping me, and we wouldn’t have matching stab wounds in our arms. If he had just let me go, I might have been asleep in Leon’s arms and not in a prison cell.

“I have to close that up,” he said. He nodded toward my blood-soaked make-shift bandage.

“You wouldn’t have anything to close if you didn’t drag me back here,” I argued.

I heard a low growl of annoyance escape him.

“I wasn’t trying to drag you back here! I was trying to help you. You’re the one who screamed like an idiot and let everyone know where you were, then decided to fucking stab me!”

“You didn’t say anything, you just grabbed me. How was I supposed to know it was you?” I countered.

“Good to know you stab first and ask questions later.”

We were both stubbornly quiet as Dom started pulling items out of the case,

“Do you know what you’re doing?” I nagged as I remembered he’d barely managed to handle his own artificial injuries the night I had a panic attack. I had my doubts about his ability to sew up a stab wound.

“Do you?” he shot back.

The only thing I’d ever stitched in my life was clothing. I certainly doubted my ability to figure out how to close a wound, especially one-handed.

“Come here,” Dom said as he finished what he was doing. I scooted a little closer to him, but he just rolled his eyes at me. I felt his fingers dig into my thighs as he grabbed me and pulled me toward him forcefully. I watched breathlessly as he situated himself between my legs so that we were face to face.

“This is going to hurt, so I need you to bite down,” he whispered.

“On what?”

Dom pointed to his shoulder.

“You’re serious?”

“Just do it. I can’t be down here all night.”

I leaned forward, my mouth hovering over his shoulder. As soon as I felt the needle pierce my already unbearably painful skin I understood why he wanted me to bite down. I wanted to scream. I heard his breath hitch as I dug my teeth into his

shoulder. I tried to think of something else. Anything else. The smell of Leon's Tom Ford cologne, the cookies my grandma Marie made at Christmas, the view from our fire escape. Tears rolled down my face as he worked. I couldn't hold them back. The pain was indescribable.

"I'm sorry," Dom whispered into my ear. "The last thing I wanted to do was hurt you," he continued.

I knew that. Dom wanted a lot of things, most of which I couldn't provide him, but for all of his faults, I knew he didn't want to hurt me.

When he finished, he drew back slowly. His eyes met mine in what little light we had.

"Why didn't you just tell me you were planning on escaping?" he asked. It wasn't until then that I could see that I'd actually hurt him by not asking for his help. This was no longer about not having to kill me. He genuinely cared about me.

I wanted to tell him the truth. He certainly deserved it. But I didn't ask for Dom's help because Leon was in Manaus, and I wasn't sure he would still want to help me if he knew it was Leon I was running to. There was a genuine possibility that Dom might see that as a betrayal, and I had no interest in being on the wrong end of Dom's feelings for me.

"I didn't want you to have to keep putting your neck out for me," I muttered, averting my gaze to my lap.

"And here I am... still putting my neck out for you..."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I'm not," he countered, lifting my chin to meet his gaze.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know why Dom was so transfixed with me in the first place, but my choices were to let him keep his misplaced feelings and reap the benefits of his little crush or tell him the truth, hurt him, and risk losing the only hope I had of survival. That didn't seem like a choice to me, especially when I didn't just have myself to protect. I also had to protect my child.

"I have to go. I'll come back as soon as I can, but I don't know when that will be," he explained.

I nodded. Dom's lips met my cheek before he hurried out of the cell. Leaving me once again in the darkness.



Sixteen

I wanted so badly to sleep. I wanted another dream where I visited some beautiful moment in my history with Leon. I still couldn't explain my dreams, but I'd come to cherish them. They were the only thing that kept me hanging on. I clung to the idea there might still be hope for us. My situation was more dire now than it had ever been, and I needed something to hold onto, but when sleep finally came after hours of staring at the ceiling, there was nothing there, only darkness.

I awoke to the sound of my new companion screaming again. I hoped that part of his mourning period might have subsided, but the truth was, I didn't know anything about the bonds that held shifters together or the pain they felt when those bonds were broken. Despite hating the persistent sounds of his pain, I didn't say anything or try to stop him. He had lost the love of his life and while his screams might have been louder than mine, I was screaming too.

It felt like hours before he finally quieted, but I had lost all sense of time. There were no windows, no clocks on the wall, and, so far, the only visitor was the housekeeper who left us a pathetic little meal of bread, lunch meat, and fruit.

"I'm sorry," the man across the hall finally spoke. His voice was raw from the strain he'd been putting on it.

“It’s okay. I understand,” I said as I picked at the sad excuse for bread in front of me.

“They’ll probably come for you soon, and then you won’t have to put up with it,” he mumbled.

“Why do you say that?”

“The boy is clearly in love with you,” he responded.

“The boy...” It took me a moment for my brain to catch up with what he was implying. “You mean Dom?”

“No, I mean Miguel! Of course I mean Dom!”

“I think he has a crush...” I countered. I didn’t realize that the man across the way knew Dom had come to see me last night, but there was no sense in trying to hide it.

“You think he’s risking his life for a crush?” he snorted.

“He’s Miguel’s only son. I hardly think he’s risking his life by coming down here.”

“Maybe not his life but he is risking yours”

That thought made my blood turn to ice in my veins. Not only the idea that Miguel would harm me, I had come to terms with that, but that Dom was so helplessly in love with me that I could be used as a tool to punish him. I had to think of something else, anything else.

“What is your name, anyway?” I asked, hurling myself at a change of subject.

Talking about Dom didn’t exactly feel like a safe topic.

“EJ”

“Is that short for something?”

“Ejikeme, but most people have trouble with it,” he said.

“Where is that from?” I asked.

“My parents are Nigerian, but I grew up in London. What about Jacey?”

“American, I guess. It’s just something my parents came up with,” I said with a shrug. “And what about Amara?”

He was quiet for a moment, almost as if my recollection of her name surprised him. “She was born in Nigeria, but we met in London.”

“So there are shifters everywhere, then?” I asked. There was still so much I didn’t know.

“She wasn’t a shifter,” he said, this time more quietly.

“I didn’t realize that shifters could bind to someone who didn’t have the gene,” I reflected. Now her death suddenly made more sense. They couldn’t hurt other shifters, and his wife wasn’t one.

“I guess technically we can bind to anything,” he said, sounding rather perplexed before a lightbulb went off. “Hold on a minute. You don’t have the gene? I thought...”

I closed my eyes tightly. I should have kept my mouth shut. I couldn’t think of a response before EJ jumped back in.

“Miguel must not know or you’d be dead instead of in here with me,” he mused.

“Yeah,” I said tightly. I didn’t know this man, and I realized that I had now armed him with information he could leverage to get himself released and, by proxy, get me killed.

I started to panic. What could I do? A simple “just kidding” wasn’t going to work in this situation.

“Don’t worry, girl. Your secret’s safe with me,” he said, as if he could see me through the walls.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

It was possible that this man was lying and he had no intention of keeping my secret, but I had no choice but to trust him.

“You’re going to have to get out of here before he figures it out, though,” he added.

“I know,” I said. “I just don’t know how.”

“Yes, you do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The boy.”

“Dom could barely make it down here to sew up my arm. He certainly isn’t going to come to rescue me,” I shot back. The implication was ridiculous, and I had no interest in entertaining the hope that I was going to be rescued.

“Not if he thinks you’re trying to get back to your husband,” EJ started. “But if he thinks he has a chance...”

I paused. What EJ was suggesting was manipulative at best and downright cruel at worst. I knew I didn’t want Dom. Sure, there were a few moments where his attempts at seduction paired with the fact that he was nearly identical to the version of Leon I first met, but there was only one man I wanted. I was sure of that.

“I can’t do that,” I finally spoke up.

“Why?”

“Because I’m married!” The lie was now starting to feel more like the truth every time I told it.

“And you don’t think Leondro would want you to do whatever you had to do to survive?” he fired back.

“I...” I hadn’t considered that. If the tables were turned I wouldn’t care what Leon had to do to get back to me. All that would have mattered was his safety. I also had our child to think about. If I didn’t make it out of this, neither did he or she. The answer was obvious.

“You’re right,” I finally spoke up.

We both fell silent again. The quiet, now heavier than before. I had some idea of how to get myself out, but I silently wondered what would become of my new companion. My gut told me he was only alive so that Miguel could continue to use him and my heart ached at the thought.

“Why are you helping me?” I asked him.

“Because Amara wanted to, and I didn’t listen to her,” he muttered. The sorrow in his voice was so painfully apparent.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you Amara was worried about you at the gathering, right?”

“Yeah.”

“She kept trying to convince me that we should talk to you, check on you, but I told her we shouldn’t get involved,” he explained, wobbling on his words as emotion started to get the best of him again.

“It’s okay. If I was trying to escape I wouldn’t have wanted to worry about anyone else, either.” I still didn’t know the details of what Miguel was making these men do or why it was so bad that EJ had been willing to risk everything to run. Any answer I could come up with was too dark. I tried not to let my imagination run away with me. “It sounds like you really loved her,” I added.

The terrifying thought that Leon might soon be talking about me in the past tense with the same pain in his voice started to prod at the corners of my mind.

“That’s not a strong enough word.”

“What was she like?” I asked him. I wasn’t trying to pry. I just hoped that talking about her would ease his suffering and temporarily distract me from my racing mind.

“I don’t think I’m ready for that yet.”

That was fair. I didn’t want to push him, so I just listened to him move around his cell for a while until he decided to speak again. “Tell me about Leondro.”

“What would you like to know?”

“How did you end up with a shifter?” he asked me.

I couldn’t help but laugh. It was the first time I’d done that in a while. What not so long ago felt completely mind-blowing was now almost funny to me. What Leon had done seemed so small in comparison to everything I had now been through.

“I didn’t know he was a shifter when I met him. We met in college. He was my best friend. We had this really normal life together before I found out,” I explained.

“How did you find out?”

“He shifted into every guy I dated for a year,” I said, unexpectedly laughing again. Finding out had been

heartbreaking, but compared to being kidnapped, stabbed, and now locked away, that year had been a walk in the park.

“You’re kidding me?”

“I wish I were,” I said, shaking my head.

“What did you do when you found out?”

I turned my head away from the direction of my fellow captive’s voice. “I’m not ready to talk about that either,” I said.

Thankfully, EJ pivoted quickly. “Alright well, tell me a good memory,” he said.

“Why?”

“Who knows how long we’re stuck down here? We might as well keep each other company.”

I nodded and then sat there for a moment as I tried to pick one moment from the ten years of memories I had with Leon.

“Leon and I were pretty much inseparable from the day we met. We seriously spent every waking moment that we weren’t in class together, but then winter break came, and for three weeks I was going to go home to Connecticut while he spent time with his mom, who was flying in from Portugal.”

I shifted on the tiny, uncomfortable bed before I continued.

“I remember I was nervous about it. I don’t know why. I think we were just really codependent by that point, and I didn’t like the idea of not having Leon around.” I smiled, knowing very well that codependency had never really gone away.

“Anyway, I was home for about a week, and everything was normal. Then all of a sudden, there’s this ring at the doorbell, and I hear my mother yelling ‘Jacey Lange, why is there a giant frozen boy on my doorstep?’” Again I laughed, mostly at the imitation I had done of my mother’s voice. My poor mother. She had been convinced from that moment Leon was in love with me. I couldn’t count the number of times I told her she was crazy. It turned out, she was right.

“He showed up?”

“I guess his mom’s flight got canceled, and she couldn’t make it for the holidays. He told me I was the only family he

had and asked if he could stay,” I explained.

“Your parents let him do that?”

“You haven’t met Leon. Literally, everyone who’s ever met him falls in love with him, even my parents.” That was true. It didn’t even take that much convincing. “We spent that entire break eating terrible food and watching old episodes of *Aaahh! Real Monsters*. Then on New Year’s Eve, we got unreasonably drunk in my parents’ basement and decided to sneak out of their house. We ended up at a tattoo shop, and ever since we’ve had matching tattoos of cartoon monsters.”

I pulled up the leg of the pants I was wearing and looked down at the tattoo on the inside of my ankle.

“You seem to have a very strange romance,” EJ observed.

“You have no idea.”



Seventeen

For days, all EJ and I did was talk. We talked about ourselves, about Leon—I even got him to open up about Amara. We laughed, cried, played strange rhyming games, and told each other bad dad jokes. Having him there was like a lifeline, and though I wasn't sure just how long it would be before someone came to retrieve one or both of us, for the time being, the sound of his gruff British accent had become a comfort to me. I liked to think I was doing the same for him, though he never said as much.

We would only stop talking when we were too tired to keep our eyes open, and then our conversation would pick back up again the following morning. The separation screaming finally stopped. EJ was still about as broken as one man could be. I doubted that he would ever stop mourning for his wife, but he didn't wake up sounding like he was dying anymore.

“Has Miguel always been so...” I started, unsure what the right description was for such cruel and monstrous behavior.

“Bloody awful?” EJ inserted.

“Yeah...”

He was quiet for a long moment before he spoke again. “I only know what I've been told, but it was always Matheo who was the cruel one. Their parents had five boys—the twins first

and then three others. Matheo came first, and there was just something dark about him right from the beginning...”

My mind wandered as EJ told me the story, and I remembered something Leon told me in Tavira. “*My mom didn’t know what my father was when she fell in love with him. She said she knew he was different—darker than normal people, but she didn’t know what that meant.*” I didn’t understand how someone like Constança could have fallen in love with someone like that or how that man could have any part in creating someone like Leon.

“Miguel always wanted Matheo’s validation and went along with anything he said or did, but when you got him alone, he was warm, genuine, funny even. I think that’s the version of him that Estela fell in love with,” he continued.

I’d wondered about that too. Estela was a force all on her own, but despite her strength, she seemed kind, or at least she had been to me. She and Miguel seemed completely mismatched at first glance.

“So how did we get here?” I asked.

“Something cracked in him when Matheo died. Everyone here calls it an *accident* but...”

“You think it was something else?” I asked, unsure I was following my new friend’s story.

“No doctor could explain it. He just didn’t wake up one day, and it was like his body was slowly rotting from the inside out. It took months. It just... doesn’t sound natural to me,” he said.

My heart ached as I faced the humanity of my captor once again. I thought of my beautiful sister and what might happen to me if I had to watch her slowly die like that. The thought was almost too much to bear, so I quickly changed the subject.

“So what was it like? Growing up knowing you could become someone else?”

“It only seems strange to you because you just learned it was possible. Shifters live in communities. Hell, I’ve even heard of whole shifter villages before. It’s not like you wake up one day

and find out you're different. You spend your whole life knowing," he explained.

"What about the ones who don't live in communities?"

"Your Leon is the only shifter I've ever heard of who didn't"

"I—"

Before I could finish my thought, the sound of a single set of footsteps and loudly jangling keys started to descend the stairs. EJ and I both went instantaneously silent. The footsteps continued until they stopped in front of my cell. I held my breath as the door creaked open, unable to see the person standing on the other side. Without thinking, I pulled my knees into my chest protectively and backed myself against the wall next to the bed.

"Relax, *linda*. Relax." Dom said softly, although he rolled his eyes at me for good measure.

I let out a small sigh of relief, but that relief was short-lived. I remembered EJ urging me over the last few days to use Dom in any way I could to get free. EJ was right, but that didn't make what I had to do any easier.

It was now or never. I hurled myself off the bed, wrapping my arms around Dom tightly as if he were the only person in the world I wanted to see.

"God, I'm so happy it's you!" I whispered into his ear.

He remained motionless for a moment before his arms slowly wrapped around my waist, holding too closely for too long.

After a long moment, Dom pulled back to look at me.

"Are you okay? How's your arm?"

"I'm okay... I'm just..."

Dom looked at me with so much concern that I was sure EJ was right. I had my doubts that what Dom felt for me was love, but there was no denying he felt something.

"Just what?"

"I'm scared," I said in the smallest voice I could muster.

I wasn't lying. I was scared, but I was also playing a part. One I could only hope Dom was naive enough to believe.

He reached up, brushing his rough fingertips against my cheek.

"He's not going to keep you down here forever," he reassured me.

"I don't understand why he's keeping me down here at all!"

"He just wants to scare you enough that you won't run again," Dom explained.

"Mission accomplished," I said, the annoyance clear in my tone.

I turned from Dom and sat back down on the bed. He followed close behind me. I willed myself not to get distracted, but it was hard. He looked so much like Leon and I missed Leon so much.

Do what you have to do to get back to him.

"How's *your* arm?" I asked, mirroring Dom's question.

"I'll live," he said with a shrug.

I reached over, gently pulling up the sleeve of his t-shirt until I could see the stitched-up wound in his bicep. I heard a tiny halt in his breath as my fingers traced along the gash.

"Does that hurt?" I teased.

"Not as much as the bite marks on my shoulder," he laughed.

"I could make more."

Suddenly he was silent, his gaze darkening as it moved from my eyes to my lips and back again.

"Last time I checked, you were threatening to strangle me in my sleep," he challenged me, though it sounded far more like a warning.

I leaned into him, daring him to do what we both knew he was imagining.

"You told me choking could be fun," I shrugged. "Maybe I want to find out if you're right."

Dom looked away from me for a long moment, then quickly snapped his head back in my direction.

“What about your *husband*?” he asked skeptically. Though he was the only one who knew Leon wasn’t, in fact, my husband.

I took a slow breath. *I’m doing this for Leon. I’m doing this for Leon.* “I’ve been here for weeks, and Leon has done *nothing*.” I hated that there was truth in my words, but there was. “I’ve been alone for days. I’ve had a lot of time to think, and I’m not blind to the fact that you’re the only person who has tried to protect me.”

I didn’t know what was going on behind Dom’s dark eyes as he stared at me. “So what does that mean?” he asked slowly.

My mind ran in circles as I tried to come up with an answer. I hadn’t exactly thought this through. I wasn’t manipulative by nature. I just had to do something, anything to help myself.

“I don’t know. But maybe when I’m not locked in a basement, we can try to figure that out.”

He nodded slowly but didn’t say a word. I wanted so badly to know what was going on in his head. I didn’t know if he was buying any of this.

“How long do I have with you?” I asked.

His brows shot up, and he once again looked at me with nothing but questions.

“You want me to stay with you?” he asked slowly.

I inched closer to Dom and gently leaned my head against his shoulder. “I just know I’m safer when you’re here.” That wasn’t a lie. Despite himself and the loyalty he no doubt felt for his father, Dom had protected me from the moment I got into this hell. I hadn’t suddenly become some love-sick school girl over it, but he did make me feel safe.

We sat there quietly for a long moment, and Dom slid his fingers into mine as we both held this heavy unknown space.

“How did you know the way out?” he finally asked.

I winced. Dom was smarter than I was giving him credit for.

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to stall for time.

“You don’t know?”

I had to think fast. I didn’t want Dom to know about the dreams I’d been having. Even though I still couldn’t explain them, they were my only means of communication with Leon, unreliable thought it was.

“Constança”

“The witch?”

“Leon’s mother,” I corrected him with a bit more bite than I intended. Technically, both facts were true about her, but I knew the word witch had a much sharper edge where shifters were concerned.

This time I was only relying on what I gathered to be true. If I was wrong, there was a possibility that Dom might know something was up.

“She told me about what happened with Matheo and how she escaped. I didn’t know if it would work, but I remembered the story and figured I would try,” I explained.

I wished I knew that story. Perhaps, it could have helped me. All I knew was Constança had been trapped here once and *someone* helped her escape.

I felt Dom’s body stiffen almost instantly. I was right. “Oh,” was all he said, and again the two of us were silent.

“I hope you know I would never do something like that to you,” he murmured.

After all, I’d been through I knew I couldn’t predict what anyone would do, let alone shifters. Regardless, I nodded and lied when I said, “I know.”

“You knew what happened, and still decided to be with Leondro?”

I had once again found myself in a conversation where I was pretending to know what was going on but truly had no idea. *Why would something Matheo did make me not want to be with Leon?*

“They aren’t the same person, you know?”

“Tell Miguel that.”

“He wouldn’t believe me if I did,” I responded. If I had gathered anything about Miguel and his obsession with Leon, it was that he not only wanted to auction off Leon’s abilities, he wanted Leon to fill the void that losing his brother left.

Dom let out a dry chuckle. “You’re right, he wouldn’t,” he agreed.

He pulled away from me so that I would lift my head to look at him.

“I should go. The whole reason I came down here was to warn you. When Miguel decides to let you out of here, he’s probably going to send Victor.”

I swallowed down the growing lump in my throat. The idea of being alone with that man shook me to my core.

“I don’t understand,” I admitted.

“Miguel just wants to know you’ll behave. Just do whatever Victor says,” Dom said, his expression suddenly grim.

“What are you talking about? What is he going to make me do?”

“I’m not sure. It will be okay, I promise. Just don’t argue with him,” Dom warned.

“You’re scaring me,” I admitted honestly. The panic started to settle in again. I gripped the side of the bed trying to steady myself, trying to control my racing mind.

Before I knew what was going on Dom was kissing me again. Perhaps he thought his lips on mine were comforting, but they weren’t. This time, I couldn’t blame my lack of response on shock, so despite myself, I returned his kiss. I willed myself not to feel anything. I would go through whatever motions I had to, but I refused to let myself get caught up in Dom, no matter how easy it might have been.

He pulled away breathlessly, his dark eyes searching for mine.

“What did I promise you?” he asked.

“You won’t let anything happen to me,” I said softly.

“Never,” Dom reassured me.

Wordlessly he got up and headed for the door.

“*Boa noite, linda.*” *Goodnight, Beautiful.*

“Wait!” I called out before he could leave.

“Tell him I want to talk.”

“Who?”

“Miguel. Tell him I want to talk.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“You think my chances are better with Victor?”

Dom just stared at me. I couldn’t read his expression.

“Okay, I’ll tell him. I just—”

I took his hesitation as an opportunity and quickly got up from the bed. I stopped inches from Dom, lowering my chin and looking up at him through my eyelashes.

“Please?”

Dom’s gaze softened.

“I just hope you know what you’re doing,” he said gently.

“I do.”

That was a lie if I ever told one, but I had an idea that might save both EJ and me.

There was a long stretching silence after Dom left. It was so long that I thought perhaps EJ had fallen asleep. That was, until I heard a slow, exaggerated clap coming from the other side of the hall.

“You did good, girl.”

“It didn’t feel good,” I shot back at him.

“Why? These people took you from your home, from the man you love, from your entire life, and they want to take your child. That boy might seem like a lovesick puppy, but don’t you dare forget that he stood by and watched while Miguel’s lap dog threatened you at knifepoint and then pistol-whipped and kidnapped you!”

EJ's words stirred something in me, something deep and feral.

"You're right," I said through gritted teeth.

"Of course, I fucking am!" EJ exclaimed. "We're going to get you out of here. No matter what it takes."

"I'm going to get you out of here, too," I told him.

"You don't have to worry about me, girl."

"We're getting out."



Eighteen

I only had one weapon at my disposal, my head. I didn't consider myself any smarter than anyone else, but I was clever, and that cleverness had kept me alive so far. The only thing I could do now was hope that that same cleverness would get me out of this cage.

I didn't expect it to take long for Miguel to show up, and just as I predicted, less than an hour after the housekeeper came to give EJ a breakfast of lukewarm oatmeal that was somehow gray, we heard footsteps again. This time there was more than one set echoing down the hallway. The sounds stopped in front of my door, and once again, I held my breath as it swung open.

The thing I always found interesting about Miguel was that only his demeanor made him intimidating. He was middle-aged, average height, broad but not overly muscular, and though there were tattoos on the back of his hands and peeking out from underneath his clothing, if I saw him walking down the streets of Manhattan, I wouldn't have given him a second thought. However, there was a way he commanded a room. He took up all the available space without moving a muscle. I found that he was very often still, letting the people around him buzz around him while he remained unmoved.

On either side of Miguel were both Dom and Victor. Victor, I assumed, was there for protection. Miguel didn't seem to go

anywhere without him. For Dom, this was likely some lesson on how to be the patriarch of this hornet's nest of a family. In my mind, he was more a cult leader than a father, but it was for that reason that I managed to come up with a way to get what I wanted.

"I was told you wanted to speak with me," Miguel said as he slowly looked me up and down. There was no hint of thought or emotion on his face.

"I'd like to ask a favor," I said as politely as I could despite wanting to spit in the face of the man staring me down.

Victor snorted back a laugh. I didn't blame him. Everyone in that room knew I was in no position to be asking for anything, but as I suspected, Miguel looked more intrigued than annoyed.

"And what might that be?"

"I'd like to go to confession," I said, raising the tone of my voice to sound more gentle.

I glanced briefly at Dom, and I could have sworn I saw the faintest smirk cross his face.

"We'll have the priest come down to you," Miguel said dismissively.

"If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to confess properly. I've made some mistakes, and I find being in a church comforting," I went on.

I didn't know much about Miguel, but I did know he made an entire community of people attend church every Sunday. I was relying on his devotion and the little Catholic knowledge I had, even if it was mostly from horror movies about exorcisms, to get me what I wanted.

Miguel considered this for a long moment before he spoke again. "Very well. Victor will take you."

I clenched my jaw and willed myself not to react to the idea of Victor taking me anywhere.

"Was that all?" Miguel asked, raising a dark brow.

"No," I said bravely. "I'd like EJ to come with me," I added.

"Oh, is he confessing too?" Miguel bit back sarcastically.

I had to act fast before he suspected I was up to something. “No, but his wife just died,” I said, choosing my words carefully. His wife hadn’t died, she was murdered. I wanted to throw that fact right in Miguel and Victor’s smug faces, but I had to be careful.

I watched the tiniest flicker of emotion cross Miguel’s face for the first time since he’d shown up. I couldn’t call it regret, but his gaze moved to the floor, and there was a fleeting moment of sadness in his expression.

“He needs to light a candle for her,” I pressed.

Everyone became so quiet you could hear a pin drop as Miguel considered my request.

Again I had to keep my face neutral as I watched him nod his head quickly and turn to Victor. He said something in Portuguese under his breath. I couldn’t quite make out the words, but Victor immediately turned to leave the room.

“Some of my men will take you and bring you back,” Miguel said simply.

“Thank you.”

Miguel left with Dom trailing behind him. I felt his eyes lingering on me as they shut me back in my cell. Of course, Dom knew I was up to something. I barely made it through mass without the entire congregation realizing I knew nothing about Catholicism. However, even if I’d had the chance to tell him what I was doing, I wouldn’t have. He would have only tried to talk me out of it.

A long moment of silence passed before EJ spoke to me.

“What are you planning, girl?”

“The baby is fine,” I said, simply.

“I don’t understand.”

“Just remember, the baby is fine.”

An hour later, Victor and a group of men, most of which I didn’t recognize, descended upon the basement. EJ and I were let out of our cells, and for the first time since being locked away, I was face to face with my unlikely companion, my

friend. He was in his early 40s and much taller than I expected, but otherwise, he was exactly as I remembered him when I first saw him getting locked away.

“It’s good to see you again,” he said quietly.

“It’s good to see you, too,” I said, reaching out and gently squeezing his arm.

What I knew, but EJ didn’t, was that if everything went according to plan, this would be the last time I saw him and the last time he saw this place.

They took the two of us in separate cars, a handful of men with EJ and a handful with me.

Dom and Victor rode in mine, but thankfully, Miguel was nowhere to be found. He was too busy to bother himself with such a meaningless task, no doubt. I was keenly aware of Dom as he situated himself next to me. We both tried not to exchange glances or give anyone in the car any indication of the things that had transpired between us. Yet like some quiet act of rebellion, I felt his fingers gently graze the side of my leg. I took comfort in his touch for perhaps the first time. He was still there. He was still protecting me.

“What is it you need to confess so badly?” Victor barked at me from the other side of the car.

“Did I miss something? Are you a priest?”

“Someone should teach you to watch your mouth,” he shot back.

“I’m not the one who needs a muzzle,” I responded, staring him down defiantly.

He lunged forward, but one of the men beside him held him back.

I was poking a bear, but I was doing it intentionally. I needed to be the sole focus of Victor’s attention.

The car slowed to a halt. “*Tem cuidado,*” *Be careful.* Dom warned me quietly as I followed behind my unnecessary number of escorts.

I had no intention of heeding his warning.

EJ's car followed closely behind. I waited for him before ascending the stairs that led to the church.

Once inside, all the attention in the room was on me.

"This might take a while. You might as well get comfortable," I said in annoyance at the men standing around.

I then turned to EJ. "We should go light a candle," I murmured.

He and I quietly walked to an intricately carved wooden table near the door, above it hung a painting of the Virgin Mary. In silence, we each took tea lights and matches from tiny boxes off to the side and quietly lit them before setting the candles back into tiny carved alcoves on the table.

"Don't get caught," I said under my breath.

EJ turned his head sharply to look at me, but I had no time to explain.

"Stay here and pray for Amara. I'll just be a minute." I said, just loudly enough that the men in the room could hear me.

Goodbye, my friend. Don't ever look back.

I slowly made my way up the aisle of the church, toward the confessional booth that was situated in the upper right corner of the sanctuary. I was about to turn at the front pew, but I stopped suddenly and grabbed my stomach. I dropped to my knees so hard that the sound of them hitting the ancient, wooden floor vibrated throughout the room. Then I let out the loudest and most gut-wrenching scream of pain I could muster. I screamed until I ran out of breath, choked in whatever air I could get into my lungs, and began screaming again.

Just as I had hoped, the room full of men came rushing toward me and away from EJ, who I left alone... by the only exit.

I just kept screaming. Even the priest came rushing out of the confessional booth to help me. The men were shouting at each other in a complete panic. It wasn't me they were worried about, it was the baby. They were worried what would happen to them if I lost something of such great value to Miguel on their watch.

Finally, Dom broke through the crowd, gathered me up in his arms, and started for the door.

“Ela precisa de um hospital.” She needs a hospital. He shouted behind him as I continued to writhe and scream.

When we got to the exit, EJ was no longer there. I didn't know how long it would take someone to realize he was missing, but I took comfort in knowing I had given him a head start.

Dom laid me down in the back seat of the closest car, got inside, and began barking commands at the driver. The car peeled off, tires screeching, before anyone else could join him. I assumed the rest of the men were following behind us, but I was relieved that for a brief moment, it was just Dom and me.

I stopped my performance cold and sat up abruptly in my seat. Dom's eyes went wide, and he slammed his hand to the ceiling, closing the privacy screen between us and the driver.

“What the fuck?” he said in a way that somehow sounded like both a whisper and a scream at the same time.

“I'm fine,” I assured him, though my voice was still raw from screaming.

It wasn't until that moment that I realized Dom was shaking. “You're fine? But you—“

“I'm okay. I promise.”

Dom launched himself at me from the other side of the car. He placed a trembling hand against my face as he pressed his forehead against mine. “What were you thinking? What the hell were you thinking?”

I could have taken that moment, to be honest with Dom. He had probably earned that. I could have told him what I did for EJ, but I had to give him as much time as I could. If I was lucky, it would be hours before anyone realized he was missing. They would all be too caught up in getting me medical help and finding out if there was anything wrong with the baby.

“I had to get out of there. I couldn't stay down there in that hell anymore!”

“And *this* was your plan?”

He was still shaking, and his breathing was ragged. He wasn't just scared, he was terrified. I felt guilt swimming up inside of me again. I didn't regret helping EJ, but I did feel terrible about how much Dom seemed to care.

"It worked didn't it?"

"You're insane, *linda*. You're fucking insane!"

He was probably right. No sane person would have pulled a stunt like that, but if my options were to come up with some way to fight back or leave myself and another person at Miguel's mercy, it was worth the risk.

I was determined to set us both free, even if I had to hurt Dom to do it.



Nineteen

I wasn't sure what I expected from hospital rooms in Brazil, but they weren't much different than home. They smelled of disinfectant, and the walls were all too white. The lights were fluorescent and time seemed to pass much too slowly. I knew nothing was wrong with me, but I had become numb to the lies I was telling.

I described a terrible shooting pain. I said I thought I was losing the baby. I said anything I could think of that might be convincing. The nurse who brought me to the exam room was a short woman in her forties. She could barely understand my Portuguese though she seemed to be genuinely trying. Dom ended up stepping in to translate for me. Eventually, he took over the conversation entirely.

While they spoke, I leaned back in the hospital bed and turned my attention to the brightly colored privacy curtain on my right. The background was an off-putting shade of pea soup green, while the pattern was a bunch of brown and blue hearts. Wondering why someone would have picked out such a monstrosity was enough to distract me from worrying. I was worried about EJ, Leon, and most of all, how Miguel would react when he found out I ended up in a hospital.

I was shaken from my thoughts when I heard Dom say, "*Tem alguém aqui que fale inglês?*" *Does someone here speak*

English?

It surprised me that Dom thought to ask for a doctor I could communicate with. I half expected to walk into the hospital only to find a bunch of Miguel's men answering questions for me. The nurse nodded and left the two of us alone.

"Thank you," I said softly. It meant a lot to me that Dom cared enough to let me advocate for myself, even when he knew I wasn't actually dealing with any pain.

"For what, *linda*?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "A lot of things," I muttered.

I had too many things to thank Dom for, and all of them were reason enough to stop pretending like I had feelings for him in order to escape. However, there was one reason that outweighed any kindness or protection Dom had given me—Leon. I didn't care what I had to do or who I had to hurt. It was all collateral damage. I would burn it all to the ground to get back to him. I tried to block out the fact that, for whatever reason, Leon had not been willing to do the same for me.

On some level, I understood that he was trying to ensure both our freedoms by not walking right into the lion's den. That, however, didn't silence the thought that it must have been clear by now that I couldn't get out on my own, yet Leon was nowhere to be found. I didn't know what I would have done in his shoes, but I did know I would have done *something*.

Dom reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing it gently. However, just as quickly as he'd taken my hand, he dropped it. The door swung open. We both braced for Miguel or Victor, but it was a doctor who entered. Another woman in her forties, this one a bit taller and with a full head of curly hair. I'd almost forgotten that Dom wasn't supposed to be doing any of this. He was, after all, a soon-to-be-married man.

I ran into that thought like a brick wall. Once, not so very long ago, I had a fiancé who cheated, too. Whether Dom was in love with Caroline or not, the last thing I wanted to do was to be Lexi Atkins in their story.

"Jackie?" the doctor asked as she looked down at the chart.

“It’s Jacey,” I explained.

“It says you’re having abdominal pain?”

I nodded.

“How long have you been pregnant?” she asked me.

I still didn’t know the answer to that question, but in an attempt not to sound ridiculous, I simply said, “I’m in my first trimester.”

“And is this the father?” she asked me.

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could come up with something other than “*No, this is the father’s lothario of a cousin, but he sure would like to be*”, Dom jumped in.

“*Sim,*” he responded. *Yes.*

It was probably just as well. The hospital staff was less likely to think something was up if they weren’t privy to the strange interpersonal dynamics of my relationship with Leon’s family.

“Okay, it seems like the pain has subsided, but we’re going to do an ultrasound to make sure everything is okay with the baby,” she explained.

I nodded, but as a nurse came in with a large gray and white machine on wheels, I felt a familiar sadness creep in again. I was about to see our baby for the first time, and Leon wasn’t there. I couldn’t help but remember Leon never wanted to be a father in the first place, but even though I tried to keep it out of my mind, I wished he did. It was absolutely insane, but despite all I knew and all we had both done, I wanted a family with Leon.

I had never seen an ultrasound before, but just like in the movies, they put uncomfortably cold, blue jelly on my skin and then placed a wand-type object against my stomach. My nerves twisted around in my stomach as the technician looked for the right spot. After finding what they were looking for, the doctor stood in front of the screen for a long moment. I desperately searched her face for any indication of what she was thinking, but she didn’t move a muscle.

“Everything looks fine. Would you like to see?”

Though I was relieved, I thought for a moment to say no. *No, I don't want to see this without Leon.* Almost as if saying no might make me wake up from this nightmare. However, I also didn't know if or when I would get the chance again, so I nodded, and the technician swiveled the screen to face me.

There, in black and white, was a tiny oblong shape. It was real.

This wasn't some fever dream I could wake up from or another one of my strange visions. This was real. This baby was real.

"Can you—do you know the gender?" I asked hesitantly. I took comfort that Dom was the only person in the room, but I was terrified to find out that it was a boy. I knew that if we had a son, neither Leon nor I would ever be free.

"Not for another month or so," the doctor responded.

I let out a small sigh of relief. At least I could keep us safe for a little while longer, but I knew that I had to get out of Brazil before Miguel found out whether my child was of any use to him or not.

Please be a girl. I thought back to that afternoon with Nichelle before Leon finally told me how he felt. We joked about adopting a child together. I told him I wanted a boy because designer bags and makeup were too expensive. Now all I wanted was a girl. I wanted the most useless baby girl I could have.

The doctor only stuck around for a few more minutes to give me some pregnancy tips while Dom stood to the side, answering a phone call. When she left me alone, I did the only thing I could think to do.

I don't think it works this way. I've been seeing these things that I can't explain, and maybe it's silly to think that I have some kind of powers or that we have some magical bond where you can hear what I'm thinking. If you could, you probably would have heard all the times I checked you out, and then you wouldn't have waited so long to tell me how you felt. All I know is that even if we don't have a magical one, we do have a real bond, and so I just have to hope that you can still feel me. That

you know I'm okay and that I'm waiting for you. I miss you, and I don't know where you are. I don't know if you're safe or hurt or plotting to go after your uncle with a bazooka, so I'm scared. Maybe I'm the one who has to rescue you this time. I'm not sure. But I want you to know I'm fighting to get back to you. Oh, and I just saw our baby for the first time. It's the most beautiful lump I've ever seen.

I sat there waiting for some kind of response. Some sign for the universe that Leon had heard me, but there was nothing.

“They’re waiting for us downstairs,” Dom said solemnly, as he hung up the phone.

I wasn’t sure what was going to happen now. I’d gotten myself out of the basement for a while, but I had no idea if Miguel was planning to put me back in. If he did, I wouldn’t have EJ to keep me sane. I also wasn’t sure if anyone had yet noticed that EJ was missing or put together the pieces that I wasn’t in pain, I had been creating a distraction to help him escape.

To my surprise, when we reached the hospital parking lot, there were only two people, Miguel and Estela. No henchmen were lingering around, not even Victor. I clenched my fists to my sides tightly, hoping that didn’t mean that the men who weren’t there were trying to track down my friend.

The driver came around and opened the door, and wordlessly, the four of us got inside.

“How are you feeling?” Miguel asked me as the car started to drive off. His voice was tight, though I wasn’t sure I understood why.

“I’m doing better, thank you,” I said politely before directing my attention out the window.

“I need to apologize,” he said.

I whipped my head back in Miguel’s direction. An apology was the last thing I thought I would ever hear coming from that man’s lips.

“I didn’t realize that leaving you down there for so long would put so much stress on the baby,” he added. He sounded a

bit like he'd been given a script. I had to assume that Estela had something to do with his sudden change of tone.

"Thank you," I said before turning away again.

"We'll make sure you have better accommodations from now on."

I hoped that meant that I wouldn't have to go back downstairs.

"That baby is important. We don't want anything happening to him," he added.

I was quiet for a long moment before my anger got the better of me. "Why?" I demanded more than asked.

"What are you asking me?"

"Why is my baby so important?" I continued.

"I know you don't think much of this family, but my brother only had one son, and that son has only one son, so keeping that bloodline safe is important."

I wanted so badly to roll my eyes. Miguel was trying to ensure my obedience by telling me how much he treasured a man, who, from what I could tell, was just as horrible as everyone else in this place. I didn't care that Leon and my child were his last connections to his brother. There was no longer anything Miguel could say to make himself seem human to me.

"What happened to no more harm coming to me?" I asked him defiantly.

"We both know you brought that on yourself," he snapped at me.

I balled the sides of my sweatpants into my fists and bit the inside of my cheek so hard I thought it might bleed.

Maybe he was right. I had brought it on myself, but Miguel was about to see what I could bring upon him. With or without Leon's help. I was going to make Miguel pay for everything he'd done to me.



Twenty

We spent the remainder of the car ride in silence. Normally, I found the quiet maddening, I was so used to the constant background noise of a city, but this time, I was thankful for it. Miguel, Dom, and Estela all stared at me as I stared out the window, and into the night. I watched as the dense forest whipped past me until the familiar site of that giant, demented house came into view.

I had gone from merely disliking the large vine-covered building to wanting to see it, and its inhabitants, burn to the ground. The rage inside of me was something I had never felt before. It was beyond anger. It was beyond any emotion I knew how to name.

When we moved inside, I expected Dom or Estela to take me to my room. Instead, it was the devil himself who decided to escort me. Color slowly drained from my face as he dismissed them. I kept looking over at Dom, begging for help, but what could he do?

“Walk with me, Jacey,” he said. Miguel’s voice was deep and rich without a hint of the malice I knew lay beneath it.

Dom shot one last longing look at me before following his mother upstairs.

I slowly turned my attention to Miguel as he started walking. I fell in step alongside him, and while I tried to remain impassive, every hair on my body stood on end.

“How are you feeling?” he asked me.

I wasn't sure why he didn't just ask me how the baby was. We both knew that was the only thing he cared about.

“Better, thank you,” I said flatly.

“Something has been bothering me...” he started as he herded me down the hall.

“Oh. What's that?” I said, my voice a little too light. I tried desperately to keep him from hearing the terror coiling inside me.

“Why is it that you have been here for weeks, and Leondro hasn't come for you?”

My mind started racing. *Oh God, did he know? Don't react. Don't react!* “I've been asking myself the same question,” I admitted with a tiny nervous chuckle.

“So you don't know where he is?”

“No,” I said without hesitation.

“And yet you went running off into the jungle toward Manaus?”

“I didn't know where I was headed. I had just seen a bloodied, screaming man thrown into a cell. I was scared,” I countered.

Luckily, most of what I was saying to Miguel was the truth, so I had no need to come up with stories or elaborate reasons for my actions. Anyone who had seen what I had would have been terrified. I knew that the pain I saw EJ in that night would probably haunt me for the rest of my life. I'd never seen suffering like that before.

“You know it's funny...” he said, turning his head to look at me with exaggerated slowness. He reminded me of some nocturnal predatory creature getting ready to pounce. “I wouldn't have expected you to be so easily frightened.”

“Why is that?”

“You walked into my office and barely flinched. From what I’ve heard, you’ve gone toe to toe with men twice your size. Yet you saw a little blood and a little screaming, and that scared you?”

“His wife had just been killed,” I said plainly.

“And?”

The dismissal in his voice made me sick to my stomach. The longer I was there, the longer I felt like I’d been transported to a completely different universe. Even death meant nothing to these people.

“How was I supposed to know I wasn’t next?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re with child.”

My heart sank. I’d always known that carrying Miguel’s grandnephew was the only purpose I served, but hearing him say it directly felt like another nail in the coffin that I was slowly being sealed in.

He halted suddenly before turning to face me straight on. “Do you know what I think?”

“W-what?” I hesitated.

“Leandro might be Matheo’s son. He might have my brother’s strength, but there’s no way that the two of you are bound, and he is still in New York.”

It took everything within me not to lose it as I mentally braced myself for the conclusion he was about to come to. He knew I didn’t have the gene. He knew Leon and I weren’t bound. This was it.

“Which means at best he’s in Manaus, and at worst he’s hiding among my men, so which is it?”

I should have been relieved, but instead, my eyes went wide. That was a possibility I had not yet considered. What if Leon was here? What if Leon was any one of these people?

“How would I know?” I asked.

“What?”

“I don’t have a phone. I don’t have a laptop. Unless a carrier pigeon is flying around here, how would I know if Leon was in Manaus?” I asked him, completely bypassing the possibility that he could be any person in this house.

Miguel narrowed his dark eyes at me but eventually nodded, seeming satisfied with my answer. We began walking again. The whole conversation felt like it was going in slow motion. All I wanted was to get back to my apartment and as far away from him as possible.

“Is he here?” he asked in a voice cold enough to chill me to the bone.

This time I was the one to stop walking. I had no idea if I was protecting Leon by trying to convince Miguel that his suspicions were off base, but if there was any chance that Leon was here, I knew I had to keep him safe.

“If he was, why would I have been running by myself? Would you let Estela run through the jungle in the middle of the night while she was pregnant?” I stated more than asked. I’d seen enough of the two of them together to know that Miguel, for whatever it was worth, was devoted to his wife. “More importantly, would you have let her get caught, stabbed, thrown in a cell, and done nothing at all?”

Leon could have been anywhere, but I knew he wouldn’t have just stood idle while everything I went through happened. If he was in the house, he showed up after I didn’t make it to Manaus. I spent so much time trying to understand where Leon was and how to escape this literal hell. Yet as confusing and cruel as this new world was, there were still things I knew for certain. One of those things was that Leondro Acosta loved me. It was a love that might have been selfish and off-kilter at times, but it was there. I thought back to the note in my nightstand. *I have been in love with you since the moment we met. No matter what happens, I will be in love with you until the day there is nothing left of me.*

We reached the door of my apartment. In an attempt to get away from Miguel as quickly as possible, I reached for the handle, but before my fingers hit the brushed metal, Miguel had

me by the wrist. I pulled back against him, but his fingers only gripped tighter around me. I hissed in pain.

“Let me go!”

“I want you to listen to me because this is the last time I will explain this to you. You and my nephew have exactly three options, he stays, that child stays, or the three of you stay together, but the moment you are no longer carrying that child, I have no use for you, and if you make another pathetic attempt at escaping I will have no problem making an example of you.”

I yanked as hard as I could against him, but it was only met with a snicker. “Is that clear?”

“Are you done?” I shot back in anger.

I had a bad habit of pushing where I should yield. Maybe that was why Miguel didn't believe EJ's suffering had scared me. It did scare me, but the man in front of me scared me more.

His grin turned feline as he shoved open the door to my apartment and stepped aside.

“Goodnight, Jacey,” he purred.

I brushed past him, slamming the door behind me before he could say another word. I heard the click of the lock again.

I turned on the lights slowly, my body still shaking. I didn't know if I was angry or just terrified. I wanted to cry and scream and throw up all at the same time. I looked around the room, and suddenly, the apartment felt massive. Compared to the basement, this place was a palace. I tried to take solace in the fact that I had done exactly what I'd set out to do, despite Miguel and his men. I had gotten out of that prison, and I set EJ free. The only problem was I felt like every victory was countered with a violent pull back into the darkness.

I looked out the window into the courtyard for a long moment. I wished I knew how EJ was doing. I decided instead of worrying I was better off assuming the best. I imagined him making his way back to London or building a home someplace new, maybe falling in love again. I didn't know how shifter bonds worked or if that was even possible for him, but that didn't keep me from hoping he would be happy someday. I

imagined a woman who was nothing but sunshine to counter his gruff personality. She knew how to garden, she insisted on home-cooked meals, and she sang to herself all the time. I doubted I would ever know what happened to my friend, so I decided then and there to keep believing in my own little fairytale.

I dragged myself toward the bedroom, removing the clothes I had been stuck wearing for days and lazily tossing them in a trail on the floor as I moved through the space. I slid into the tiny bathroom and turned the shower on, cranking the water as hot as I could.

I was too tired to stand, so I just sat down under the water. As the hot water hit me, so did the events of the last few days. I covered my head with my hands and just let it out. I sobbed, not just for myself or my child, but for a life I wasn't sure I would ever be able to return to. I knew that even if Leon showed up and Miguel agreed to let me go, I wasn't going to leave him. I promised myself I would never leave him again. We were all trapped. Leon, me, our baby, Dom, Caroline, Taia, and every person within these walls belonged to Miguel whether we wanted to or not.

I stayed in that shower as long as I could. Nearly an hour later, I managed to pull myself together enough to get out. I took my time putting on my nightgown. The gash in my arm was still painful enough that I had to work around it. With a heavy sigh, I walked back out to the kitchen, hoping that the housekeeper had left me something to eat that wasn't oatmeal or mystery lunch meat. I was starving.

Before I could open the fridge I noticed something on the counter that hadn't been there before.

My heart stopped as I realized what I was looking at. Sitting on the tile countertop was a photograph, printed from the ultrasound. It was our child. That tiny, beautiful lump. Next to it, a bright yellow flower that I recognized from the courtyard and next to that, a note. It only read three words in handwriting I feared I might never see again.

Yours.

Mine.

Ours.



Twenty-One

I found it strange that a note scribbled in frantic, almost cursive handwriting on a tiny white sliver of paper could do so much. I was strong, perhaps even stronger than I realized, but I was cracking. Between the kidnapping, death threats, the ever-present monitoring of strange men, a stab wound, pregnancy hormones, and attempting to seduce a twenty-two-year-old into helping me escape, I was grasping at strings. I didn't know how much longer I could hold on, but right when I was losing my grip, there Leon was.

I tried to think through who Leon might be, but the exhaustion of all I'd been through and the lack of sleep I'd gotten in the basement got the better of me. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was out.

When I opened my eyes, I immediately knew I was dreaming. I was laying on my side on the familiar dark blue velvet of our sectional. Part of me didn't even want to get up or go hunting for whatever I was meant to see in this vision. I just wanted to lay there and remember what it was like to lay on my own couch again.

"Where's the fire?" I heard Leon call out from the kitchen.

That caught my attention. I popped straight up just in time to watch myself running up the stairs. This wasn't a vision, it was a memory.

“I have a date!” I called back to him.

Suddenly, I realized that I was still downstairs with Leon while the previous version of me was upstairs trying to find the perfect outfit for my date with Alex.

I stood up from the couch and made my way into the kitchen. Leon’s attention was on the stairs just long enough for him to be sure I wasn’t immediately coming back down, and then his face dropped.

“What am I doing? What the fuck am I doing?” he mumbled as he paced back and forth in the kitchen.

I’d never actually thought about what it must have been like for him, watching me fall all over myself for all these men, completely oblivious to how he’d felt for years.

He stopped pacing and placed both hands on either side of the sink as his head dropped. I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to tell him that in the end he got the girl. That the way I felt about Alex was nothing compared to how I felt about him, but I had already learned there was nothing I could do but watch when these dreams happened to me.

As soon as Leon heard me on the stairs, he spun around, opened the fridge, and pretended to be deciding what he wanted for dinner. He watched as I clumsily tripped down the stairs and stood in front of him in that tiny black House of CB dress. My heart melted a little as I watched from a different perspective the way he couldn’t take his eyes off me. He didn’t even seem to be breathing.

I listened to the conversation between us. It was exactly as I’d remembered it.

“I have to get going, but I’ll tell you all about it later!” I said to him before hurrying out the door.

I expected to wake up, yet I was still standing there with Leon as he watched the front door close behind me.

Leon clamped his eyes shut. “It doesn’t matter who she chooses. It just matters that I can keep her safe.”

Keep me safe? It had never occurred to me before, but maybe the reason Leon was prepared to be someone else for the rest of

his life wasn't just because I would have chosen that person, but because it was the only way his family wouldn't ever come looking for either of us.

My heart felt like it was cracking inside my chest as I watched the smoke surround him and leave Alex standing in our apartment.

The following morning, I was awake before the sun came up. I immediately started trying to run down the list of possible suspects. Leon might have been EJ, but I didn't know when or how he would have had the chance to trade places with the real EJ. I was sure he wasn't Miguel or Victor. I ruled out Dom before we even landed in Brazil. Plus, despite Dom's desire to help me, I sensed that Leon wasn't his favorite person in the world. He'd spent too much of his life in Leon's shadow. I doubted that he would agree to something like that. The truth was, I could think as hard as I wanted, but it wouldn't bring me any closer to the answer. There were dozens of people in and around the compound. Any of them, male, female, young, or old, could have been Leon.

All I could do was wait until he revealed himself to me, but I had something to hope for.

It was the *ours* at the end of that note, not my baby but *ours*, not my future but *ours*, that I held onto with everything I had.

By the time the sun started peeking through my bedroom window, Dom was already quietly tapping at the sliding glass door. I hadn't exactly considered the predicament I put myself in until I opened that door and Dom immediately reached for me. Dom's fingers wrapped around the side of my neck as his thumb gently moved across my cheek. The devotion in his gaze was too much. I had to look away. I was a monster.

Now that Leon was here, I had no reason to leverage Dom's feelings for me to get him to help me escape. The only problem was I couldn't exactly go back on everything I'd said and done. I didn't want to hurt him, but I also didn't know what would happen if I did. He was still Miguel's son, and this was still the cruel and unfeeling world that raised him. I wasn't naive enough to rule out the danger I might be in if he felt slighted.

“How did you sleep?” Dom asked me, carefully closing the door behind him.

“Better than I did in the basement across from someone screaming their lungs out,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You know he escaped, right?”

I was starting to think I should have pursued theater instead of fashion with all the acting I was being forced to do.

“What?” I asked, trying to sound surprised but not overly involved.

“He ran out of the church while you were screaming,” Dom said.

I wasn’t sure what to make of his words. Was he telling me this because he suspected something? Or was he merely catching me up on the compound drama?

“Did they catch him?”

I quickly remembered that there was still an ultrasound photo and a note on the kitchen counter. I couldn’t let Dom see them. I attempted to appear disinterested, both in Dom’s story and in the items in the kitchen. I wandered over, picked everything up, and tossed it into a waste basket under the sink. I planned to retrieve them the moment Dom left, but for now, I didn’t want him to take any interest in what I was doing.

“They’re still looking,” he said.

On the outside, I simply nodded and then busied myself with putting a kettle on. Inside my head, however, I was jumping up and down and screaming. *They didn’t catch him! They didn’t win!*

As I moved around the kitchen, I noticed Dom was staring.

“What?” I asked.

He suddenly shook his head as if he had gotten lost in his thoughts. “You look happy,” he said softly.

I was happy. For the first time since I’d gotten to this god-forsaken place, I was happy.

“Well, I’m certainly not complaining about getting to sleep in a decent bed again.”

“I would have preferred if you were in mine,” Dom said with his familiar vibrato. Being forced to stab me did something to Dom. He hadn’t sounded like himself since. I hated to admit it but, I’d missed his shameless flirting.

Even if I no longer needed Dom to get me out, there was still one purpose he could serve.

“How long can you stay?” I asked.

Dom’s brows shot up immediately. “How long do you need?”

I made my way over to him, grabbing his hand and leading him further into the living room. I gently pushed against his chest, nudging him to sit.

“What are you doing, *linda*?” he purred as he staggered back onto the couch.

I ignored his question and shuffled right back to the kitchen, quietly pouring two cups of tea. His dark eyes never left me.

When I returned, I placed both cups on the coffee table and sat beside him.

“However long it’s going to take you to answer my questions,” I said with a teasing smile.

“What do you want to know?” he groaned, rolling his eyes at me before draping an arm around the back of the couch.

“I have shifter questions,” I clarified as I, almost instinctively, placed my legs over his lap. It was something I did with Leon, even before we were together.

His gaze moved up my legs slowly, then over the rest of my body, before landing on my face. I should have been keeping my distance from Dom, but I also knew that if I pulled away too quickly, he would know something was up. Playing my part seemed safer, at least for the time being.

“I have shifter answers.”

I paused for a moment. I couldn’t just jump right in with what I wanted to know. It would be too obvious. Instead, I

needed to tread lightly, so nothing I asked Dom stood out.

“So there are shifters, and there are witches... what else exists?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” I protested.

“Are you asking about vampires and werewolves?” Dom said with a laugh.

“I just found out people can magically turn into other people a couple of months ago. I don’t think vampires are beyond the realm of possibility!”

“If they exist, we don’t know about them.”

“There should be some kind of mystical creature directory,” I said sarcastically.

“We’re not exactly mystical creatures.”

“Then what are you?”

“Let me put it this way, a wolf is just a dog with more abilities, right? They’re bigger, have sharper teeth, and run faster. Wolves still look like dogs, they can still breed with dogs, you can even keep them in your house and name them, but they’ll always be more than dogs.”

I nodded slowly. What Dom said made perfect sense, but my mind immediately went to Leon. The reason you didn’t keep a wolf in your house was it was dangerous. Sure, you could name it Fluffy and try to teach it to play fetch, but it was still a wild animal. For that same reason, you wouldn’t expect a wolf and your poodle to live happily ever after, and yet, that was what I was doing.

“Do you think it’s a bad idea?”

“What?”

“Wolves and dogs?”

“It’s only a bad idea if the dog starts expecting the wolf to stop being a wolf.”

His statement hit me so hard that I quickly had to turn away from Dom to keep him from reading the remorse on my face.

When Leon told me what he was in Tavira I told him, point blank, that I wanted us to lead a normal life. In doing so, I implied that I wasn't willing to accept what he was. It wasn't meant to hurt him. I was just so shocked by the idea that his abilities were even possible that strong-arming things back to normal was the only way I knew how to process.

“Okay, so what's different?” I asked after taking a moment to compose myself. “Other than being about to poof into other people, what is different between shifters and humans?”

“Poof?” Dom teased.

“Shut up, you know what I'm asking.”

“Not a lot. We have normal lifespans, functions, physical strength... we just feel things differently.”

“Like what?”

“I've never been a human, so I can't say for sure, but emotions, physical touch, pain... it's all heightened. So this...” he said, slowly running his hand up my leg. “... is distracting as hell.”

“I'm sorry,” I muttered, as I tried to move away from him. “I wasn't trying to...”

That was a lie. I was “trying to” but I wasn't sure why I was doing it anymore. The lines between what I wanted to do, what I had to do, and what I was doing to keep myself safe were all starting to blur.

Dom quickly grabbed my knees to keep me from moving.

“Don't be. I like being close to you,” he admitted.

I was in so much trouble. I could only hope that Leon planned to get me out quickly and quietly so I wouldn't have to face the aftermath of the feelings Dom was developing. My only other hope was that he would eventually develop feelings for Caroline. She was, after all, his fiancé.

“Can you tell when someone's shifted into someone else?”

“You mean like if I shifted into you, would Miguel know I wasn't you?”

I nodded.

“No,” Dom said. I watched his face for any sense of suspicion, but nothing came. “The only giveaway is if you know someone well enough to know their mannerisms or the way they talk and you notice something is different, but people don’t pay as much attention to that stuff as they think they do.”

“But you can’t sense each other?”

“I can’t tell when someone has shifted any more than you can.”

That was what I ultimately wanted to know. I wanted to make sure that whoever Leon was couldn’t be detected.

“Can I ask a question now?” Dom asked.

“Sure,” I said with a shrug.

“Are you still planning on trying to get out of here?”

I looked down at the floor. The question took me by surprise. I didn’t know whether to lie to Dom or not. I seemed to always be questioning whether or not to lie to Dom.

“Miguel told me he would make an example of me if I did,” I explained, settling for the truth but not the answer to his question.

“Fuck him. Are you planning on trying to escape?”

My head jerked back a little at his reaction. Anyone with eyes could tell that Miguel was not the perfect father. I certainly didn’t know the ins and outs of their complicated relationship, but this was the first time I’d heard him say something like that.

“Why are you asking?” I questioned.

“Because you didn’t let me help you last time, and look where it got us.”

He had a point, but I couldn’t explain why I didn’t plan on escaping.

“I don’t know,” I said. He turned away from me. I couldn’t say that Dom knew me well, but he was starting to pick up on when I was lying. “But I promise when I figure out what I’m going to do, you’ll be the first to know,” I added softly.

That was a promise I intended to break.



Twenty-Two

Two days later, I found myself back in church. This time Dom sat next to Caroline near the front of the sanctuary, directly across from Miguel and Estela. I remained in the back row both for my safety and so that I could quietly scan the room for anything that reminded me of my best friend. I tried to find Leon in every face, every tiny movement, but what Dom said rang true. Most people weren't as good as they thought at picking up changes in someone. I dated four men who ended up being Leon, and I didn't have the slightest clue. I don't know why I thought I would suddenly be able to recognize him as a complete stranger.

Still, there was a comfort in knowing he was there. Each time I closed my eyes and pretended to pray, I instead imagined Leon somewhere in that room. I missed him so much. My hands shook as I pulled the thread-bare Bible from the slot behind the pew in front of me. I made no attempt to read the words. I just stared down at the nearly translucent paper, mimicking the motions of the rest of the congregation and stealing glances at everyone around me.

When the service finally ended, I remained in my seat. I looked up at the faces of every single person as they passed me, and yet, I was still no closer to finding him.

I lingered so long that eventually, Miguel sent Taia after me.

She quietly tip-toed back into the sanctuary and slid into the seat next to me. Neither of us said anything for a long while. I just stared up at the giant crucifix at the front of the room. I assumed I knew what she wanted, so I didn't ask.

"Why are we praying?" she suddenly asked me.

"Leon," I said.

"About him or for him?"

"Both," I said with a shrug.

"I'm sure there's a reason he's taking so long," she tried to assure me.

"Really? What might that be?" I bit at her.

I immediately felt bad for being short with Taia. None of this was her fault. I just missed Leon, and though there was comfort in knowing he was there, it was also frustrating. Just like that day in Manaus, all I could think was, *grab me and run. What are you waiting for?* Yet I was still stuck in the jungle with strange people who viewed me as nothing more than a literal baby-making factory.

"You guys lived in New York for a long time, right? Maybe, it's just taking longer than he thought to tie up loose ends," she said softly.

I sighed as I looked over at Taia and the concern in her dark brown eyes. I had forgotten that she didn't know I had been forcefully brought here. She thought, as everyone did, that Leon had chosen to come home, and he'd sent me to his family ahead of him. She likely didn't know that I'd been locked up in the basement or that her brother was forced to stab me either. Taia was drinking the same kool-aid that Miguel was feeding everyone here. I wondered if she even knew what the men in this compound did. If she ever even bothered to ask.

"Do you ever think about leaving?" I asked her, trying to get a sense of just how wrapped up in her father she was.

"I—" she started before quickly glancing at the door. "All the time," she said softly.

My eyes widened. I was sure that I was going to hear some kind of perky, obnoxious response about how wonderful it was

here but what I heard instead in Taia's voice was sadness.

"Why?" I pushed.

Again, she looked towards the door. It seemed to be a habit of Miguel's children to check who lurked around every corner before they spoke.

"This stays between us?" she asked.

I nodded and turned myself to face her fully. "Of course."

"I think I'm in love," she said carefully, though it came out more like a question than a statement.

"And it's not someone that Miguel would've picked for you?" I added, assuming that had to be the explanation.

Taia nodded slowly. I wasn't sure why she decided to trust me with this. We barely knew each other, but perhaps she sensed that I was the only person here who wouldn't report back to Miguel.

It was obvious why Taia was in trouble. In terms of the value this world put on women, she was a prized possession. She wasn't only beautiful, but Taia came from a long line of shifters with a lot of power, money, and influence. I could tell by the conversation I had in the car with her and Caroline that Miguel planned to leverage or even sell that.

"Can I give you some bad advice?"

"Sure," Taia said, letting out a small laugh and tossing her hands in the air.

"Find a way," I said.

"That's impossible—"

"Maybe, but you will spend the rest of your life wondering what would have happened if you didn't try. Do you really want to end up tied to someone you dislike forever while the person you love is somewhere out there in the world?"

Then it hit me. It was a terrible plan, but there was a possibility it might work.

"What if they were already bound to you?"

"What?" Taia squawked out in surprise.

“What if you just did it before Miguel could bind you to someone else? What could he do?”

I knew hypothetically he could find someone to undo it, but from what I could gather there likely weren't witches lining up to help with something like that.

“That can't happen.”

“Why? I mean, he obviously isn't going to be happy but just ___”

“We can't be bound.”

All of a sudden, what she was saying clicked in my head.

“He's human?” I asked though I was sure I was right.

Taia shook her head. “No...” she said slowly, giving me a pointed look.

I thought about it for a moment. They couldn't be bound, but he wasn't human so...

“He's not a *he*,” I gathered.

Before Taia could respond, Victor stuck his unmistakable bald head through the sanctuary doors. I watched her jump at the sound of his voice.

“*O que é que se passa?*” *What's the holdup?*

“We're fucking praying!” Taia snapped as she whipped around to face him.

I had to stifle a laugh as I watched Victor roll his eyes and disappear back out the door.

“I still think if you love someone, it's worth whatever you have to risk to be with them,” I said quietly. “It's worth everything.”

“I just don't know what to do,” she admitted.

“Neither do I, but if you need help... I'm here...” I didn't know how much help I could be to Taia, but it was clear that she needed someone to confide in.

“We should go back to the house,” she said, glancing back toward the door again.

I wasn't quite ready for the gathering, and I wasn't sure I could stomach another one of Miguel's vile speeches, especially when I knew Leon was somewhere in that crowd. I thought maybe if I delayed long enough I could avoid that part of the evening.

"Can you tell them I need some more time? And ask if they'll leave a car for me."

"Sure," Taia said and started to get up. Before she reached for the door, she turned back to me. "I'm glad Leon sent you to us. I always wanted to know what having a sister was like."

With that, she slid out of the church. After what happened with EJ, I knew that if Miguel allowed me to stay, there would likely be men lingering outside waiting for me, but I didn't mind. My intention wasn't to run, only to avoid hearing Miguel talk about his beloved, long-lost nephew again.

The room around me was now intensely quiet. I stood up from my seat and started slowly wandering through the pews. My fingers danced over the tops of the worn wood as I walked. The whole room smelled like a used bookstore which made me think of August, and eventually, Leon. I, once again, laughed at the idea that he had been so many different men. The fact that Leon actually argued with me about *The Great Gatsby* in some ridiculous attempt to overcompensate for Owen's lack of intellect was both baffling and strangely sweet. I didn't like what he had done, and I probably never would. Yet I had to admit that after enough time, I started to find it all bizarrely endearing.

I wasted as much time as I possibly could. It was probably the most time I'd spent in a church since I was a child. However, as much as I hated the man and loved the idea of pissing him off, I knew that my safety depended on keeping Miguel happy, at least for now.

To my surprise, when I made my way down the steep stairwell that led to the church, I didn't find a bunch of men waiting for me. There was only a singular black car parked in the dirt lot. The driver, who I assumed was tasked with making sure I didn't leave, leaned against the car impatiently. His arms were crossed, and he stared me down as I approached.

Wordlessly, he opened the door. I slid inside only to find that it wasn't just the driver that had been waiting for me, so was Dom.

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying to keep my voice quiet enough that we wouldn't be overheard.

"Making sure you don't leave," he said with a smirk.

"What happened to helping me escape?"

"About that..." Dom started.

He reached for me forcefully, pulling me so close to him that I was nearly sitting on his lap. I felt his lips against my ear, and as much as I knew I shouldn't be reacting, there was no way I could breathe normally with his body so close to mine.

"Miguel has your passport. We took it from your apartment in New York so we could get you here. I can get it from his office while the gathering is going on, but I'll need you to make sure no one notices I'm missing. After the gathering, go back to your room and grab anything you think you might need."

I tried to pull back to ask Dom what kind of crazed plan this was but his hands, one placed on my hip, the other against the side of my face, held me firmly in place.

"I think I can get the keys to one of the cars without being noticed, but I'm going to have to move fast, so just be ready for me as soon as I come to get you," he finished.

I realized the whole reason for our closeness was so there wasn't any chance we would be heard. I turned my head just enough so Dom could hear me.

"What are you thinking? This is crazy," I whispered. Plus, I couldn't leave. Not until I knew where Leon was and that he would be safe too.

"I have to get you out of here, *linda*. He will kill you. Sooner or later he will do it."

Dom was right. I wanted to fight him, but if there was any chance he could get me out I had to take it. Leon could follow behind me. I was the only one who knew he was there, so it wasn't like anyone would know when he went missing. I wanted him to come with me, but I didn't know who he was, and I was already on borrowed time.

“What about you?” I asked.

“What about me?”

“What if they find out? What are they going to do to you?”

Dom pulled back but only enough for his eyes to meet mine.

“If we do this right, they’ll never know it was me,” he tried to reassure me, but I’d spent too much time with Dom. I could see right through him, and there was fear behind his eyes.



Twenty-Three

The gathering had been going on for some time before we arrived. Thankfully, any speeches were long over, and everyone was in the middle of eating. The seating arrangement was exactly the same as it had been the first time. Miguel at the head of the table, Estela on his right, and Dom on his left. I was to the left of Dom, and to the left of me was an empty place setting for Leon. I steeled myself not to look at it or wonder whose seat Leon was actually taking. Instead, I had to focus on the task and hand.

The stakes were much higher this time. If Miguel caught me, I knew I wasn't getting back out of the basement. I didn't take his threats lightly, but something angry and rebellious began growing in me the moment I woke up on that plane, something I no longer had a leash on. I had reached the point where I was going to get out of Brazil, or I was going to die trying. That meant choosing to stay wasn't an option, not when I had a real chance at escape.

I could have played by Miguel's rules, but in the back of my mind, I knew that regardless of what Leon and I chose, he would wait until I had my child and then dispose of me. He claimed we had choices, but the truth was, like everyone else in this place, we were just puppets on strings that he controlled. I wouldn't live that way, and neither would our child.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that not waiting for Leon to reveal himself might have been a misstep. I also didn't know when or if I would have this chance again. Despite my better judgment, I had to take it.

I ate my meal in silence, rarely looking up at the people around the table. I couldn't taste my food. Every bite was like ash in my mouth. All I could do was wonder when Dom would get up from the table and how I could keep his family from noticing his absence.

I looked up just as Miguel was turning to say something to Estela. At that exact moment, Dom got up and wandered off. As we'd both hoped, no one seemed to notice. The conversation between Dom's parents continued for a while. I started to take easier breaths until Miguel glanced over at the empty seat beside him.

"Where's—"

I panicked. Before Miguel could finish his sentence, I grabbed the closest thing to me. That *thing* happened to be Taia, who was returning from chatting with someone at the other end of the table. I pulled her unexpectedly into Dom's seat.

"Taia and I were discussing something today," I said brightly.

I felt her whole body tense at my words.

"We were talking about what Leon and I should name the baby. She suggested Matheo." I added, squeezing Taia's hand under the table. I knew she didn't understand why I was making up a story about baby names, but I wanted to be sure she wasn't afraid I might out her, either.

The idea of naming my son after Leon's father made me nauseous, but the excitement on Miguel's face and the way he leaned forward in his seat told me he was no longer worried about where Dom had disappeared to. *Mission accomplished.*

"I think that's a wonderful idea, *meu anja*," he cooed at Taia.

I had to direct my attention to the cobalt water glass in front of me to keep from rolling my eyes. *My angel?* How much could he love a daughter that he would ultimately end up forcing into an arranged marriage for his own personal gain? I

didn't know Taia very well, but she was beautiful, kind, fiery, and most importantly she deserved more than her father was willing to offer her. I only wished I could do more to help her. This place was so backward, it was like I had been transported to another era. The fact that Dom's sister was likely going to have to spend her life in some weird arranged marriage so Miguel could ensure more shifter babies was mind blowing.

The whole thing made me want to scream, but I had done enough screaming. It didn't change anything.

"And what are you thinking, Jacey?" I vaguely heard Miguel say, but I was so focused on keeping my head straight and my face from reacting that I didn't respond.

Taia nudged me, and I took a sharp breath as my attention was drawn back to the conversation.

"What?"

"Your son. Have you decided on a name yet?" Miguel pushed.

A sadness swept over me as the fact that Leon and I had never even had the chance to have that discussion crept into my thoughts.

"We were thinking about Jeff," I said flatly.

There was no way I planned to give my baby my father's name, lest I wanted him to sound like he was 57 years old. *Sorry, Dad.* But I knew the idea was going to piss Miguel off. If I'd learned one thing about being here, it was that, the more I pissed off the men around me, the more attention they paid to me and not to what was happening around them.

"Jeff?" he repeated with a look of disgust on his face.

"You don't like Jeff?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"Who has ever heard of a *Português* boy named Jeff?" I watched his lip curl up as he considered the possibility.

"It's a perfectly normal American name," I shrugged.

"Americans!" he said, shaking his head.

"You know what name I've always loved? Wylie. When Dom and I have a son, I think we're gonna name him Wylie,"

Caroline's southern accent rang out across the table.

"Like the coyote?" I asked with a laugh.

"I like it!" Caroline argued.

"You're in my seat," I heard Dom grumble at Taia from behind me.

I had been so wrapped up in the conversation that I'd almost forgotten why I started it in the first place.

Taia rolled her eyes, then got up and returned to the seat next to her mother.

When Dom sat down, I felt his hand reach out and grab my knee. A silent reassurance that he had been successful.

"Did you know she wants to name your son Wylie?" Miguel asked, pointing at Caroline.

Dom jerked his head back in surprise. "Like the coyote?"

I couldn't hold back my laughter anymore.

"What is this coyote everyone is talking about?" Miguel protested.

"*Um cão animado que persegue um pássaro.*" Dom told his father. Explaining to him that it was a cartoon dog that chased a bird.

This was the first time I'd let myself forget where I was for a moment. The conversation was light and funny. It almost felt like a normal family dinner for a fleeting moment. I wondered if that was why it was so hard for both Dom and Taia to defy their father, though they both found silent ways to do it. Despite how truly evil he was, he was still the only family they knew.

As usual, the gathering lasted until well after sundown. I hoped that someone might have unexpectedly bumped into me or I might find another note from Leon so that I could tell him what Dom and I were planning, but by the end of the night, I was no closer to figuring it out. I had to go without him and hope Leon followed.

I returned to my room, and just as Dom instructed, I started to pack. There wasn't a lot to take with me. I wasn't planning another misguided trek through the jungle, so I didn't need

supplies. I gathered my clothes, a few sketches I'd managed to do, and the ultrasound photo, and then all there was left was to wait for Dom.

I found that any waiting in this place was ultimately a killer. Any time I had to wait, I got in my head, and this was no exception. I knew I should leave, I wanted to leave, yet I kept thinking about Taia. I was afraid for her. I doubted Miguel would hurt her, but there were plenty of ways to do damage that didn't involve physical harm.

I also couldn't forget that Leon was still here. I wanted to believe that if that man I loved could get in undetected, he could get out, but what if he couldn't? What if I was leaving him to the wolves?

The thoughts spun around in my head for hours. *Leave or stay? Leave or stay?* I thought by the time Dom showed up to get me I would know what to do, but I didn't. Suddenly, I heard the door to the apartment open, and Dom was standing on the other side.

"You ready?" he said quietly.

I wasn't, but it was now or never. I grabbed my things and followed out the door. My heart began racing immediately. I trusted that Dom didn't want to get caught any more than I did. Plus, he'd grown up in this house. He knew when people were coming and going. He was my best shot at getting out.

He grabbed my hand and quietly led me towards the back of the house, but instead of turning out the back like I had the last time I attempted to escape, we made our way down a hallway I'd never seen before, following it until we hit a side door. Directly in front of us was a paved path that led to the front of the house. I stepped out, planning to follow it, but Dom grabbed me by the arm and roughly pulled me back.

"Not that way," he whispered and then nodded for me to follow him. Instead of taking the path, we veered off into bushes and trees that lined it. I struggled to keep my footing as we both quietly climbed through loose soil and shrubbery. I followed behind him as best I could, trying to stay close. I could only assume there were cameras somewhere that would have caught us wandering out in the open.

When we reached the front of the house, Dom held up a hand, urging me to stop. I watched as he quietly pulled a key from his pocket. The driveway was full of identical town cars. After quietly looking on for a few minutes, he pressed a button, and headlights flashed on a car several feet from us. Crouching down to avoid being seen, we both hurried toward it.

I wasn't sure that I was breathing until Dom and I both got inside that car, then I took a huge gasp of air as I slid my seat belt over my chest. It hadn't set in until that moment, but I was terrified.

"You did good, *linda*," he said to me, equally breathless.

I watched Dom's hands tremble as he put the key in the ignition and turn. I'd heard cars start a million times, and yet this one seemed to be screaming to life. Instinctively I glanced over at the house only to see the front lights come on, and a silhouette started moving toward us.

"Dom!" I said.

His head snapped to the side only to see the same figure I was seeing. "Fuck!" he responded. He looked around as though he might speed off, but the other cars around us were too close, and it would have taken too much time and careful maneuvering to get us to the point that we could leave.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Dom continued slamming his hands against the steering wheel in frustration.

The figure continued to draw closer in the darkness. I had to think fast. I threw the seatbelt off my body and tore one of the straps off the top I was wearing, exposing most of my bra.

"What are you doing?"

"Shut up!" I managed to get out before climbing on top of Dom and colliding my mouth with his only seconds before the door to the car was ripped open.

Victor stood there wide eyed for a long moment until his tiny pea brain managed to catch up with him. I don't know what I expected him to do, but laughter was not on that list. He was practically cackling, he was laughing so hard.

I glared at him for good measure.

“Now I know why you didn’t want me to touch her,” Victor said.

The way he spoke about me like I wasn’t even there made me want to swing at him, but this was what I wanted. I wanted whoever was coming at the car to be so shocked by what they saw in it that they would completely forget that the car was running. While I wasn’t exactly thrilled at the idea of Miguel finding out I was caught on top of his son, I remembered that Dom had already slept with someone’s wife in the past. No one would be surprised if he did it again.

Victor grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the car. His lizard-like gaze moved over my body in a way that made my skin crawl.

“I can’t wait until Leondro finds out what a little slut you’ve been” Victor barked at me.

I yanked my arm away from him. *I can’t wait until Leondro rips your fucking face off.*

“Vai guardar o teu brinquedo, Domingos” Go put your toy away, Domingos.

Dom rolled his eyes but said nothing. He didn’t defend me or react. He just turned off the car without another word and nodded for me to follow.

Neither of us said a word as we made our way through the house. I wasn’t sure which was louder, the silence in the endless hallways or the silence in my head. I just shut off.

I expected Dom to leave me in my room, but he followed me inside. As soon as the door shut behind him, he lost it.

I didn’t think I’d ever seen someone go completely ballistic before, but Dom started shouting at the top of his lungs, his face turning a bright shade of red. It was like watching a child throw a tantrum. He started destroying any object near him as he rapidly cursed in Portuguese. I stood in the middle of the room, watching it get torn to shreds, and I said nothing.

Something in me knew that he wasn’t mad *at* me but *because* of me, because he couldn’t protect me. I knew that should have made me feel something, but while he flew off the handle, I was

frozen and numb. No one came to check on me, even though I was sure Dom's screaming could be heard through the house. It should have surprised me, but it didn't.

By the time he finally calmed down, I had two barstools broken in uniquely different ways, cracked tiles on the kitchen counter, a decorative vase with dried eucalyptus that had been hurled at the back wall and was shattered across the living room floor, a broken light fixture, and countless other items in ruin.

"I'd like to go to bed now," I said flatly.

Perhaps he had finally gone numb too, because without another word, he left.



Twenty-Four

I had never felt *nothing* before. Like most people, I had experienced brief moments of numbness. They usually came on after crying or a huge fight, but this was different. I couldn't feel *anything*. I could hear my thoughts echoing around in my head, but no matter what I thought about, good or bad, it never reached my chest.

I lay in bed, staring at the perfectly white ceiling, and tried to think about things that would cause a reaction. I thought about the night I kissed Leon for the first time, the sound of Nichelle's laughter, my pregnancy, how I used to stay up late on nights when my dad would get called in for emergency surgery so I could make him pancakes when he got back—we would talk about everything over midnight pancakes. I was thinking so hard I was starting to give myself a headache, yet nothing stirred. I was empty.

When I finally gave up and got out of bed, I was greeted by the sight of the aftermath of Dom's emotional explosion. I looked around the trashed living room, which would no doubt take hours to clean up, and still felt *nothing*. I wandered back into the bedroom, put on some clothes, then got to work.

For the following three hours, with nothing but the sounds of early morning Brazilian news to keep me company, I put the room back together again. There was something cathartic about

it. I just gave myself one task after the other until I had something that resembled the way the room once was. I was fumbling with the broken stools, trying to figure out some way to get them to sit upright again, when I noticed someone in the courtyard.

I was sure it was Dom, I was so used to seeing him out there, but as I moved closer to the window, it was Caroline, sitting alone on a bench.

It was hard to know what to make of Caroline. Sometimes she came off like a jealous child, others, I was sure she was the smartest person in the room. I got the sense that she was careful, maybe even calculated with the things she let people see. I didn't blame her. I learned quickly that being a woman in a place like this required a certain level of subversion.

I watched her for a moment. Her long, light brown hair was perfectly curled, which made no sense in the middle of the tropics. I wondered what kind of witchcraft was keeping her blowout in place. Honestly, it was more impressive than men running around, turning into other people. She was wearing a pale yellow skirt and a white cropped peasant top that looked like it came from Reformation. Jealous child or not, she was a well-dressed one. I was about to return to my feeble attempt at repairing furniture when she looked up, and her eyes met mine. She had a look on her face that I couldn't quite put my finger on, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat before motioning for me to join her.

I slid out the sliding glass door and into the courtyard, carefully approaching her. As I got closer, I could see she appeared worried, maybe a little sad.

"Are you okay?" I asked. I immediately heard the change in my voice. Not only did I feel completely numb, but I also sounded numb.

"I need to ask you something."

I looked around, a little confused. I had no idea what Caroline could possibly need to ask me, but whatever it was seemed serious, so I sat down on the bench next to her and tried to look attentive.

“Shoot.”

“Are you—” she started but quickly pursed her lips together. “Did something happen between you and Dom last night?”

If I could feel anything, I probably would have panicked, but the benefit of being so numb was that not even the slightest hint of emotion crossed my face when I said, “No. Why?”

Caroline narrowed her eyes at me, but she was no more adept at figuring me out than I was at figuring her out.

“I heard Dom and Victor talking about it,” she said as she watched me intently for a reaction.

“What did you hear exactly?”

“I don’t know everything they were saying. They were speaking Portuguese, but I know they used the words: wife, stop, condom, and car.”

“What words were those?”

“What do you mean?”

“What words did you hear?”

“*Mulher*”

“Okay. Yes, that means wife,” I said as if I was genuinely trying to help her.

“*Prevenir*,” she continued, with perhaps the only accent that was worse than mine.

I shook my head. “That kind of means stop, but it’s more like prevent. So not like you should stop doing something but that you should stop something from happening,” I explained to her. This was true, but I was intentionally trying to convince her that she didn’t know what she heard. She probably *did* overhear Dom and Victor talking about the two of us in that car, but there was no way I was going to let her know she was right.

“*Camisinha*,” she continued.

“Are you sure they said *camisinha* and not *camisa*?” I asked, tilting my head to the side.

“No. What’s the difference?”

“Well, one is a condom, and the other is a t-shirt, so there’s a big difference,” I said with a giggle that sounded completely false in my ears.

“Oh,” she said quietly.

Caroline’s eyes moved to the ground, and she was quiet for a long moment, seemingly trying to work out what she heard.

“What’s really going on, Caroline?” I asked her, as if this was all some silly scenario she made up in her head.

“I don’t know. I just heard them talking, and you two are always spending time together, and I thought—”

“That I was cheating on my husband with his cousin?” I asked, feigning shock.

“Don’t pretend that’s crazy! I see the way you look at him!” Caroline fired back at me.

“Did you ever think to ask me why?”

Caroline’s mouth dropped slightly, as if she couldn’t quite process what I was saying. She probably expected me to deny I looked at Dom at all. “Okay, why?” she finally managed to get out.

“Because Dom looks *exactly* like Leon did when I met him,” I explained, using my time-honored excuse. “If you saw a picture of Leon then and a picture of Dom now, you would think they were the same person. Literally, the only difference between them is their eye color,” I continued.

“Miguel and Matheo were twins,” Caroline said, further proving my point.

Constança and Estela didn’t look all that different either. Estela’s complexion was a little darker, and so were her eyes. However, the two women had the same hair color, height, and similar body types, so it wasn’t rocket science figuring out how Dom and Leon ended up so alike in appearance.

“I’m not interested in Dom. I just miss Leon. This is the longest we’ve been apart in over ten years,” I explained to her. It was funny how little lying I actually had to do. Perfectly timed truths seemed to be just as useful.

Caroline went silent. Her gaze fell to her hands as she began nervously twisting her engagement ring around on her finger.

“How did you feel when your parents told you that you were going to marry Leon?”

Now I did have to lie. I wasn't forced into some strange arranged shifter marriage, and I wasn't sure what it would be like to experience someone choosing a spouse for me, so I decided to work around it.

“Leon... was around for a long time before my parents finally decided on him. We became friends first, and I think I was already a little in love with him before I knew we were going to end up together.”

“You're lucky,” Caroline said without lifting her gaze to meet me.

I nodded. I didn't feel so lucky at that moment, but compared to a girl whose choices were being made for her, I suppose I was.

“Are you not happy with Dom? It seemed like—”

“We're a good match,” she said, suddenly sounding like Miguel.

“That doesn't answer my question,” I pushed.

“My parents were like you and Leon. They grew up in the same community, and even now, they're still so in love with each other,” she started. “Do you know how my dad introduces my mom to people?”

“How?”

“He says ‘this is the love of my life, Faye’. Not my wife, Faye but the *love of my life*, every single time.” I could have sworn I saw tears forming behind her saucer sized eyes. “Bonds like that—the ones that just happen naturally, they're special.”

“You don't think you could have that with Dom?” I asked though somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew the answer.

“I don't think I'm the love of his life,” she responded quietly, though I wasn't quite brave enough to ask if she thought he was the love of hers.

“It seemed like you were really excited about the wedding,” I said, quickly moving on.

“I am,” she said very quickly, changing her tone.

I looked at her skeptically as she adjusted in her seat, once again, crossing one long leg over the other.

“Why are you excited about marrying a man you don’t think can love you?” I questioned.

“Well, once we’re bound he doesn’t really have a choice,” she explained.

I could have asked her what that meant, but I thought better of it and decided to put a pin in that particular question until I could get Dom to explain it to me.

“I guess that’s true,” I shrugged.

“I want to stay in Brazil. I hated Texas. I also want a family. I guess those things just feel more important than true love,” she explained.

They didn’t sound more important to me, but Caroline and I didn’t come from the same worlds, and I couldn’t exactly blame her for simply wanting to attain the things she’d been raised to believe she was supposed to have.

“Dom’s lucky to have you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because love doesn’t always happen for two people at the same time. Sometimes someone has to love you first and love you hard before you figure out how to love yourself. After that, loving them back is easy,” I said.

The moment the words came out of my mouth, I thought of Leon, and for the first time in hours I felt a tiny twinge of something. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to let me know that this place hadn’t completely broken me.

I was about to continue, but I heard another sliding glass door open, and Caroline and I both looked up to see Dom standing there. He froze the moment he saw the two of us. I had no doubt he was heading straight for my apartment. I could only

imagine what he might have been thinking, but I had no intention of sticking around to find out.

“I have to get back to my cleaning,” I said as I stood up. “You two should talk.”

I forced myself not to look at Dom as I headed back toward my apartment. I shut the sliding glass door behind me, and this time, I also shut the curtains.

EJ was wrong, Dom wasn't the answer. I still wasn't sure what was, but I knew that I couldn't keep using him and whatever misguided feelings he had for me to get free. It didn't help, and I didn't like the kind of person it made me.



Twenty-Five

When it rained in Brazil, it rained hard. The sky seemed to open up and let out what I could no longer manage. It had been hours since my encounter with Caroline, and I still felt empty. I knew Dom was long gone, so I reopened the curtains. I stood there for a long moment, watching the rain as it slammed against the glass. The house tended to get too quiet and listening to people on TV speak a language I had to struggle to translate back to myself was equally tiresome. Rain was a welcome change.

It took less than ten minutes to hear a knock from the hallway.

“Go away, Dom!” The timing was too convenient for it to be anyone else.

There was silence and then another, more persistent, knock.

“Go away,” I groaned as I dragged myself toward the door.

“Why?” I finally heard Dom ask from the other side.

I rolled my eyes. “Go spend time with your fiancé,” I fired at him before turning from the door.

“*Linda!*” he whined.

I had to appreciate Dom’s newfound understanding of boundaries. He had a key. He could come in if he wanted to, I

could do nothing to stop him. Yet he was giving me a choice.

“Stop calling me that and go away.”

I rubbed my fingers against my temples as I waited for further protest. Instead, there was silence. The quiet lasted long enough that I shuffled back toward the living room.

I managed to convince Taia to find me some paper and whatever pencils and pens she could locate. It wasn't much, and it had been years since I'd actually done sketches by hand, but it was enough to keep me sane. I doubted I would ever actually use anything I was working on. I just needed some sense of normalcy amidst the chaos around me.

I situated myself on the couch, but just as I started to get to work, another knock. This time, it was the unmistakable sound of someone banging on glass.

“You've got to be kidding me,” I mumbled as I tossed a stack of drawings back down on the coffee table in front of me.

I approached the door, and there Dom was, standing in a torrential downpour and staring in at me like I was the only one capable of saving him. *Idiot.*

“What are you doing?” I said loudly, hoping he could hear me through the pane of glass between us.

“Are you going to let me inside?” he yelled back at me.

I looked at him for a long moment. His dark hair was soaking wet and falling into his face, and as my eyes moved lower, I couldn't help but notice how his clothes clung to his muscular body. I didn't want to acknowledge anything about the way Dom looked, but it still made my mouth dry.

Defiantly, I shook my head no.

“Let me in, *linda*,” he continued pleading.

“What are you doing? Get back inside!”

“If you don't let me in, I'm going to drown!”

I crossed my arms over my chest, but Dom just mirrored me, and we stood staring at each other, both of us waiting for the other to make a move. The water continued to assault him, and

yet he didn't flinch. I had no choice but to give in. If I didn't, he would likely stand out there all night.

"What is wrong with you? You're going to get sick!" I shouted more than asked, as I yanked the door open.

"I can't stay away from you," Dom admitted, breathlessly as he stepped inside.

The moment he stepped inside, a puddle started to form beneath him. I rolled my eyes both at the mess and at his overdramatic declaration. I didn't respond. Instead, I left him standing there and made a beeline for the bathroom.

I grabbed the biggest towel I could find and stomped back into the room, throwing it at his head as soon as it was in view.

"You should work on your impulse control," I snipped.

"Why are you mad at me?" he asked as he started to dry himself off.

"I'm not mad."

"Okay, then what is this?"

"We just have to stop doing this," I said, attempting not to meet his gaze.

If I were more myself, I might have felt bad about the words coming out of my mouth or that Dom's face looked like it had just been slapped, but I didn't. At best, I was annoyed, and at worst, there was a gigantic void inside my chest that consumed so much of my attention that Dom could have been bleeding on the floor in front of me, and I still would have chucked a towel at his head and told him to go away.

I watched him. Expecting the shock to switch to anger at any second, but instead, a cocky smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth, and he took a step closer to me.

"What is it you want us to stop?"

I glared up at him.

"How many times have you kissed me or touched me knowing it would hurt Caroline?"

"Not nearly enough times, believe me."

“She loves you,” I argued.

“No, she doesn’t, and you don’t get to pretend you’re innocent, *linda*. You have a fiancé too.” he lectured.

I wondered what Leon would think about the mess I’d gotten myself into. Maybe he already knew. EJ convinced me that if it meant my survival, Leon would overlook it but, I didn’t know how to predict anyone’s behavior anymore, least of all Leon’s. He was furious when he found out I went on one date with Gabe, and this... was a great deal more than that.

“What happened with Caroline?” Dom continued.

“She overheard you and Victor talking about the car.” A look of panic crossed his face, and I realized he wasn’t registering that he and Victor weren’t speaking English. “It’s fine. I convinced her that she’s just really bad at Portuguese.” We were both lucky that she had no clue I was lying to her. *Camisinhas?*”

Dom rolled his eyes. “He wanted to know if I used protection when I...”

It was another instance in which I should have felt something but couldn’t. The idea of being the subject of Victor’s version of locker room talk should have made me gag, but instead, I stared back at Dom blankly and said, “Why? I’m already pregnant.”

Dom started laughing. In fact, he laughed so hard that I found myself laughing too. There was nothing funny about the whole thing, and yet we continued laughing to the point we were almost in hysterics. I found myself literally wiping tears out of my eyes.

That was something. I could feel something.

After several minutes of laughter, Dom and I finally pulled ourselves together.

“I’m not stupid, *linda*. I know I can’t have you,” he suddenly said.

He moved closer to me, running his hand down my shoulder, his fingertips stopping briefly at the place on my arm where he and I would soon have matching scars.

“Then what is this?” I asked skeptically.

Another step closer. “A distraction,” he murmured. His gaze locked solely on my mouth.

“Someone’s going to get hurt, Dom.”

That someone was Caroline. It wouldn’t be Leon. I promised myself it wouldn’t be Leon. I wouldn’t hurt him again. I had no delusions he would be happy about my behavior with his cousin, but I hoped he would understand it. Leon was here, and last night I learned that Dom was just as incapable of getting me out of the compound as I was, so it was done. It had to be done.

“No one has to know,” he pushed.

“*I* would know, *you* would know,” I argued. “We both agreed to spend the rest of our lives with other people. I would rather not do that with the guilt of something we never should have started in the first place hanging over our heads.”

Dom sighed. “You’re too noble, *linda*.”

“And you have no restraint,” I threw back at him with a smirk.

“Have you seen what you look like? You make restraint seem like a joke.”

“You don’t exactly make it easy, either, but I love him—” I stopped myself as Dom averted his gaze. All the air felt like it had been sucked out of the room. I assumed Dom always knew that to be true, but I’d never said it to him directly. “I’ve already caused him enough pain,” I finally finished.

“What do you mean?”

“I left him. When I found out about what he could do. I left,” I admitted. It wasn’t that simple. I also found out Leon had lied to me for an entire year and that he had manipulated everything I knew to be real. Ultimately, that was why I disappeared, but that didn’t make it the right choice. One mistake, hell one year of mistakes, didn’t change the ten years between us.

Dom blinked a few times, looking away from me. “Why?” he asked me.

I realized what I was saying might have given Dom the impression that I hated that part of Leon or that I wanted him to be different. Given it was a part of him too, I knew I had to

explain. “I got scared. Here was the man I loved telling me that he had been hiding this huge part of himself for a decade and that he was capable of things that sounded like they came out of a storybook. I was in shock. I was angry that he didn’t trust me enough to tell me years ago, and so I just panicked and left.”

“This is why they tell us not to get involved with humans,” Dom said, shaking his head.

“Shifters are no walk in the park either!”

“Can we still do this?” Dom asked me, his eyes growing a bit rounder as he asked.

“Do what?”

“*This*,” he repeated, and I realized he was talking about the banter between us.

“You mean, you want to be friends?”

This was beginning to feel like a high school breakup.

“I guess so.”

“You saved my life, more than once, so yes, I think we can be friends,” I said with a laugh. He was the only real friend I had here. I never quite knew what to do with him, and he often behaved like an overgrown teenage boy, but for better or worse, he was my friend. “Although we should probably be careful. Caroline apparently thinks we spend too much time together.”

“That’s because I don’t spend *enough* time with her,” he responded.

“Why do you avoid her so much?”

Dom gave me a look as if I should have already known the answer to his question, but when I didn’t respond, he continued. “If someone brought a stranger to you and said, ‘Here, I chose this person for you. In a few months, you are going to be so tied to them that separation will cause you physical harm for the rest of your life.’, wouldn’t you want to enjoy the freedom of being away from them for as long as you could?”

“I didn’t really think about that,” I admitted.

Suddenly, Dom’s situation seemed much sadder than it had been before. I understood the concept of Miguel choosing who

he was bound to, but I'd never considered how that would feel. I also falsely assumed that because Caroline was beautiful and she came from this world that he might grow to be happy with her, but he was right, she was a stranger. Without thinking, I reached out and grabbed Dom's hand.

Dom looked like he was going to say something but quickly fixed his attention on the ground below us.

“What else did Caroline say to you?”

“That she doesn't think she'll ever be the love of your life,” I said honestly.

“She's right.”



Twenty-Six

In the week that passed, Dom became a surprisingly comforting presence. He still flirted with me relentlessly, but for the first time since I'd met him, he was no longer a threat nor a means to an end. He was just my friend. Every free moment he had, he would show up at my door. We would talk or watch whatever movie was playing on Brazilian cable. Without fail, he would have to explain the plots to me once my "just above conversational" grasp of Portuguese got me lost. In a way, it was almost like being home. Dom was a poor substitute for Leon, but I had lived with my male best friend for the entirety of my adult life. His constant invasion of my space was much closer to normal than spending all my time alone. Through Dom and from the information EJ gave me while I was locked away, I'd pieced together some semblance of how things worked around the compound. Very wealthy people with very specific needs would get ahold of Miguel somehow. I wondered how these people knew shifters existed or how this all began. I had a feeling it pre-dated even Miguel. Neither EJ nor Dom had ever made it clear to me *exactly* what Miguel sent his men to do, but I had my theories. Security clearance, corporate sabotage, hell, with the ability to physically become anyone, there wasn't much off the table. I imagined there were probably a few appearances from long-lost lovers or passed-away family members as well. The men who came here did it for the money and perhaps to be a part of Miguel's fucked up version of a family. However, like

any cult, there was no leaving. The moment you set foot in this place, you were selling your soul to the devil.

I gathered that most of the time, Miguel only needed to send one or two people away at a time, but occasionally, when the house got too quiet, I knew why.

I was starting to fear the next time Miguel would send Dom away. Not only because the last time he had, Dom came back in bad shape, but because despite myself, I had grown attached. I didn't have feelings for Dom, at least not the same feelings he had for me, but I depended on him. He was the only thing keeping my head on straight.

If it weren't for Dom, I would likely be dead or spending every waking moment terrified at the thought that I still didn't know where and *who* Leon was and why after all of this time he still had made no attempt to get me out of this hell.

Any time that Dom wasn't around, I was working. What started as a few sketches started to become a full-on collection. I hated that I had no way to get any of it to Nia. She was probably worried sick. While I was confident that she would be able to keep things going for a while, I also knew she wasn't going to be able to run my line without my designs. All I could do was hope that I somehow made it back to New York before that became an issue.

It was nearly 2 am when I finished the sketch I was working on. I had started and restarted it at least a dozen times before getting it to the place I wanted. I was just about to put everything away and turn in for the night when I heard the sound of keys in the door.

My stomach dropped, and on instinct, I scurried around the sofa, crouching in the small space between the arm of the couch and the wall.

It was the hour and the key that made the visit seem nefarious. Dom took up knocking after I had that panic attack in front of him. He never came in without me telling him he could. The housekeeper, Estela, and sometimes even Taia, came by but never in the middle of the night. I didn't know who was on the other side of the door, but my gut told me I wasn't safe.

I couldn't see the front door from where I was hiding, but as I held my breath, I heard it creak open on its hinges. Two heavy footsteps entered the room, definitely a man.

Go away. Please, go away.

There was silence for a moment, and I assumed the intruder was looking around the room for some sign of me. Then the footsteps started up again, slow and heavy. It wasn't until the unwelcome guest turned right toward the bedroom that I could see that unmistakable bald head and those arms, chorded with tattoos come into view.

I had to get out. I was alone and defenseless, and anyone who might come to my aid was somewhere deep in the labyrinth of the house. They likely wouldn't hear me even if I did cry out for help. I waited until Victor was far enough into the bedroom that I thought I had a chance of not being seen.

I took a sharp breath and then held it as I bolted for the open door. I didn't hesitate as I sprinted down the hallway. I had to get into another room and fast. Miguel's office was always locked, the classroom would have been a good hiding place, but I was too disoriented to figure out which door that was. I grabbed for a handle, but the door didn't budge. The next door looked less like a room and more like a closet. Relief washed over me as the third door I tried was opened on the first try. I slid into the safety of its darkness, closing the door behind me as quietly as I could.

I stood there, trying to get my bearings and waiting for my eyes to adjust to the room around me. I couldn't see much, but it suddenly hit me that the room smelled familiar, like cedar, like vanilla—like Dom.

I could make out a living room, not unlike mine but smaller, and a similar hallway that led to what had to be a bedroom. My heart raced as I quietly crept toward it, hoping to God I was right. Luckily once I stepped into the bedroom, the moon shining above the courtyard gave just enough light through Dom's own sliding glass window that I could see him, fast asleep in a giant king-sized bed.

I finally caught my breath. The idea of Victor sneaking into my room was terrifying, but I was safe, at least for now.

Then it hit me, if I wasn't in my room, Victor would assume I escaped again. It was only a matter of time before the whole household descended upon that apartment to look for me. I didn't want to think about what Miguel would do to me if he thought I escaped again. Yet, I couldn't let them find me in Dom's bedroom either.

I needed help.

"Dom! Dom, wake up!" I said as loudly as I could without being heard from the hallway.

Leon's cousin didn't move at all. Apparently, heavy sleeping was a family trait. I had no time to waste. I quickly crawled onto the bed and gently started to shake him.

"Dom! Wake up! Please!"

He gasped and then quickly scrambled to sit up in bed. "*Mas que raio?*" *What the fuck?*

"It's me. I need you—I need help, please!" I said to him as quickly as I could.

He reached for me in the dark, his hand meeting the side of my face as if he needed some physical proof I was there.

"Victor is in my room. He just came in with the key and went into my bedroom!"

"What? How did you—how did you get out?" he managed to get out, his voice full of sleep.

"I was in the living room, but I hid as soon as I heard the key in the door. When Victor turned the corner to go into my room, I ran," I rattled off.

"It's okay. It's okay. Just stay here, *linda*," he said.

He wasn't awake enough to connect the dots as I had. "I can't just stay here! As soon as he realizes I'm not there he'll wake the whole house!"

Dom was quiet for a moment as he processed that.

"Okay," he said suddenly, throwing the duvet off his body. As he stood, he turned on a lamp next to his bed. Despite the urgency of the situation, my eyes had a mind of their own. They

slowly made their way down his naked torso as he stood in front of me wearing nothing, but a pair of shorts hung far too low.

Snap out of it, Jacey. “Okay, what?”

“I’ll deal with it,” Dom said as he reached for the door to the courtyard.

“How are you planning to—“

Before I could finish the sentence, smoke began twisting and consuming Dom and filling the room around me. When it cleared, what was left was... me.

I blinked several times as I processed what I was looking at. Every detail was identical, right down to the placement of the handful of freckles I had on my nose and the mole on the inside of my right arm.

Until then, I hadn’t really processed just how terrifying and powerful the ability to become a perfect match to someone in a matter of seconds was, not until it was there, staring back at me with my own face.

“What are you going to do?”

“Just stay here!” Dom commanded. The sound of my own voice echoing in my ears.

I sat on Dom’s bed in stunned silence, and I waited. What else was there for me to do? Some voyeuristic part of me wanted to sneak into the courtyard and try to watch whatever *I* was about to do, but I knew that put both Dom and me at risk.

I heard Miguel’s men in the hallway. I knew Victor had woken everyone up, but when they arrived, *I* would be there, and Victor would look like an idiot. I wondered how he would try to explain sneaking into my room at two in the morning. Despite the terror of my experience, I was almost excited at the prospect of Victor pissing off the entire house.

I had been waiting for what seemed like forever. There wasn’t a clock nearby, so I had no sense of how long Dom had been gone or if I should be worried. I eventually laid back on his bed, mostly out of exhaustion. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep doing this. I’d managed to survive this far, but what exactly was I supposed to do to keep Victor from creeping into

my room in the middle of the night? I felt powerless. This was a nightmare I couldn't seem to wake from. All I wanted was to go home.

I let out a sigh of relief when I finally heard the sliding glass door open again. "You look good in my bed, *linda*." I heard Dom say to me in my own voice as I sat up.

"Ew, what is wrong with you?" I said, grabbing a pillow from behind me and hurling it at my own head.

He laughed, ducking out of the way of the pillow, so it hit the door instead.

"Everything is fine," he assured me.

"I'm not having this conversation with myself," I asserted. Given that I had an identical twin, I was probably more accustomed to having conversations with my own face than the average person, but there was still something unsettling about it. It was like watching someone else inhabit my body.

The room filled with smoke again, and when it cleared, Dom stood leaning against the door frame with a familiar cocky grin.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well, Victor thinks you're a witch now," he said with a laugh as he stepped into the room and shut the door behind him.

"What?"

"Well, he woke up half the house and dragged them into your room because you escaped again only to find you half asleep in your bed," Dom explained. "Miguel was *not* happy, and Victor started going on about how that wasn't possible and that you had to be some kind of witch."

"Maybe that'll keep him out of my room," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Yeah... we've gotta figure that out," Dom sighed.

"I can't sleep there knowing he can show up any time he wants!"

"You're not going back in there. At least not tonight."

"I have to sleep!"

“Sleep here,” he shrugged.

“With you?”

That was a bad idea if I’d ever heard one. The truth was, I wasn’t doing a very good job of keeping my relationship with Dom platonic. I wanted to because I wanted Leon, I wanted our family. Yet the more time I spent with Dom, the more he got under my skin. I’d spent the last year falling all over myself every time some attractive man looked at me the right way, and that wasn’t the person I wanted to be. Sure, Dom wasn’t a stranger—not anymore. He also protected me more times than I could count, but I didn’t *want* to want him. Sleeping in his bed wasn’t going to make holding that line any easier.

“I can turn into Leon if it’ll make you feel better,” he joked.

I knew that he was kidding, but it was cruel, and I was tired of cruelty at the hands of the men in this place.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” I said blankly.

“I’m not letting you do that. You’re pregnant.”

I didn’t react. I just got up from the bed and started to leave. Dom, however, wasn’t kidding when he said he wouldn’t let me. He jumped up and maneuvered himself right into my path.

“It was a bad joke, I’m sorry.”

“Dom—” I started, but he cut me off before I could finish.

“Please just come to bed. I’m not trying to make a move on you, I promise but...” his voice was strained, and I watched his dark lashes lower as he stared down at the ground below him, unable to meet my gaze. “That scared the shit out of me. I know—I know you don’t feel the way about me that I feel about you. I know when Leon gets here, I will probably never see you again, but...”

“Please don’t—”

“I have regretted bringing you here since day one. I’m not supposed to feel that way. I’m not supposed to question anything Miguel says or does, but I knew I had to keep you safe if I could, and tonight I couldn’t keep you safe,” he finished, his voice breaking at the end.

My heart ached in my chest. This was such a mess, and Dom was so beautifully tragic. All I could do was wrap my arms around his neck and hold him close.

“You did keep me safe,” I whispered.

He held onto me tightly for a long moment before he pulled back to look at me.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I knew it wasn’t just the joke he was apologizing for but all of it. For every part he had to play in this circus.

“Let’s go to bed,” I said simply.

Dom and I fell asleep that night with so much space between us that we would barely touch even if we actively tried reaching for each other. I couldn’t say that I was comfortable, but I was safe, and that was all that mattered.



Twenty-Seven

For the first time since my visions started, Leon wasn't there. Ordinarily, I would find myself moving through some memory of ours like a fly on the wall. I would listen to conversations I wasn't present for or moments where Leon was alone, but this was different. I was watching Dom. I stood in a bathroom I had never seen before, where Dom was shaking—almost violently. He looked up into the mirror, and the sound of a sob he was trying to choke back escaped him. He looked down at his blood-soaked hands, and as I got closer, I recognized the clothes he wore. That blood was my blood.

I choked out a breath, taking a step back. I was watching the aftermath of Dom stabbing me.

He roughly turned the faucet on and stared at the water until it got so hot that steam came off it. He began violently washing his hands, even when the blood was gone. He just kept scrubbing them manically.

“Domingos, where are you?” I heard a gravelly voice call out in a sing-song way from the other side of the bathroom door.

I recognized the voice immediately.

“I'm coming!” Dom shouted.

He slammed down the faucet handle before looking at himself in the mirror again. He took a step closer before he

noticed the places where my blood had stained his shirt.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed as he wrestled to get the short sleeve button-down off his body. He threw it into a corner before he quickly wiped any sign of tears from his dark brown eyes and marched out of the bathroom.

Victor was waiting outside the door, and his eyes narrowed at Dom as he stormed out of the bathroom.

“Are you ready?” Victor asked him, looking impatient.

Dom quickly grabbed another shirt from his closet and threw it over his head before following him out the door.

I continued to follow, knowing full well there was nothing I could do but watch when these things happened to me. Dom, Victor, and a large handful of Miguel’s men jumped in a car. They were loud and rowdy, most of them already sufficiently drunk. They were all laughing and yelling at each other, but Dom sat in the back of the car, perfectly still, staring out the window.

Eventually, the men arrived at a bar in what I assumed was Manaus. The building was anciently old, filled with smoke, and everything in it was dated and tacky. Dom did the same thing he had in the car for a while. He sat and sulked. However, eventually, his companions demanded that he join their drinking, and boy could he drink. I watched him hammer back shot after shot. The more drunk he got, the harder it was to watch. Masking his pain wasn’t so easy for him anymore.

The night didn’t end until the wee hours of the morning. The men were so inebriated they could barely stand. They all crammed back into the car they arrived in, except Dom.

“What are you doing?” Victor slurred when Dom refused to get in the car.

“I’m going to go find Gisele!” Dom nearly yelled back at him.

I had no idea who Gisele was. Dom had never mentioned her, but the idea that there was some girl he randomly hooked up with in Manaus didn’t exactly surprise me. As the car pulled away, I tried to piece together any reason I might be seeing this.

Dom sauntered back into the bar, but before I could follow, he emerged with a bottle full of what looked like tequila.

He started walking down the middle of the street, swaying side to side and taking large swigs from the bottle along the way. Just as I began hoping I wouldn't have to stay in this memory long enough to watch Dom hook up with some strange woman, he started yelling.

“Leondro! Leondro!”

What was he doing? The street remained quiet as he weaved between brightly colored buildings.

“Where are you Leondro?” he continued to yell. “I need to find you, you stupid son of a bitch!” Dom took another drink before he jumped back in. “Son of a witch!” he yelled before letting out more of a cackle than a laugh.

I wanted to wake up. It was too hard to watch. Manaus was much too big of a city. Dom wasn't going to find him this way, and I didn't even know why he wanted to.

“Leondro!”

I was surprised he hadn't woken the entire neighborhood, and yet, no one seemed to stir. Perhaps, living so close to a bar, the residents were used to this kind of thing. “Fuck! Please! Jacey needs you! Miguel locked her up. He's never going to let her out, he—”

All of a sudden, I heard the sound of wooden shutters being thrown open above us. Dom and I both looked up at the same time.

My heart stopped. Impossible though it seemed, there he was. His gaze was hard as he stared down at Dom, drunkenly teetering in the middle of the street. *Was this real? Did this happen?* I couldn't tell the difference between dreams and visions anymore.

“Cousin!” Dom exclaimed, holding the bottle up.

I gasped for air as my eyes shot open. I felt my body being gently shaken .

“*Linda*, wake up!”

I scrambled to get myself upright in bed.

“Where is Leon?” I demanded.

Dom looked completely confused by my question.

“How would I know?”

“You went to Manaus!”

Dom’s eyes shifted back and forth. “I go to Manaus all the time. I don’t understand. Are you okay?”

“After you stabbed me!”

Dom tilted his head to the side. “No, I sat in this room until everyone went to bed. Then I came and sewed up your arm,” he said.

He was right. It was a dream. It had to have been a dream. Dom was completely sober when he came to sew up my arm. He didn’t even smell like alcohol.

I didn’t know what to say or how to explain myself. “I must have been having a nightmare,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“About Leon and Manaus?” he prodded.

“Something like that,” I shrugged. I looked over at the window and noticed the sun as it started to rise. “I should get back to my room before anyone realizes I’m gone.”

Dom nodded, and I quietly crept out of his room, through the courtyard, and back into my own.

I assumed the only family functions I was expected to attend were the ones that involved Jesus and elaborate post-mass brunches. However, Taia made it clear when she burst into my room at three in the afternoon with her arms full of dresses for me to try on that I *belonged* at every Dos Reis event, which included the dinner they were throwing in honor of Estela’s birthday.

I wanted to refuse, not because I had anything against Estela. She was one of the few people in this looney bin I liked, but being put on display in front of all of Miguel's loyal subjects always made me feel a sense of impending doom. Between pretending that I came from some long line of shifters, Victor's constant lurking around, Miguel's self-indulgent speeches, and Leon's permanently empty table setting, I felt like sooner or later something was bound to go wrong.

However, I knew the only thing worse than dealing with Miguel all evening would have been refusing to do what he asked, so I put on the deep red, floor-length dress Taia supplied me with and waited for someone to retrieve me from my room.

Just after the sun went down, Taia, Dom, and Caroline showed up at my door. As it swung open, the three of them looked at me in stunned silence. I felt like a fish in a bowl.

"What?" I demanded after a long moment.

"You look so good!" Taia exclaimed, bounding into the room and grabbing me by the arm.

I looked to Dom for some confirmation of what his sister was saying, but he just held my gaze for a long moment and then took Caroline by the hand, leading her out of the room.

There was a twisting in my stomach at the way Caroline clung to him. It had never bothered me before. I sometimes even found her persistence entertaining, but unwelcome though it was, the feeling was there.

Of the three of us, Taia seemed to be the only one excited about the evening. She and I walked arm-in-arm behind Dom and Caroline.

"Are birthdays always such a big deal around here?" I asked her, wondering why we were so dressed up

"Just my mom's," Taia explained.

It was kind of nice to hear Taia call Estela her mom. I knew that Miguel and Estela were Taia and Dom's parents, but they always called Miguel by his first name, so I assumed the rule was the same for Estela.

"Why just hers?" I asked.

“Are you kidding me?” Caroline piped in, craning her head over Dom’s shoulder to look at me. “If Estela wanted us all to jump in the pool and reenact *Titanic* while singing ‘My Heart Will Go On’, Miguel would make us do it!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the image that description created in my head. Honestly, Caroline’s idea sounded a lot more fun than some fancy evening version of a gathering.

“You know how shifter men are,” Taia added, rolling her eyes. “When they fall in love, it’s like they’re possessed. The whole world revolves around that person.”

I didn’t need to come from this world to know that Taia was right. I’d experienced it firsthand.

“And you know how intense Miguel already is, so you put those things together, and we all just accept that if Estela wants something, it’s going to happen,” Caroline chimed in again, finishing Taia’s thought. “The whole reason we have gatherings is that she has like eight siblings and twenty cousins in Porto Seguro, and they used to have these huge family lunches that would last until dinner.”

I filed that information in the back of my mind. I didn’t know if I would need it, but it seemed useful to hold onto the fact that the only person who could make Miguel bend was Estela.

I wasn’t sure what I expected, but the back of the house reminded me more of a dramatic candlelit reception than a birthday celebration. There were candles and string lights and roses everywhere I looked. While Caroline and Estela’s children strolled right toward the table like this was an everyday occurrence, I stood there staring. It was so hard for me to imagine Miguel being so in love with someone that he’d go to all this trouble, and yet, that was exactly what I was looking at.

It was the first time I’d seen the seating arrangement change, and I was surprised to find that it was Estela sitting at the head of the table, not Miguel. I tilted my head as I watched the two of them from a distance. Miguel leaned into her, whispering something in her ear. From the way she smiled, she seemed happy—truly and genuinely happy. It was hard to understand. Estela was so caring and maternal, while Miguel was so dark

and self-involved. They made no sense together, and yet, they fit perfectly. I thought back to the story EJ told me and wondered if maybe the version of Miguel that existed when they were first bound still lived inside him somewhere. Perhaps Estela was the only one who could see it.

Occasionally, I would find it hard to keep the image of Miguel as the villain in my mind. Sure, he was obsessed with Leon, but he'd lost his twin brother, and Leon was all that remained of him. Sure, he ruled this community by fear, but he was someone's father, someone's lover. Every line here seemed blurry, and the longer I stayed, the more complicated every relationship seemed.

I got lost as I struggled to understand the picture in front of me. It wasn't until Estela noticed me standing off to the side and waved me over that I approached. She immediately wrapped her arms around my shoulders, hugging me tightly.

"Estás linda" You look beautiful, she said.

"Obrigada, tu também. Feliz aniversário," I said, telling her she also looked beautiful and wishing her a happy birthday.

She motioned for me to sit. I was surprised to find my seat next to Taia, with Dom and Caroline across the table. There was no empty place setting for the missing Leondro, and I wondered how much of a fight Estela had to put up to keep the empty seat off the guest list. Next to Dom was Victor and his wife. I tried to keep my focus elsewhere as he stared daggers at me from across the table.

Once everyone was seated, Estela stood up, grabbing Taia by the elbow and urging her to do the same.

"Obrigado a todos por estarem aqui," she started as the whole endless banquet table looked on.

"Thank you all for being here," Taia translated.

Taia continued to translate everything her mother said to the table. Estela spoke English well enough, but I imagined that her native language was easier for her. At my first gathering I wondered why Miguel chose to speak English in Brazil, but it was clear that the people who lived here were from all over, so it

seemed that English was the only common tongue between them.

“I came from a very large family, and when Miguel and I were bound I had a hard time leaving them. I’d never lived in a place that wasn’t full of grandparents and children and noise. When we were married, Miguel promised me he would give me all the family I could ever need, and he did. He gave me all of you,” Taia said to the group.

I looked up at her, all of the love on her face as she spoke to these people—her people, as much as they were Miguel’s. Then I looked at them. Everyone at that table looked back at her with the same admiration. It wasn’t the subservience with which they looked at Miguel but reverence. She was their matriarch. It seemed strange in a society that valued women only for their ability to make more shifters, and yet it seemed like Estela had found a way to make herself a great deal more than just the mother of Miguel’s children.

When Estela finished, everyone began eating, and the table fell somewhat quiet for a while. However, Victor wouldn’t give up glaring at me from where he sat. His vulturine gaze tracked every movement I made. I desperately wished that Estela had put him further down at the table, but wherever Miguel was, Victor was never far away.

“Can you stop?” Taia finally spoke up. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“I just want to know how she did it,” Victor responded.

“Did what?” Estela spoke up.

It was as if Victor and I realized the same thing at the same moment because color drained from his face as a lightbulb went off in my head. I found my opportunity to use Estela’s sway and her instinct to protect me to my advantage. I also doubted that his wife would be very happy with the fact he, for some unexplained reason, felt it necessary to come into my locked apartment at two in the morning.

“*Não é nada.*” *It’s nothing,* Victor quickly said before lowering his gaze back to his food.

“What did you do?” Estela asked as she turned to look at me, unsatisfied with that answer.

“Victor came into my bedroom at two in the morning last night, and apparently, he didn’t see me sleeping because he woke up half the men in the house, dragged them into my room, and claimed I had escaped while I was in my bed the whole time.”

I looked at no one but Victor. I stared him down the same way he had been staring at me from the moment the evening began. The entire table looked at me, but I didn’t even blink.

“What were you doing in her room?” Estela demanded.

“*Explica!*” *Explain*, Victor’s wife demanded when his silence went on for far too long.

“She’s already run off once, I was making sure she didn’t do it again,” he grumbled.

“At two in the morning?” Taia piped in.

“Calm down!” Miguel commanded, but for the first time, no one was listening to him.

“Is this what we’re doing now, sending men into pregnant women’s bedrooms in the middle of the night?” Taia shot at her father.

Estela turned to face her husband angrily, and immediately Miguel held his hands up.

“I didn’t send him anywhere, *meu amor!*”

“That does not explain where the hell you were!” Victor said, slamming a fist against the table. “I know you weren’t in that bed, witch!”

I smirked. The man terrified me, but I had no intention of letting him know that. “You should probably get your eyes checked.”

“I will fucking—”

“Enough!” Estela shouted before Victor could threaten me. “Do not go in there again. You want to know where she is, you come to me.”

Victor glanced at Miguel, perhaps hoping that he might intervene, but Miguel did nothing but nod in agreement with his wife.

“Will you excuse me? I’m not feeling well,” I said as I stood up from the table. Everyone around it just sat there in stunned silence as I wandered off.

My intention wasn’t to go far. There was a gazebo on the opposite side of the pool, far enough away that I didn’t have to deal with anyone at the table but close enough that no one would assume I’d run off.

I sat down on a cream-colored sofa and listened as the party seemed to go back to normal. The talking and laughter resumed as if nothing happened. I figured that was just as well. I didn’t want to be responsible for ruining Estela’s day. I just had to take the opportunity to ruin Victor’s when I could.

I was enjoying the solace of being alone, and I stayed that way for a long time before I noticed a figure approaching me in the distance. It was hard to make out who I was looking at, but eventually, Dom came into view. I wasn’t sure how he managed to sneak away from Caroline. She seemed to be even more clingy than usual.

“What the hell was that?” Dom said by way of greeting as he gestured back to the party.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“If by worked you mean gave Victor even more of a reason to want your head on a platter, then yes,” Dom said, though there was a glint in his eye, and it almost sounded as if he were on the verge of laughter.

“Considering the way his wife was looking at him, I don’t think I’m going to be the one losing my head.”

That time Dom did laugh before nodding his head to the side, indicating that I should move over so he could sit next to me. I did as he asked, although I was keenly aware of the number of other places he could have chosen to sit.

He was already too close, and without a moment’s hesitation, he draped his arm around the back of the sofa, making us far

more comfortable than we should have been in public.

“You’re amazing, *linda*,” he said softly, leaning into me slightly.

“Why is that?”

His hand slowly moved toward my face, brushing a strand of hair away. His fingers grazed my skin.

“Because you’re fearless,” he whispered.

I froze. At first, it was because those words were familiar, too familiar, but just as my brain started to catch up with me enough to say something, I noticed we weren’t alone.

“Domingos, a tua mãe está à tua procura.” Domingos, your mother is looking for you.

Dom slowly turned his head to see his father. A mask of perfect, unmoving calm stared at the two of us. *Too close, too intimate.*

“Agora!” Now, Miguel barked, the mask slipping just enough that he became frightening again.

I’d never seen Dom move so quickly, before I could blink he was out of his seat, hurrying away from the scene of the crime, and leaving me alone to clean up the mess.

“I—” I started to speak though I had no plan on how to explain this.

“I suggest you remember you’re a married woman and start behaving like one,” was all he said, then turned and left me alone.

My heart sank from my chest deep into the pit of my stomach. Somehow I knew that wasn’t the end of it.



Twenty-Eight

It was more intuition than anything else, but I could feel something brewing in the air. Our encounter with Miguel, though unnerving, was seemingly harmless. Victor already knew something was going on, Miguel already believed his son would seduce any woman on two legs, and technically I didn't do anything that crossed the line I'd given Dom when it came to our friendship. We were a little *too* friendly. I knew that, but it wasn't like Miguel caught us in bed together. I told myself everything I could to calm down, but nothing helped.

I wasn't sure if it made matters better or worse, but bright and early the next day, Taia showed up at my door, ready to drag me to mass.

I tried as hard as I could not to read into the fact that it was Taia and not Dom who came for me. As we slid into a town car, I held my breath, hoping for the familiarity and safety of Dom's face, but it was just the two of us.

Taia was uncharacteristically quiet. I didn't know if it was because she knew something or she was dealing with her own issues. I didn't press. I just rode in the car in silence, trying to hold onto anything that would keep my out-of-control nerves from slipping over the edge into a panic attack.

When we arrived, I practically dove out of the car, hoping to catch a glimpse of Dom anywhere. My heart started beating

faster. *What if Miguel did something to him? No, he's his only son he wouldn't—he couldn't have been that mad, could he?*

My mind twisted and turned. Best-case scenarios, absolute nightmares, logical outcomes, and complete and utter nonsense all raced through my head. I clamored up the stairs to the church, yanking open the doors.

And there he was.

That stupid man-child was safe and sound, sitting quietly next to Caroline on the opposite side of the aisle from his parents as he had at so many masses before this. I took in my first steady breath in hours.

I tried to take my usual seat in the back of the sanctuary, but Taia grabbed me by the arm and pulled me toward her parents and brother.

“You’re family. You should sit with us,” she insisted.

I couldn’t create a scene of saying no, so I hesitantly followed her up the aisle, and as Taia sat down next to her mother, I took a seat at the end of the pew.

Dom was across the aisle from me. He was so close that if we both reached out, we might even be able to touch each other, and yet we both maintained a staring contest with the oversized effigy of Christ mounted to the wall.

It wasn’t until the priest came out in his pale blue robes, a gold cross embroidered on the front, and began the service that I was brave enough to glance over. It was like Dom could read my mind because he turned to look at me at the exact same time.

“Are you okay?” he mouthed.

I gently nodded my head.

“Are you?” I mouthed back.

Dom nodded.

That brief moment was all we could risk, and I spent the rest of mass using all the willpower I had to hold myself back from glancing over again.

I’d had enough practice at pretending to be Catholic that I could get through the service without watching anyone around

me. I didn't know the words to say, but because Portuguese wasn't my first language, no one appeared to think anything of it. The hour-long service felt like it had been going on for days. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. On the one hand, I needed to find a way to talk to Dom, but on the other, I was well aware that the moment mass was over, they would expect me at yet another gathering.

When the priest released us, I tried again to avoid eye contact as I got up and started to file out of the church. I could have sworn I felt someone brush my hand as I shuffled through the door, but I didn't dare look behind me to see who it was. Maybe Dom. Maybe some altered version of Leon. Maybe an accidental brush by a stranger. I didn't know.

The ride back to the house was more of the same—silent, strained, uncomfortable. I still didn't know what I was sensing, but it felt like I was barreling toward a cliff with no way to stop myself.

I stepped out of the car only moments before Dom, Caroline, and Victor's family climbed out of theirs. Everyone around us started migrating toward the house, but I watched as Dom stepped away. When he was sure no one was watching, he nodded, urging me to follow. I looked around me, thankful no one seemed to be paying much attention. I lingered another second before casually following him around the side of the house.

As soon as I was within arms reach, Dom grabbed me, holding me close to him.

"Hi," I laughed, mostly out of relief.

"Are you okay? What did he say to you?"

"I suggest you remember you're a married woman and start behaving like one," I said, mocking Miguel's Portuguese accent and the deep, angry sound of his voice.

"That's it?"

I looked around, checking again that we weren't being watched.

"Yeah, that's it. Why? What did he say to you?"

“He gave me an hour-long lecture about the responsibilities of this family and taking my place among my people.”

“Okay...” I started. “That doesn’t sound that bad. I mean boring but—”

“Something’s wrong,” Dom said cryptically.

I dropped my head. He felt it too. I wanted to tell myself I was worked up over nothing, but I could see it in Dom’s eyes. Miguel wasn’t done. It was just the calm before the storm.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I said, though the promise sounded as hollow as it was. I had no idea how I was going to protect him.

“You can’t fix this, *linda*.”

“If I got EJ out, I can handle whatever Miguel does next,” I asserted.

“If you—what?” Dom exclaimed loudly.

I closed the small distance between us, clamping my hand over his mouth. The last thing I wanted was for yet another person to catch us together.

I’d hidden what I did for EJ when it first happened. I didn’t trust Dom enough to tell him the truth, but things had changed between us. Plus, enough time had passed that I could safely believe EJ wouldn’t be found.

“I didn’t make that scene in the church because I wanted to get out of the basement. I did it because I was giving EJ a chance to run. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I just had to give him a fighting chance to escape first.” I said, keeping my hand firmly over Dom’s mouth.

I expected Dom to be upset, but his gaze softened. I slowly removed my hand, but didn’t step away.

“You are the most incredible person I have ever met,” he whispered as I felt his hand wrap around my waist.

The electricity of the connection I had to Dom pulled me in. It was like a siren song calling me to make yet another mistake. It would have been so easy. My eyes dropped to his lips. All I had to do was close the distance another few inches and let Dom

make me forget. *A distraction.* Still, Leon's face flashed in my mind like some kind of beacon home, and I couldn't bring myself any closer.

"That's not saying much when everyone you know is from this place," I said with an uneasy laugh.

I took a step back. Dom's brows instantly knit together in confusion. I shrugged my shoulders, and without saying another word, I tugged at the side door and slid back inside the house.

When I joined everyone outside, I found that the seating arrangement had returned to normal. My seat was, once again, placed between Dom and an empty chair for Leon. This time the irony of that wasn't lost on me. I had been stuck for weeks between Dom and a Leon who wasn't there.

I quietly took my seat, but Miguel seemed to be waiting until everyone was at the table before making his weekly *grand* speech.

Dom waited just long enough that his arrival didn't seem associated with mine and took his seat without even glancing at me.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as Miguel stood up.

"Many of you have been here with us from the very beginning. Our children were raised together, we have built this empire together, and our families have always been as one, so it is with the greatest joy that I announce to you the marriage of my only son!"

I grabbed Dom's hand hard under the table while the group erupted into exclamations of joy.

"We have put off the binding long enough! Tomorrow, we will welcome the beautiful Caroline Buckley into our family!"

I squeezed his hand harder, but Dom didn't react. His eyes glazed over, and he just stared across the table at his mother. Estela looked concerned, but she knew as well as I did, it couldn't be addressed, not here.

It was Caroline, brave as she was, that was the first to speak up after Miguel sat down.

"Tomorrow?" she balked.

“You have been asking about this wedding since you got here. Are you not pleased?” Miguel asked her with a nauseating grin.

“My family can’t get here from Texas in a day,” she said carefully.

“It takes 10 hours to get here,” he responded, waving his hand dismissively. “You’ll call them now, they’ll be here by tomorrow night.”

“But—”

“Go call your family,” Miguel cut her off. It sounded more like a threat than a command.

I could see tears starting to pool in Caroline’s eyes. Thankfully, she thought better of arguing. She quickly got up, nearly running from the table. Dutifully, Taia scurried after her.

Fix this. I told Dom I could fix this.

“Don’t we want to wait, until Leon is here,” I squeaked out. I was grasping at straws.

It was then that Dom finally reacted, grabbing my hand back as if urging me to stop talking.

I could have sworn I heard a growl come from Miguel, and his gaze flickered from amusement to fury as he turned his attention to me.

“We’ve waited long enough,” Miguel repeated slowly.

“But—”

“This is too much excitement for the baby. You should return to your room,” he said, shooting me down just as quickly as he had Caroline. “Victor!” he called.

I shot up from my seat before Victor could so much as glance in Miguel’s direction.

“It’s fine. I’ll take myself,” I said quickly.

Dom looked up at me, and I thought my heart might break. He had been engaged to Caroline long before I arrived, and on some level, I’m sure he always knew this day would come, but we both knew this wasn’t what he wanted. Binding to Caroline

meant he'd never be free again. That he'd always be tied to a woman he never loved in the first place, and I was powerless to help him.

“Get some rest, Jacey,” Miguel said, the sound of his voice now sickeningly sweet.

I took one last look at Dom, and then I left the table. My legs felt like they were made of lead as I dragged myself back to my room.

It was my fault. It was all my fault.



Twenty-Nine

The gathering went on without me, and I spent the next several hours in stunned silence. I cursed myself for my lack of productivity. I should have been coming up with a plan. From the beginning of this whole mess, I had always been able to come up with *something*, and yet my mind was blank. Numbness settled in again, attempting to protect me from what I was really feeling.

On some level, I knew I couldn't blame myself. Dom and I could have been more careful, or I could have drawn a harder line in the sand between us, but Dom was engaged to Caroline before he even knew I existed. Sooner or later, Miguel would have made him marry her whether he wanted to or not, so why did I feel so guilty? Was it even really guilt?

That question twisted in my gut and made me grateful that I didn't have a chance to eat anything before Miguel dismissed me.

Guilt would be better than the alternative. The alternative meant, despite fighting with everything in me not to fall for yet another beautiful man who stumbled into my path, that I wasn't capable of loving Leon the way he deserved to be loved. My heart would always be this unreliable mess. If that was true, what was I even fighting for?

Night eventually fell, and I heard people begin to move through the hallways again. I had no expectation that anyone would come for me. The next time I saw Dom would probably be at the end of an aisle, about to be a husband—or whatever the shifter version of that might be. That was if they even let me be there. No, if Miguel believed something was going on between us, he'd *make* me watch.

I was helpless. Worse than that, I was powerless. As the house settled I slid out into the courtyard. I sat on a bench and watched Dom's door, hoping for any sign of him, but the lights remained off, and there was no movement from behind the glass.

I could smell the rain coming, and when the first droplet inevitably hit my head, I knew I had to get inside quickly. Rain here was no joke, and as much as I hoped for some sign that Dom was okay, I also didn't want to get soaked waiting for one.

It was nearly midnight when I finally looked at the clock. It was officially Dom's wedding day, and I was no closer to figuring out how to save him from it.

I was about to crawl into the shower in the hope it would clear my head enough to come up with something when I heard keys in the door again. No knock. It wasn't Dom. I took a step back, reaching for a heavy, plaster candle holder that sat on a nearby shelf. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was something. As soon as the door was unlocked, the person on the other side shoved it open with unnecessary force. I braced myself as a face came into view.

Caroline.

"Where did you get that key?" I demanded as soon as my brain registered her freckled, oval-shaped face.

I wasn't sure what she wanted, but I didn't exactly enjoy being barged in on in the middle of the night yet again.

"Shut up!" she nearly shouted in a way that told me she had clearly been drinking.

I placed my hands on my hips, fighting the urge to roll my eyes as I watched her. The revolving door of people showing up whenever they wanted was starting to get old.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Shut up! You don’t get to ask questions! I get to ask questions!” she yelled again, her Texan accent thicker than I’d ever heard it.

I set the candlestick back down. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but I doubted I’d need a weapon for whatever Caroline drunkenly thought she was doing by barging in unannounced.

She stood there glaring at me and teetering on her Celine kitten heels. She continued for so long that I finally had to say something.

“Okay, ask your questions then...”

I just wanted to get this over with.

“You lied to me!” she spat out.

“That’s not a question.”

“Shut up!”

I clamped my eyes shut and pinched the bridge of my nose. I just wanted to go to bed and get this terrible day over with. I didn’t want to deal with any more shifter drama, especially when it was coming from a drunk twenty-two-year-old.

“Caroline, it’s late. I’m pregnant. I need to sleep.” I said calmly.

“Not until you tell me why you lied!”

“What did I lie about?”

“Dom!” she shouted at me.

Shit. She knew. I didn’t know how she knew or who told her, but she knew that something went on between Dom and I. She’d also no doubt pieced together that this sudden wedding was a direct result of that.

“You need to calm down, okay. I’ll explain, but I need you to calm down.”

“Why? So you can lie again?”

I took a step toward her, hoping that I could find some way to reason with her, but as I did, I watched her tiny face contort in anger. She grabbed an orange from the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter, the closest thing she could get her hands on, and hurled it at my head.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I said as I ducked out of the way.

“You should have told me the truth!”

“I don’t owe you anything, Caroline!” Now, I was shouting. This wasn’t going to stop unless I found a way to de-escalate it, and joining her in a screaming match wasn’t helping.

“So you admit it!”

“You have to calm down, okay? It doesn’t matter if something happened between Dom and me. The moment you’re bound, it’s over. You won.”

Another orange came hurtling toward me. Thankfully, her aim was off, and it bounced off the wall behind me.

“You don’t understand!”

“What? What don’t I understand?”

“I didn’t want to stay here because of him!”

My brain couldn’t move fast enough to keep up with what Caroline was saying or trying to imply. From the moment I arrived here, she only seemed to care about her silly little wedding and keeping Dom’s attention. What was I missing?

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t give a fuck about Dom! Sure, we used to hook up, but I only came here because my parents forced me.”

My eyes went wide and her sudden admission. Everything she said to me now seemed so confusing. I didn’t know how to follow any of it. I couldn’t tell if that was because she was drunk or because there was still more I didn’t understand.

“Then why does it matter if I lied?”

“Because I could have come up with a plan to keep this from happening!”

“So you don’t want to marry him?”

“No!” she continued yelling. “I only acted like I did because the more I pushed for a wedding, the further Miguel pushed it out. It was like some test or something. We were going to run away together. We just needed more time.”

“You and Dom?” I was so lost, and the more that was revealed to me the more backward everything sounded.

“No, with Tai!” she said, a sob escaping her as she spoke.

Instinctively, my hand went up over my mouth. Taia said she was in love with someone she couldn’t be bound to. I’d figured out that it was a woman, but I had no idea that that woman was *Caroline*.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know,” I started, but I wasn’t even sure what to say. I took another step toward Caroline. I wanted to comfort her in some way. This felt like it was all my fault, but the moment I started to, I noticed a figure in the doorway.

Caroline swung around to see Dom standing there wide-eyed, his mouth parted slightly as his gaze rapidly moved from me to Caroline and back again.

“Oh, God!” Caroline sobbed before dropping to the floor like some sort of drunken rag doll. I hurried toward her, but Dom got there first and held out his hand to stop me from coming any closer.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. Look at me.” Dom said gently.

All I could do was watch the two of them. If anyone was responsible for all of this, it was Miguel, but that didn’t ease my sense of guilt.

“Oh, God! Please don’t tell—do you hate me?”

Dom shook his head as he tried to wipe the tears from his fiancé’s face.

“I don’t hate you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I cheated on you! With your sister!”

I could have sworn I saw a hint of a smirk cross Dom’s face before he focused back on comforting Caroline.

“We both knew what this was, and we both knew why we were doing it. You were never in love with me,” he said. “And I was never in love with you,” he told her as he turned to look at me.

“Everything is ruined. What am I supposed to do?”

This whole scene was heartbreaking in every possible way, but I couldn’t help but melt a little at how kind he was despite all Caroline said.

“We will figure that out, but for right now, you have one more night to be free. Don’t waste it yelling at Jacey and waking up half the house. Go, be with Taia.”

Caroline finally stopped crying.

“Okay,” she said with a shaky voice.

Dom helped her to her feet, and I watched her wrap her arms around his neck tightly before leaving the room. She didn’t bother giving me a second glance.

The silence that filled the room as soon as she left was immense. It was so quiet it was like neither one of us was breathing. Finally, Dom stood and shut the door, so we were alone.

“Did you know?” I asked.

Dom glanced at the door and then back at me. “No, but I get it.”

“Really? Because I’m completely lost.”

“Caroline has always been a little *too* invested in this. Almost like she was putting on a show, and Taia has always been a little too uninterested in any match Miguel has suggested, so I get it,” he explained.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly.

“You didn’t do this, *linda*.”

He was right, but at the same time, he was wrong. I may not have forced them to get engaged, I didn’t bring Caroline all the way here from Texas, and I certainly wasn’t the one demanding they marry each other tomorrow, but I couldn’t help but think

that if I'd been more careful, maybe she and Taia would have had more time. That they could have made it out.

“I certainly didn't help.”

“Neither did I,” he said, and I could hear the sadness in his voice. Another long moment of silence passed before he spoke again. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything,” I said.

I had already doomed him to marry a woman he wasn't in love with. He was more than entitled to ask for a favor.

“Come with me,” he said, reaching out for me.

I looked back at him skeptically, knowing full well that anything I chose to do with Dom would only make the situation worse. Yet despite myself and all the reasons why I shouldn't have, I took his hand.



Thirty

Dom led me out of my room without so much as locking the door to the apartment behind me. I suspected he didn't care much who knew where I was. I didn't blame him. How could we get in more trouble than we were already in? It wasn't like Miguel could force him to get married any faster, and anything Miguel was planning to do to me, he likely wouldn't do until after my child was born. It was one of the rare moments in this place where nothing seemed to matter. Hell had already broken loose. There was no point in keeping the demons in cages anymore.

The hallways were empty and silent as we walked toward Dom's room. I'd walked those halls dozens of times before but something about that moment felt different. It was almost like I was walking through some altered version of reality. However, I had been in plenty of altered realities before, and the funny thing was, there was never any sign I was in one.

Dom opened the door, and I followed him inside. I stood uncomfortably in the middle of his living room, arms crossed, while he turned on the lights.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"I'm just... not sure what I'm doing here," I admitted.

“Don’t worry, *linda*. I’m not trying to seduce you,” he said with a smirk.

“What makes you think I can be seduced?”

Dom raised an eyebrow at that as if I issued him a challenge, but he said nothing as he moved to the tiny kitchen. He poured himself some kind of dark liquor. I was immediately envious. Drinking sounded like heaven. I wanted so badly to forget what I was going through. Unfortunately, in my current condition, that wasn’t an option. It was just as well, being drunk with Dom was probably a terrible idea.

“I have to do something I really don’t want to do tomorrow, and if I only have one more night where I’m not helplessly tied to Caroline, I want to spend it with you. You don’t have to sleep here just... stay with me... for a while. ”

I wasn’t sure what he was proposing was a good idea, but it sort of felt like denying a dying man his last wish, so I decided not to fight him.

“Okay,” I shrugged.

The truth was Caroline was now the second angry person to show up in my apartment unannounced. Regardless of the feelings I was trying to avoid looking in the face, I was much safer wherever Dom was.

We both sat down on Dom’s couch, and for a long moment, we sat in the thick, heavy silence that seemed to surround every square inch of the house since Miguel’s big announcement.

“Come here,” Dom finally said, snaking an arm around my shoulders and pulling me close to him.

I leaned my head against his chest, laying my arm lazily across his torso. There was something strangely familiar about this, but I’d grown tired of dissecting why things felt the way they did. Whatever there was between Dom and I would be gone by tomorrow night, and wherever Leon was, he would no doubt come for me eventually. This was all there would ever be of us.

“Distract me,” Dom said more than asked.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you, actually.”

“What’s that, *linda*?” his tone softened.

“The truth.”

I felt his breathing slow as he waited for me to go on. Despite all he’d done, I never let myself trust Dom completely. It was justified, he’d helped kidnap me after all, but since then, he had done everything in his power to help me. I knew I had to come clean.

“Leon and I haven’t been together for 10 years,” I started.

“What? I thought you were—”

“We’ve *known* each other for 10 years, we’ve lived together for 8 years, but we were best friends. We had only been dating a few months when he asked me to marry him. After I found out about the shifting and about what he did before we started dating, I disappeared for a month. I came back after I found out I was pregnant, and he gave me this...” I said, holding up my left hand. “But I didn’t even have a chance to tell him about the baby before...”

I didn’t bother looking up at Dom’s face. I was sure the shock was there.

“When you found out about what he *did*?”

“Leon was in love with me for a long time before I understood I had feelings for him.”

“I don’t blame him,” Dom said under his breath.

I decided not to acknowledge that and press forward.

“And it’s a long story, but I dated five–four different guys before Leon and I got together and...”

“You’re not telling me he—”

“Yeah. He was all of them.”

I purposefully left out Leon’s ability to change my reality. I wanted to trust Dom, I really did, but I had a feeling that Leon’s family didn’t know about the things his mother taught him. If he had abilities his family didn’t know about, there was a possibility those abilities might help us, and so I kept my mouth shut.

Dom didn't say anything at first, but I felt his arm tighten around me.

"I'm sorry," was all he could manage.

I shook my head. "I'm not."

"You're not?"

"I started seeing things right before I got here," I started to explain.

"Seeing things?"

"Like visions, I think? But I'm seeing things that already happened. Things I wasn't there for,"

"Has that ever happened before?"

"No. I have no idea why it's happening, but I saw these moments that led up to the choice Leon made. I can't say that I completely understand it, but I do know everything he's ever done is because he loves me," I said honestly.

I wasn't sure if it was the visions or the fact that compared to what I'd been through since arriving in Brazil, a bunch of dates with hot guys who all ended up being my best friend seemed like a walk in the park, but either way, I'd made my peace with it. There was a point where I didn't think forgiving Leon was even possible, but there was also a point when I thought the worst thing about his family was that they called too much.

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because I also forgive you," I explained.

Dom's breathing slowed once again.

"I kept things from you because no matter how close we got, I still blamed you for bringing me here, and I don't know if I entirely understand why you do the things you do, but I do know that since we got here you've only ever tried to help me."

Dom leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

"You know I don't regret it," he said into my hair.

"Don't regret what?"

“Helping you, even if it means marrying Caroline. I don’t regret it.”

I sat up a little to look at him.

“Why?” I asked, though on some level, I already knew the answer.

“Do I really have to explain it to you?” he asked as his dark eyes locked with mine.

I didn’t know what it was about Dom that had somehow finally managed to sink its claws into me. He was cocky, immature, and most of the time a pain in my ass. Yet at the same time, he was beautifully broken, and I had this terrible, unending urge to reach out and save him. The problem was, there was no scenario in which I could. He was the only heir to the empire his father built. Miguel would hunt him down and drag him back here until the day he died. He had to stay. He had to marry Caroline. I had to go, and if Leon would still have me after all of this, I would marry him too.

In a way, it reminded me of where I stood with Gabe when I left. It was like they were doors to other lives I could have led if I hadn’t chosen Leon. With Gabe, the other side of that door was gentle, safe, warm, and entirely human. It was the Sunday paper my mom always told me to look for. With Dom, that life was dark. It was dangerous, and it called to me like a siren song toward destruction.

I’d always believed that who you loved was a matter of fate, that you had no choice in the matter, but I was wrong. I chose Leon. I would keep choosing Leon, no matter how many doors were placed in front of me.

It was then that it hit me. My feelings for Dom weren’t some indication of failure. They were inevitable given the circumstances. How was I supposed to feel nothing when this gorgeous man who just so happens to look like the love of my life keeps popping up and saving me and who looks at me like I put the sun in the sky? Feeling nothing wasn’t the test. Choosing Leon was.

“No,” I finally answered Dom. “I know,” I finally responded.

I knew what he felt. I didn't need to hear him say it. It would do neither one of us any good.

I leaned my head back against his chest, and we didn't speak again for a long time.

"Have you ever heard of the many worlds interpretation?" I asked, interrupting the silence.

Dom laughed, likely at how out of left field my question sounded.

"What is that?"

"It's this theory that every time you make a choice, a branch universe is created where the other option is the one you went with."

"I don't get it," he said as he adjusted underneath me.

"Basically, if you're driving down the road and you have to choose to turn left or turn right, when you turn right, there's another universe that's created where you turned left, and another version of you lives out the rest of his life having turned left."

"Okay..." he said slowly.

"So maybe somewhere out there, there's a version of this that turned out differently, too," I said with a shrug.

I didn't know if I believed in many worlds interpretation, but the thought was comforting, or at least it was comforting to me.

"And there's no way I could get you to choose differently in this universe?" Dom asked me.

"No," I said simply and I knew we'd both had enough mourning for whatever dalliance occurred between us.

I slowly stood up and started to head back to my room. My heart broke for Dom, but we both knew what we had to do.

"Wait!" Dom called out, scrambling to his feet as I reached for the door.

"I should go," I said before I continued out the door and down the hall. I wasn't sure what Dom was thinking or what he

was trying to convince me of, and yet he proceeded to follow behind me.

“*Linda*, come back, please,” he said, but I chose to ignore him.

Dom hadn’t done anything wrong, I wasn’t upset with him. I just didn’t want to sit around causing him or myself any more pain.

As I grabbed for my door handle, Dom grabbed for my arm, and I swung around to face him.

“What?” I groaned.

“Let me in,” he demanded.

I wasn’t sure if he meant my apartment or heart, but neither was an option.

“Dom, I don’t want to do this with you,” I warned.

“Why are you pushing me away?”

“Because nothing has changed. It’s Leon, it’s always going to be Leon. Even if I chose whatever it is you think you’re offering, you would live to regret it because you would very quickly learn I cannot love anyone that isn’t Leon.”

“That’s bullshit!”

“How the fuck would you know?”

We were yelling now, and while I knew having an argument out in the hallway like this wasn’t advisable, I was too angry to back down.

“Because you don’t really love him!”

“Don’t you dare tell me I don’t love him! You know nothing about either of us.”

“Is that why you left him? Why you didn’t realize that you had feelings for him until the last possible minute? Why you—”

I swung without thinking, and my open palm met the side of Dom’s face with a sound so loud it echoed down the hallway.

I didn’t know how I expected Dom to react, but the smirk on his face was certainly not it.

“If you ever imply I don’t love that man again, I swear to god, Dom—”

“You’ll what?” he said, nearly laughing at me.

“Go to bed,” I shot at him as I opened the door and shoved myself through it.

Before I could get through the threshold, Dom grabbed my arm again.

“Jace!”

Leon.



Thirty-One

My eyes went wide as the realization hit me. It wasn't Dom. Dom had never called me Jace. Dom had never even used my first name, let alone a nickname he'd never heard before. It was Leon. I was sure of it.

My arms couldn't yank him into that room fast enough. The moment he came tumbling toward me, I slammed the door behind us, and my mouth collided with his instantly. I had a hundred questions, but I needed him too badly to bother asking them. I had time to figure out how long he'd been Dom and where Dom was later. He was here. He was with me. That was all I could focus on.

Leon held onto me tightly. He had one hand tangled in my hair, and the other gripping my hip as we kissed hungrily. We couldn't let go or pull away, even for a second.

I finally managed to pull back just enough to realize what he looked like.

"Let me see you, please." I pleaded breathlessly.

Leon turned toward the door to the courtyard and pulled the curtains shut. I held my breath as I watched the smoke slowly wrap around his form. I kept staring through the darkness surrounding him, desperate to see him. When it cleared, and my

eyes danced over that face for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, I could feel the tears threatening to spill over.

“Hi,” he said quietly in his own voice. The sound of it was like music.

“Hi,” I responded, but the word came out shaky and strained as I tried to hold back my tears.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I know, I should have told you sooner, I wanted to but—”

“No!” I said, interrupting Leon’s explanation. I needed to hear it. I wanted to understand what was happening, but my world had just snapped back into focus. I needed a minute, just a minute where I didn’t have to think about everyone in this compound or how I was going to escape it. I needed a minute where it was just Leon and me. “I mean what the fuck are you doing all the way over there?”

Leon smiled, and again I thought I might lose it. There was a part of me that truly feared I might not ever see that smile again.

He moved quickly across the room and pulled me in, holding me tightly against him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Just don’t leave me again. Don’t *ever* leave me again,” I said, choking on the threat of tears again.

“I never left you, Jace.”

I lifted my head just enough to look into those amber eyes. I could tell he meant what he was saying, but I didn’t understand the words. I knew he couldn’t have been Dom the whole time, so if he’d never left, who had he been?

I couldn’t bring myself to ask. Not yet.

Leon lowered his mouth to mine. His lips, barely hovering. I could feel his breath against my face.

“You still need a distraction?” I asked.

The way Leon captured my lips again was all the answer I needed.

There would be time to figure everything else out, but at that moment, I needed him. Maybe I needed a distraction too. I

grabbed his hand and led him back to the bedroom.

We collided again, our mouths, our bodies. I couldn't resist the way it felt to be near him, the warmth of him, the safety of him. Leon was home, and I didn't care how complicated things would be when this moment was over. I had been moving through this place in a haze. I was so traumatized that half the time, I couldn't feel anything at all, and when I did, it was like feeling it through a foggy window. The moment I saw Leon's face, it was gone. I could feel everything. I *wanted* to feel everything.

I pulled at the hem of Leon's shirt, and he tore his lips away from mine just long enough that I could get it over his head. He did the same with mine, pulling it off me as quickly as he could and throwing it across the room.

Before he touched me again, Leon stopped to look at me. Those piercing eyes drinking me in. He did it every single time. It was like he needed a minute to actually believe what he was seeing.

"You're beautiful," he whispered against the shell of my ear as he pulled me close to him again before his mouth slowly moved down my neck.

I arched against him. My whole body ignited in a way that it only did for Leon. "I'm yours," I whispered back in response.

I heard a low, throaty growl escape him, and I felt the way those words made him react, pressing hard against me. He threaded his fingers through the back of my hair, and gently tugged my head back, making me look at him.

His hand slid into the waistband of the leggings I was wearing, his fingers sliding between my legs. I closed my eyes at the feeling of his touch, but before I could get lost in it, Leon pulled my head back again.

"Look at me."

I did as he said, my eyes never leaving that perfect face as his fingers slid inside me. I gasped, realizing how wet I already was. It was almost too easy for Leon. Every time he touched me, I came undone.

“Leon,” I moaned as he continued sliding his fingers in and out of me, making my whole body vibrate with electricity.

“God, I love my name in your mouth,” he said before pulling his hand away and pushing me down onto my back. He struggled to kiss me and pull my leggings off my body at the same time. As soon as they hit the floor, he trailed his mouth down my neck, my chest, and my stomach before pressing my legs open and hovering his mouth just above my center.

I cried out with need, arching my hips closer to him, but his grip on my thighs tightened as he kept me in place.

“Please,” I begged. “I need you.” I had never needed anyone more in my life.

Finally, I felt his tongue slowly start to explore me. He teased me with such diabolical slowness that I thought I might explode. My fingers slid into his hair, and I let out a moan. It was like that sound itself caused Leon to lose the control he was holding onto because his mouth began devouring me.

I ground my hips against him as my back arched in pleasure. I had been with Leon so many times, I knew the way our bodies fit together, but this was different somehow.

I felt my breath catch in my throat as his tongue threatened to throw me over the edge. “That’s it, Jace. Come home to me,” I heard him say as he returned his tongue with that same maddening slowness he started with. I lost myself, crying out in pleasure as my hands gripped the bedding beneath me.

I reached for his face, guiding his mouth back to mine. Tasting myself on him was intoxicating. I needed all of him. I reached for the waistband of his jeans, but he immediately pulled away from me.

“Not yet,” he said, and when I insisted and reached out to touch him, he pulled away from me and moved to the foot of the bed.

“I want to watch you.”

I whimpered, already missing the feeling of his body on mine, but I did as he asked, spreading my legs for him and

rubbing myself. I was so sensitive, and I couldn't help the sounds that were coming out of me as I touched myself for him.

Leon's gaze was dark and intense as he watched me. All I wanted was to feel him inside of me again, but if he was going to make me suffer. I intended to do the same.

I got up slowly. His eyes tracked me as I drew closer. This time he didn't stop me as I reached for him, and he let me get the rest of his clothes off without argument. I pushed him back onto the bed. Mimicking his motions, I kissed him deeply before slowly trailing my mouth down his chest, the muscles of his torso, and hovering my lips right before they met his head.

"Fuck," I heard Leon gasp, and I slowly trailed my tongue up the length of him. I teased him with painful slowness. When I could feel him throbbing against my tongue, I wrapped my lips around him, sliding up and down as he groaned in pleasure.

I continued until I could feel him getting too close to his own edge, and then stopped.

I climbed on top of him, his hands snaking around my waist as I reached between us, teasing his head against my wet slit.

"Yes. Fuck yes. I want you to feel me," he muttered.

I couldn't hold back anymore. I gasped as I felt him fill me, sliding down onto every inch. His hands moved to my hips, guiding me as I started to move. I kissed him again, moaning against his lips as my speed picked up, needing more and more of him. I was already close to the edge again, and as Leon felt me pulsing around him, he started to thrust up inside of me, hard and fast.

I lost it, digging my nails into his chest as my body went over the edge again. He pulled me close to him, holding onto me as I fell apart completely.

When my body stopped shaking, he turned me over, spreading me open and sliding back inside me. This time I could feel him deeper, and he wrapped one hand around my neck as he drove himself into me over and over. I was screaming in pleasure. I couldn't feel anything but him or want anything but him. I didn't remember where I was or who I was. All I knew

was I belonged to this man. That I could never belong to anyone else.

“Oh my god, you feel so good,” I cried out as he continued to take me.

He moved my legs to his shoulders, driving himself even deeper inside me. Driving us both even closer to losing ourselves in one another.

“Stay with me,” he muttered as my body started to shake, threatening to explode before he got the chance, but I bit down on my bottom lip, holding on as hard as I could.

I could feel him, throbbing inside of me. He was as close as I was. I reached for him. My lips crashed into his one last time before we both fell apart completely. The entire room burned away until there was nothing but the two of us.

We lay there breathless and silent for a long time before Leon slowly moved.

“I love you,” he whispered before laying down beside me.

I lazily kissed his lips as I settled in next to him, turning on my side as I rested my head against his bare shoulder.

“I thought you were going to hate me,” I admitted in my post-orgasmic haze.

He furrowed his brow and turned his head to look at me. “Why would I hate you?”

“Because of Dom,” I admitted. I didn’t know how long he’d been Dom, but tonight had made it perfectly clear that I had some sort of feelings for him.

“Jace, when did you start having feelings for Dom?”

I paused as I tried to figure out *when* it happened. There was always a bit of flirtation there, but I’d mostly found him annoying until...

“I tried to escape, and I stabbed him in the process, so when they caught me, Miguel made him stab me. Then they threw me in a cell in the basement,” I started but watched as Leon clamped his eyes shut as if he was trying to block out the

thought. “I don’t think I felt anything until hours later when he came to sew up my arm,” I explained.

“That’s why I don’t hate you,” he explained.

“I don’t understand.”

“After Dom had to stab you, the kid was really messed up. I mean *really* messed up, and he got completely wasted and went yelling for me through the streets of Manaus. I have no idea how he found me, but he did.”

I gasped. It was a vision. I had seen everything Leon was describing to me.

“He and I traded places that night. I was the one that sewed up your arm,” he explained.

I turned my back so I could stare up at the ceiling.

“That makes so much sense,” I mused.

“It does?”

“Dom could barely put a bandaid on himself. I wondered how he could sew up a stab wound in the dark...” I trailed off.

“We have a lot of things we need to work out, but Dom isn’t one of them,” Leon said.

I had so many questions, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to dig any deeper yet. Leon was right. We had a lot of things to work out. My leaving, how we were going to get out of this mess, why he was Dom for so long without telling me, not to mention my pregnancy. I knew breaching those topics now would only take from the first moment of actual happiness I had felt in ages, so I left them alone.

I lay there quietly as my fingers absently danced with Leon’s.

“I think on some level I knew,” I suddenly said.

“What do you mean?”

“Other than Brian and Gabe, I don’t think I’ve ever had real feelings for anyone who wasn’t you...”

“Just Gabe,” Leon corrected me, though there was an edge to his voice when he said Gabe’s name.

I pushed myself up on my elbows. “What? Please tell me you’re not insinuating you were Brian!”

Leon shook his head.

“When you first started dating Brian. You *really* liked him, but he was actually kind of a shitty boyfriend,” Leon explained. “He wouldn’t take you out because he was too busy with his little game, he only ever brought you places to show you off to his weird little programmer friends. I just wanted you to be happy, so a lot of the beginning of that relationship was me. That’s why I was so angry when he screwed it up. I basically gave him the keys to the castle, and he burned it down.”

I should have been mad. I knew that, but it all filed down to the same thing I’d said to Dom. Everything Leon had ever done was because he loved me. There was no denying the choices were misguided, but they were still made out of love.

“I love you,” I finally said back to him, and I meant it. Perhaps more than I ever had before.



Thirty-Two

I had no dreams or visions; however, when I woke up, I realized I also had no Leon. The first thing I did before even opening my eyes was reach for him, but the space where he'd fallen asleep next to me was now empty. My heart dropped.

I turned on my side, worried that perhaps it had all been some vivid lucid dream, but the scent of his Tom Ford cologne still lingered in the sheets, and my body ached in a way that assured me I could not have been dreaming.

“Leon?” I called out, but there was no response.

I tried not to panic. I didn't know what Leon and Dom were planning, but it was possible—even likely—that Leon had gone to deal with it. In all this time, no one had even suspected that Dom wasn't himself, so I had to believe that wherever Leon was, he was safe.

I slowly got out of bed, showered, and dressed. I felt a mix of emotions that ranged from blissful happiness to intense guilt and back again. While the Dom I fell for might not have been the one who kidnapped me, the *real* Dom had cared enough about me not only to find Leon but to let Leon take over his entire life to help me. I couldn't imagine what Miguel would have done to either of them if they were caught. I owed him so much, and yet, Leon and I had unwittingly created a situation in which he was

looking down the barrel of marrying Caroline in a matter of hours.

The churning in my stomach at the thought of the wedding was made worse by the sounds of people moving throughout the hallway again, no doubt getting ready for the evening's festivities. I swallowed hard and tried to focus on finding myself something to eat for breakfast when I heard the unwelcome sound of someone opening the door.

I took a step back. Ready to run if I had to, but it was Dom... or Leon. I didn't know how to be sure. Either way, I took in a steadying breath.

"Come with me," Dom said flatly.

I looked around the room, a bit confused, then slowly approached him.

"Okay, where are we going?"

Dom grabbed me by the arm and dragged me out of my apartment and into the hallway.

"What are you doing?" I shouted as I pulled back against him. I wasn't even sure who I was dealing with at that moment. I just knew I was being manhandled out of the apartment.

The people moving throughout the house glanced over briefly as I struggled against Dom, but none of them bothered to intervene. They didn't even bat an eye. Here brutality was as ordinary as the men who shifted into other bodies in a matter of seconds.

"Fuck! Just do what you're told for once!" Dom exclaimed.

Not Leon.

"Get off me!" I yelled, thrashing against him.

When we stopped at the door to Miguel's office. I started to realize what was happening, and panic settled in. Dom reached for the door handle, and I continued pulling as hard as I could.

"No! I'm not going in there. Dom, let me go!" I demanded, trying to throw my weight backward, but even pregnant, Dom outweighed me by at least 60 pounds. There was no way I was going to get the upper hand.

He threw the door open and shoved me inside. He hadn't hurt me. My arm would likely bruise, but otherwise, I was fine. It was something else in me that hurt. Dom had been my friend, my protector, and even though I now knew most of the time I spent with him I'd really spent with Leon, he'd still tried to save me. Now he was doing a rather convincing impression of Victor, dragging me through the halls against my will while barely saying a word to me. Perhaps he was angry. I didn't exactly blame him for being angry.

I couldn't figure out why Dom tossed me in his father's office or what Miguel wanted, but everything inside me told me it wasn't good. Why else would Dom be acting like this? I didn't even look at my surroundings, I just barreled back towards the doorway where Dom was standing, intent on taking out my feelings of betrayal on his face, when I heard the last voice I wanted to hear.

"Jace..."

I froze, visions of the night before rushing through my head. I wasn't sure if I had just imagined that voice. This wasn't happening. This *couldn't* be happening.

"Jacey..."

A sound escaped me. I wasn't sure if it was a sob or a laugh. I just opened my mouth to speak, and it came out. Perhaps it was the sound of something cracking within me. Dom just stood there, staring daggers at me from the doorway as I slowly started to turn around. "No," was all I could bring myself to say.

Yet there Leon was. He was just as tall and dark and beautiful as he'd been the night before, and I felt my eyes starting to pool with tears. If Miguel knew he was here, he would never let him leave. I didn't understand.

"No, no, no... you can't be here!" I said, shaking my head.

Leon hurried over to me, wrapping his arms around me and holding me as tightly as he possibly could.

"It's okay. It's all going to be okay," he murmured, as I listened to the sound of his heart hammering inside his chest.

“Why didn’t you—” I started, desperate for an explanation. *Why wouldn’t he tell me this was his plan last night?* However, I quickly remembered that Dom and Miguel were watching, and I didn’t know what they knew.

“See! I told you he would show up sooner or later,” Miguel crowed triumphantly from behind his giant desk.

Fuck him. Fuck this. Why after sneaking around all this time was Leon just giving himself over to Miguel?

Leon stepped back from me. I could see nothing pure rage burning behind his eyes as he turned to face Miguel.

“As I said, she’s perfectly fine,” Miguel said, gesturing to me.

“Perfectly fine? You had me stabbed and locked me in a fucking basement!” I protested.

“You know the laws!” Miguel snapped.

It was the first time I’d seen him lose control in front of an audience. The last time his mask slipped was when he had me cornered. If I hadn’t been so full of anger and confusion, it would have been downright terrifying, but fear was one emotion too many, and I didn’t have room for it.

Protectively, Leon took a step in front of me, shielding me from Miguel’s gaze. “If you or anyone else lays another hand on my wife, laws or no laws, I will kill you myself, and believe me, I’ll enjoy it,” Leon growled back at him.

“You have so much of your father in you,” Miguel said, completely unphased by Leon’s threats.

“It’s how much of my mother I have in me that you should be worried about.”

At that, the impossible happened, I saw Miguel pale. He didn’t say a word. Instead, he just stood there, eyes locked on his nephew. The room was heavy with the weight of whatever Leon’s words meant. At this rate, Leon was going to be answering my questions until we were eighty, but I tried as hard as I could not to look as dumbfounded as I felt.

“I believe the two of you have a decision to make,” Miguel finally said, shaking off whatever it was that managed to

frighten him. “Until then, I’ll expect to see you both at the wedding.”

There was a tiny part of me that hoped Leon’s return might have meant that Miguel would give Dom and Caroline more time, but, from the sounds of it, there would be a wedding no matter what. *Poor Taia*. I could only think about what I now knew and how her heart must have been breaking. I wasn’t the one in control, but I couldn’t help but feel like I had betrayed her somehow.

Leon didn’t look at me as he reached for my hand. He and Miguel continued to glare at each other for much longer than I was comfortable with. I shot my gaze toward Dom, a quiet plea for help, but he was still too busy looking at the two of us like some predatory animal ready to pounce.

I squeezed Leon’s hand tightly. Only then did he turn to lead me out of the room.

As we reached the doorway, Dom remained blocking our path. He was postured in a way that almost seemed like he was attempting to appear bigger than he was.

“Move,” Leon said, sounding more annoyed than angry.

When Dom didn’t budge, a strange realization hit me. I didn’t know this version of Dom, at least not well. He’d been kind to me and cared enough about me to risk his life by working with Leon. For that, I was grateful, but while the man in front of me had the same face as the one I’d spent nearly every waking moment with for weeks, it wasn’t him. Worse yet, I had no way to predict what this version of Dom would do.

“*Deixa-os ir,*” *Let them go*, Miguel finally said.

Dom stepped out of the way as slowly as he could. The three of us filed back into the hallway, closing the door to Miguel’s office behind us.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Dom spat out at Leon.

“We cannot talk about this here!” Leon growled under his breath.

I took a step toward Dom, despite my conflicting emotions.

“Why are you so upset? I don’t understand,” I asked as gently as I could.

Dom opened his mouth to answer me, but we both caught a glimpse of Leon making exaggerated gestures to get away from Miguel’s door before we started this discussion.

“At least if you were going to ruin my fucking life, you could have gotten her out first,” Dom hissed. He was too angry to care about being heard.

My heart held a beat as I listened for any stirring behind the heavy wooden door, but there was only silence.

Instinctively, I reached for Dom, but the moment my fingertips hit his arm, he recoiled away from me.

“Fuck this,” he whispered before taking off toward his room.

I watched his form quickly disappear down the hall. I wanted to go after him, but I also needed Leon to explain what the hell was going on.

When I turned back to my best friend, he sighed heavily. “Go,” he said as if he could read my mind.

I looked up at him, wide-eyed and completely confused.

“Are you sure—”

Leon moved toward me, gently reaching out to touch my face. I closed my eyes, savoring the warmth of his touch, a touch until last night I wasn’t sure I’d ever feel again.

“He needs *someone*, and he’s not going to listen to me,” Leon explained.

I spun around in the direction that Dom went, but before I could take my first step, I hesitated and turned back to Leon quickly.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” he said softly.

I held onto those words with everything I had. Knowing very well that if it was my choice to make, I would never let myself be parted from him again.



Thirty-Three

I stood outside the door to Dom's bedroom for a long time. I wasn't sure how he would react to my presence or what I could say to him. He was the man who'd kidnapped me, not the man who'd become my friend. Yet, at the same time, what else could I call someone who was so selflessly willing to put himself and his relationship with his family in jeopardy on my behalf? I wasn't even sure that I really understood why he did it.

Carefully, I knocked and held my breath, waiting for a response.

After a short moment, the door jerked open in front of me.

"*Estás a gozar conmigo?*" *Are you kidding me*, he grumbled.

"Can we talk?" I asked carefully, raising my hands as if to show him I meant no harm.

Dom took a step forward, craning his neck to look down the hallway, and once he was satisfied no one was there, he nodded for me to follow him into his room.

"What do you want, *linda?*" he groaned as I shut the door behind me.

"To make sure you're okay..." I said. It was a weak explanation at best. I wasn't really sure what was motivating me. I did want to make sure he was okay, but I also wanted him

to clarify what was happening. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to understand. There was so much going on in my head.

“I am very far from *okay*.”

“Can I help?”

“Stop that!” Dom snapped at me.

“Stop what? What am I doing?”

“Stop trying to help me! Stop bandaging my wounds! Stop rescuing me from family functions! Stop looking at me with those fucking eyes! Just stop!” he barked, though I could hear him trying to hold back the volume of his voice and the full depth of his anger.

I stared at him, unblinking. I no longer had to ask what this was about. At first, I’d thought it was just about the wedding, but it was clear there was a great deal more than that going on. I nodded slowly, and then, without warning, I walked to the opposite side of the room. Like a child in timeout, I stood in a corner with my face to the wall.

“What are you doing?” Dom demanded more than asked.

“I’m not looking at you, but I’m not going away either.”

“*Linda...*” he sighed.

“I care about you. I know it might be easier to believe that I don’t, but I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” I said into the wall, trying to speak loudly enough that Dom could hear me.

“I know,” he relented.

“I’m sorry about Caroline,” I added.

“It was going to happen sooner or later,” he breathed, sounding defeated.

“Yeah, but it didn’t have to happen today.”

“You can turn around now,” Dom said.

“You told me not to look at you,” I teased. I knew there wasn’t anything I could do to rescue Dom from this situation and that my attempts were only making things worse for him, but I had to try to lighten the mood somehow.

“Turn around, *linda*.”

When I did, Dom was so close to me that I had to take a step away. My back pressed into the wall as his pained dark eyes ripped through me. The lines between Leon and Dom had always been blurry. They looked alike, they both had this instinctive desire to protect me, and even though I knew that Leon had been with me nearly the entire time I was in Brazil, it was hard to separate them. Dom’s closeness was doing me no favors.

“I need you to know something...” Dom started.

I nodded, urging him to go on but trying to maintain what little distance I could.

“Binding for shifters is instinct. They teach us how to keep it in check so we don’t bind to the wrong person, but it’s not supposed to be a choice.”

I furrowed my brows as I looked up at him. I didn’t understand where he was going with this.

“But you’re not choosing...” I said, sounding just as confused as I was.

“Yes, I am. I’m being forced to choose Caroline, but it’s still a choice. If I let instinct take over, I wouldn’t have any say in it at all,” he explained.

“Okay...” I said, waiting for him to get to a point where I understood.

“I just need you to know it would have been you,” Dom said. “If it was instinct alone, it would have been you.”

My heart instantly dropped. The guilt I felt before was only amplified with every word Dom spoke.

He leaned into me, placing his hand on the wall behind my head and lowering his mouth to my ear. “It would have been you, and I would have worshiped you for the rest of my fucking life,” he whispered.

I closed my eyes and took a shaky breath. My first thought was to blame myself. I had led Dom on after all, but I quickly remembered that the person I threw myself at in a desperate

attempt at salvation wasn't the man standing in front of me. The whole thing made my head start to spin.

The truth was, we were only having this conversation because Dom was romanticizing me. I knew he didn't love me. Maybe he thought he did, but he didn't know me. I'd just shown him a kindness he hadn't experienced before, and he developed some kind of attachment. The math all made sense. It didn't make me feel any less guilty, but I could put the pieces together.

"Whether it was choice or instinct. I'm sorry you didn't get to decide for yourself," I said softly.

Dom slowly stepped away from me.

"I am too."

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked, casually moving away from the wall lest I end up in another compromising position.

Dom just nodded, trying his best not to make eye contact with me.

"Why did you go find Leon?"

"I was drunk," Dom said flatly.

"Don't do that," I urged him.

"Do what?"

"Shut off on me."

Dom just looked at me. It was the long, hard stare of someone who had both everything and nothing to say all at once.

"It's all going to shut off as soon as the binding is over anyway,"

"Is that how it works?"

Dom rolled his eyes at me. "Not exactly." I watched him silently weighing whether to say more. "I'll still probably feel whatever the fuck you call this feeling. There's a difference between bonds that are forced and ones that happen naturally but this will dull out. No matter what, being bound to someone is this all-consuming thing. Even if I wanted to feel this way, I don't think I could."

There was some masochistic and perhaps even egotistical part of me that wanted him to explain everything he was feeling, but I held my tongue. I knew hearing it wasn't going to help either of us.

"You still didn't answer my question," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

"What question?"

"Leon."

"It isn't obvious?" Dom groaned.

"Just explain it to me," I countered.

"What do you want to hear, *linda*? Do you want to hear that I felt guilty from the moment I dragged you out of that apartment? Or maybe that every time you fought back against what would easily terrify any woman, I fell? Worse than that, you managed kindness in the face of the literal hell you were being put through. I knew I couldn't have you. I wasn't even sure I really wanted you—you're a fucking handful. But I knew I had to help you. I knew I couldn't let Miguel hurt you, and sooner or later, that is exactly what he's going to do."

I stepped towards Dom, but he immediately took in a sharp breath and quickly backed away.

"Don't," he said, trying to keep me from touching him.

"I just—"

I didn't know what to say or how to say it. I wanted Dom to know how grateful I was, and yet, any words I could come up with didn't begin to scratch the surface.

"*That* is why I'm angry. It's not you or the wedding. It's not even jealousy. It's that you're still here."

"You two didn't plan this?" I said, unable to understand how we went from Leon being Dom to Leon showing up as himself.

Up until the argument that happened outside of Miguel's office, I was sure that Leon and Dom had this all figured out, but it was clear now that I was wrong.

"I knew I had to come back because he obviously couldn't bind himself to Caroline, but I didn't know he was going to

Miguel until he was standing in his office and Miguel ordered me to go get you.”

“Is that why you dragged me kicking and screaming down the halls?” I said, sounding a bit angrier than I intended to.

“I overreacted,” he explained.

“You think?”

“I’m sorry,” Dom said as his gaze dropped to the floor.

“So am I,” I whispered.

“What do you have to be sorry for?”

“Where should I start?” I said with a hollow laugh. “I’m sorry that I didn’t ask for your help when I decided to run, I’m sorry that I stabbed you, I’m sorry that Leon and I put you in a position where you had to go through with this binding sooner than you wanted to because even when he’s pretending to be someone else something inside me always gets pulled in and if I had just kept my distance, Miguel would have never caught us...”

Dom never once looked up at me as I spoke.

“This probably doesn’t help to hear, but I think if humans had some version of a bond, that’s what happened to me when I met Leon. I decided when I was nineteen that I never wanted to be separated from him again, and even when I tried to leave, everything inside of me started screaming for me to go back. It doesn’t matter who he is physically. My heart always knows it’s him. It just took longer than it should have to figure that out.”

“You’re wrong...” Dom finally spoke up.

“About what?”

“It does help to hear,” he said.

“How?”

“I think it would be harder to let you go if I thought there was some chance, no matter how small it might be. But it doesn’t sound like anyone on earth has the ability to come between you.”

I nodded slowly, my eyes wandering to the door. Dom wasn't the one who needed to hear all of this.

"I should probably get back," I said.

Not only did I have a world of things to discuss with Leon, but the later it got, the more likely it was that people were going to start getting ready for the wedding, and the last thing I wanted was someone to find me in Dom's room and report it back to Miguel.

"Yeah, you should..."

I took a deep breath, my eyes meeting Dom's. We took one last look at each other before I turned toward the door.

"Thank you," I said simply.

"For what, *linda*?"

"For saving me."

I would never forget the lengths Dom had gone to protect me.

Dom shook his head. "Thank you," he said back.

"For what?"

"I'm not the only one who did the saving," he responded.

I pressed my lips together and willed my emotions not to get the better of me as I walked away. It wasn't Dom's feelings for me that broke my heart, it was that I was powerless to help him any further. Despite his belief that I somehow saved him, it wasn't enough.



Thirty-Four

When I returned to the apartment, the lights were off. The only light illuminating the space was the sun coming through the courtyard. I found Leon sitting on the couch, though he hardly seemed comfortable. He was leaning forward pensively, with his elbows resting against his knees and his hands covering his face in what looked like frustration. I slowly closed the door behind me, but it wasn't until I stood directly in front of him that he bothered to acknowledge I was there.

"How was that?" Leon asked without looking up at me.

"Hard," was really the only answer to his question.

Leon dropped his hands and slowly looked up at me. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

I took the seat next to him. Clearly neither of us knew what to say to each other. There was so much that we needed to figure out, so many answers I still didn't have, but I didn't have the slightest clue where to begin.

"I guess we should talk," Leon finally said after a silence that seemed to go on forever.

"Do we have to do it here?"

Leon furrowed his brow as he turned to look at me.

“Where would you like to talk about this?” he asked with an edge of sarcasm to his voice.

“Home.”

“You want to wait to talk about this until we’re home? We might—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I don’t want to wait. I just want you to take me home,” I said.

His eyes widened the moment he realized what I was saying. “You want me to—?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

His mouth dropped open a little. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

I knew the significance of what I was asking Leon to do. I stormed out on him when I discovered he changed my reality. Now I was asking him to do it on purpose. My request probably didn’t make any sense to him. But I wasn’t asking him simply because I wanted to see my apartment again. I needed him to know I wanted to accept who and what he was.

“Okay,” Leon said hesitantly. He stood up from the couch and extended a hand for me to take. “Come with me.”

When we reached the bedroom, Leon sighed heavily before turning to me. I could already see in his face that he was still questioning whether I was sure about this.

“Do you need me to do anything?” I asked, feeling a little silly that I had been out of my own reality so many times yet didn’t know the steps it took to get me there.

“Just lay down,” he said.

I did as he said, lowering myself onto the bed and laying flat on my back. Leon kneeled next to me, and we just looked at each other for a long moment. In a way, it was like seeing him for the first time. Not just the parts of him that he wanted me to see but all of him.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered.

“One second,” I said before quickly pushing myself up just enough to collide my lips with his. I felt him smile against my mouth, and before the kiss was over, I was home.

As I stepped away from Leon, my eyes went wide. Every last detail was the same, from the nail still in the wall above the entryway table from a piece of art we took down and never replaced, to the woodsy scent on the plug-ins I insisted on putting in every room. I could feel the tears behind my eyes, threatening to fall as I took it all in.

“I thought I’d never see it again,” I choked out as I walked toward our blue velvet sofa. I ran my fingertips over the fabric. It was hard to believe this wasn’t real. It all looked and felt like our home.

“Fire escape?” Leon asked me.

I smiled and nodded, following him toward the large window that led outside.

Below us was the city, strangers wandering down the street, cars passing. It felt like some beautiful dream, but when I turned to look at Leon’s face, I could see he was struggling with the conversation we were about to have, so instead of expressing my amazement and what he’d managed to create for me, I quietly sat down, crossed my legs and waited for him to do the same.

“Where do you want to start?” I asked once he’d situated himself next to me.

“The baby, I guess...” he said. The tone of his voice and the choice of the word *the* and not *our* echoed loudly in my head. I quickly remembered why this was the part of the conversation I least wanted to have. I took in an unsteady breath. Maybe it was best we dealt with the hardest part first.

“Surprise!” I said teasingly. I knew my sarcasm was ill-timed, but I didn’t know *what* to say.

Leon swiftly turned his head to look at me. I could tell he was trying not to roll his eyes in annoyance.

“It’s too late now to...?”

My heart ached at the question. Leon didn't have to finish the sentence for me to know what he was asking.

"I think so," I said under my breath as I pulled my knees into my chest.

"It's not that I'm asking you to, I'm just—". He was scrambling for the right words.

"I know," I said, cutting him off. I knew Leon well enough to know he'd never ask me to do that. However, I also knew him well enough to know that there was likely some part of him that wanted me to.

Even ten years ago, when we first met, Leon always swore he didn't want children. After seeing what shifters were like first hand, I could hardly blame him. Still, some part of me hoped that finding out he was going to be a father might have changed something inside him. Maybe it didn't work that way. Perhaps our child would always be something he didn't want.

We were both quiet for the longest time. It was a gap that neither of us really knew how to bridge. Suddenly I represented both the things Leon had always wanted and never wanted all at the same time. I didn't know how I expected him to process that. I felt the tears against my cheeks before I knew they were coming. I wasn't even sure why I was crying. I wanted to blame it on out-of-whack hormones or the non-stop trauma I had been enduring since I found out he was a shifter, but I knew there was more to it than that.

I turned my head away, hoping that Leon hadn't noticed, but he immediately reached for me, turning my face back toward him.

"I need you to understand something. If I were... normal, if I couldn't pass on this *thing* or put this kid in danger, I would have a million fucking babies with you, Jacey Lange."

"I do not want to be pregnant a million times," I laughed through the tears streaming down my face.

"My point is, it is not for lack of loving you..." His eyes slowly made their way to my stomach. "Or loving it. It's because I want to protect you both from what I am."

“First of all, let’s start by not calling our baby an it,” I said, hastily wiping the tears from my eyes. “Second of all, from *what you are*? Okay, yes, you have this *thing*... ability... whatever, but that is one very small part of the picture here. You’re also smart and kind and funny and selfless. You got an education, built a life, have a career, and fell in love. Your ability to shift didn’t change any of that. You didn’t become what Miguel is because of the woman that raised you and because that’s not who you wanted to be. Even if we have a son, and even if he can shift, who’s to say we can’t be to him what your mother was to you? And honestly, if he becomes even half the man you are, then I will be proud to have raised your son.”

Leon just sat there staring at me. My eyes searched for him, but I wasn’t sure I was reaching him.

“I wish I could believe that,” he murmured.

My heart sank again, but this time it wasn’t tears that came out of me, it was anger.

“You can’t believe it or you don’t want to?”

“You ran!” Leon snapped back at me. “I told you the one and only thing ever hidden from you, the one thing I had never told *anyone*, the one thing that makes me a fucking monster, and you ran. But you didn’t just run to your sister or your friends. You ran to some other guy!”

It was like I could feel my heart stop beating inside my chest, and the once noisy city below me fell silent to the ringing in my ears.

“How did you—?”

“He showed up at our apartment, Jace! Apparently, you told him you would text him and let him know you were okay, and when you didn’t he came looking for you.”

Oh, Gabe. I hadn’t let myself think about him or the mistake I’d made in turning to him. I’d been too busy fighting to stay alive and to stay sane, but now that mistake was staring me in the face.

“I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have gone there. I just knew that he was real, and I needed to clear my head and figure out

what to do.” I rambled.

“*We* were real! You and me. I know I made a mistake and I will regret deceiving you for the rest of my life, but what we had was real. I wasn’t pretending to be anyone else when you fell in love with me.”

He had a point, and it was one I probably should have realized the moment I walked out the door, but there was no handbook on what to do when you find out the man you’re in love with has supernatural abilities that he was using on you for nearly a year.

“I didn’t sleep with him,” I said, though I doubted Leon would believe that.

“Oh, I know,” Leon spat out.

“How?”

“We had a whole conversation. He’s a nice guy. I can see why you fell for him,” Leon said though the edge in his voice was obvious.

“I didn’t fall for him. I thought maybe I could have, but every time I would get close to him... there was you, and I was still in love with you,” I explained, my eyes cast down at the wrought iron below us.

This was a lot more complicated than I could have imagined. Last night I was so sure we would be okay, and yet, in the cruel light of day, everything between us looked different.

“I’m not sure I can believe that either,” Leon said.

“Yeah, well maybe you should have made that clear before leaving me photos of our baby and calling it *ours* or *sleeping* with me!”

I bit my lip as hard as I could to hold back into another fit of tears.

“Is this over?” I asked, my voice just above a whisper.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

I nodded slowly and quietly moved around him, letting myself back into the apartment. I walked over to the couch in stunned silence, wrapping my arms around myself protectively

as I sat down. I didn't know how to make him understand how much I regretted what I'd done. I also didn't know what to do without him. He was the only thing I was holding on to. The only thing keeping me breathing. The idea of losing him terrified me.

He stayed outside for what felt like ages. I didn't know what to do, so I just sat there, staring at the wall. However, just as I thought to ask him to send me back to reality, he came barreling through the window.

"Why did you come back?" he demanded.

"I saw you."

"What?"

"I'd just found out I was pregnant, and I realized I didn't care what you'd done, I just wanted you back. I was planning on coming home that morning, but I went to bed that night, and I saw you on the phone with your mom. I thought I was dreaming at first, but you were a drunken mess, and you were telling her that something was going to kill you and begging her to make you forget me, *forget us*. It just—it felt so real, and I know you, I know you wouldn't say something like that to be dramatic, so I got scared that something was wrong or coming for you and I got up at four in the morning, packed all my things, scared the hell out of Gabe, and I came home. It wasn't until I got there and saw that you were in the same clothes and the apartment looked exactly the same that I realized what I saw actually happened."

Leon narrowed his eyes at me as if trying to piece together the same puzzle I had been trying to figure out since that night. *How* was I seeing things I wasn't present for?

"Is that all you saw?"

"No," I admitted. "I've been having visions ever since, things from our past mostly, but the night before you told me you had been Dom, I saw him come get you in Manaus, although I thought that one was a dream. I also saw your Mom tell you about what happened to her, which is how I knew how to get out of the house."

“*Eu disse-lhe para não se envolver,*” Leon grumbled more to himself than me.

“Told who not get involved?”

“My mom. She knew you were pregnant when we got to Tavira.”

As soon as Leon said the words, a memory hit me. *Será que ele está a par desse bebé?* Constança had asked me that question in Tavira. I didn’t understand it at the time. She wasn’t asking if I knew Leon didn’t want babies. She was asking if Leon knew about *the* baby.

“So this is her doing?” I asked slowly.

“I can’t think of any other reason you’d be having visions.”

That made sense, it was a vision after all that told me how to get out of the house. It still didn’t explain why I’d had those specific visions, but I didn’t expect that anyone but Constança would know the answer to that question.

“Too bad, I was starting to hope I was secretly a witch,” I said sarcastically.

“It’s something you learn, not something you are,” Leon reminded me.

“Oh good, there’s still time!” I continued. The situation we were in was hardly funny, but sarcasm had always been the language of our friendship, and I didn’t know what else to do. I could have sworn I caught the faintest smile across Leon’s face.

“Do you think we’re ever going to forgive each other?” Leon asked me, avoiding my gaze.

“I already forgive you.”

That was true. I knew that there would always be some part of me that remembered the hurt of what Leon did, but in the grand scheme of things, it just didn’t matter all that much anymore. It was a *really* bad call, but it wasn’t who Leon was. I only wished I’d known that sooner.

“You still have the ring on...” Leon observed.

I looked down at the piece of jewelry on my finger and nodded.

“Why?” he asked.

I shrugged. It felt like the answer to that should have been obvious. “Because I still want you.”

Leon made his way over to me and sat down on the couch next to me.

“Then just promise me you’ll never take off.”

“Are you proposing?” I teased.

“Haven’t I asked enough times?” he laughed.

I had my answer. This wasn’t over. There was still something for me to hope for in all of this, a reason to keep fighting.



Thirty-Five

Returning to my own reality was awful. Physically, it felt like waking up, but emotionally, it was like being ripped from my home all over again. I knew Leon and I couldn't stay in that version of our apartment in New York forever, but my heart still ached for it as I opened my eyes to the pale yellow walls of the tiny bedroom I was in. It wasn't just being returned to the compound that pained me, but the fact that Leon and I had stayed there as long as we possibly could, and the only reason we'd returned was that we had a *wedding* to attend.

I wondered if that was even possible, to stay in some altered version of reality forever. Compared to my current surroundings, it sounded like paradise, but I imagined keeping us there would ultimately take a toll on Leon over time.

We both moved around in uncomfortable silence as we tried to make ourselves look presentable. Neither of us really had much in the way of clothing. Luckily, shifter weddings required all black, which we managed to piece together. I couldn't help but think how fitting it was for a wedding that felt like a funeral.

I started to hear people moving in the hallways again. Their excited voices echoed against the walls as they passed my door. I wasn't surprised when moments later, I heard a timid knock.

Leon and I looked at each other, but as I moved towards the door, he protectively moved in front of me to answer it himself.

Taia stood there staring at the ground. She barely resembled the exuberant and brave girl I first met. She was pale, quiet, and so full of anguish it almost hurt to look at her.

“It’s time,” she mumbled.

I pushed past Leon and wrapped my arms around Taia’s neck.

“Please don’t—” she said, but I didn’t heed her warning, and before I could respond, she buried her head in my shoulder and started sobbing. She cried so hard her entire body shook.

I just held onto Taia tighter, but I was well aware of the confused glances of the people passing by. I pulled her inside, and Leon shut the door behind us.

“You can do this,” I said, pulling back just enough to get her to look at me.

“I can’t,” she croaked out.

“Tai, they can’t see you like this, or they’re going to know something’s up,” I said as I quietly pointed toward a box of tissues, a silent command for Leon to bring them to me.

“People cry at weddings all the time,” she countered, trying to laugh through her tears.

“Yes, but they don’t cry before the wedding even starts.”

I handed Taia a tissue, but just as she started to clean up her face, we all heard the door swing open.

“Come out, little witch,” Victor purred in a voice that made my skin crawl.

Before I could say a word, Leon barrelled towards the door. “We need a minute,” he snarled, blocking Victor from any further view into the apartment.

“Miguel wants you *now*,” I heard Victor argue.

“Then Miguel can come here himself,” Leon said before slamming the door in Victor’s face.

I had to admit, there was something both satisfying and incredibly sexy about the way Leon jumped in to defend me from Miguel's lap dog. If I wasn't so busy keeping Taia together, I would have been all over him.

"It's only going to be a minute before someone else shows up," Leon warned.

"Hey, none of us want to do this, but it will be worse for you *and* Caroline if you don't. I'm right here. Leon is right here. We won't leave you, but you have to go out there."

Taia took in a sharp breath and then nodded her head.

I grabbed her hand tightly and headed for the door with Leon trailing behind us.

As we reached the foyer, I noticed that the entire makeshift family was all in a line that led to the front door. I looked over at Taia in confusion.

"For the procession," she said, pulling me around the line toward where her parents and brother stood.

"I don't think—" I started, trying to protest, but she only continued toward the front of the line.

"We have to. We're his family," she scolded me.

Leon followed us, unwilling to let me leave his sight, but as soon as the group noticed his tall, dark figure following me. They all fell silent.

"You see!" I heard Miguel's booming voice from the other side of the room. "Today is a joyous day! Not only do we bind my son, but Leondro has finally returned to us!"

I stood there, completely frozen, and watched as the muscles in Leon's jaw clenched. The crowd stared as if they were seeing a ghost, murmuring to each other quietly before cheers and applause started ringing out. I wanted to gag.

My attention was pulled back to Taia as she tugged on my arm.

The three of us grabbed candles sitting in a box by the door, and Leon and I fell into line behind Miguel and Estela. I tried not to look at Dom and fixed my gaze on the white prayer

candle in my hand, but I could feel his eyes on me, and when I glanced up, my heart broke a little.

Much like when I started getting dragged to mass every Sunday, I had no idea how a shifter wedding worked. I'd asked Leon for pointers as we got ready, but he wasn't raised by shifters. He was just as in the dark as I was. The only indication I had that the ceremony was beginning was Dom lighting his candle. He passed the flame to Miguel, who passed it to Estela, from Estela it went to Taia, then me, then Leon, and on back through the line until every candle in the room was lit. I had to admit the sight was captivating.

Just as I started to wonder how the front of the line would know that the back of the line was finished, a humming started. It was quiet at first and then slowly started building as more and more people joined in. I didn't know the song, or where it came from but it felt old, much older than anyone in that room.

Slowly the procession started moving forward, everyone in black, lit only by candlelight, away from the house and toward the dense jungle. It was somehow hypnotic, beautiful, and terrifying all at once. I placed an arm around Taia's shoulder, reminding her I was there. Leon kept a hand firmly against the small of my back, no doubt to remind me of the same.

Eventually, we came to a clearing lit by a roaring fire. Caroline stood there wearing a gray and black tulle gown that somehow resembled the way smoke swallowed shifters as they turned into someone else. She looked absolutely breathtaking, and though she was smiling, she somehow still managed to look miserable. Around her, in a semicircle, were what I had to guess were the few members of her family who could manage to get here on such short notice. There were only five people in total, all of them with similar features to Caroline, sandy brown hair, and freckled faces. Compared to the sea of people behind Dom, her family seemed minuscule. It was sad that she wasn't able to have her own procession of people leading her toward the next chapter of her life

Dom, Miguel, and an elderly man I could not remember having seen before joined Caroline while everyone else gathered around, completing the circle around the fire that Caroline's family started.

“Who is that?” I whispered to Taia, but both she and Leon spoke at the same time.

“My grandfather.”

Now Leon was the one who looked like he’d seen a ghost.

The longer I stared at the frail man, the more I could see the resemblance, but I had no way of knowing why the sight of him seemed to affect Leon so much. Yet another question about these people and this place I had no answer to.

Miguel raised his hands to silence the crowd. Then someone stepped forward with an ornate-looking wine glass. The color of the liquid inside it was a revolting shade of brown as if someone had filled the glass with swamp water. I watched Leon’s grandfather take the glass from Miguel and hand it to Dom.

“Para que não sejas outra pessoa senão tu.”

“So you may wear no face but your own,” Miguel translated for the crowd.

Dom looked down into the glass, his lip curling slightly before he took a deep breath and tossed it back. Instantly he began coughing and retching as he doubled over in pain. As his face started to turn red, I turned to Leon. His eyes were the size of saucers as he stared at his cousin, the sounds of Dom’s heaving were the only thing filling the silence around us.

I desperately wanted to stop it, but I didn’t even know what *it* was. I just knew that Dom was in pain. I wanted to question what they’d given him or why it was making him sick, but the only person who could tell me was Tai, and as far as she knew, I’d grown up with ceremonies like this.

I bit the inside of my cheek so hard I thought I might bleed, but it was the only thing I could do to stop myself from reacting.

After several minutes the terrible sound that Dom was making stopped, and he stood up slowly. The way he looked was...wrong. It was like Dom wasn’t in there anymore. His eyes were glazed over, and he seemed unsteady on his feet. Instinctively, I took a step forward, and at that exact moment, I could have sworn Dom took his own step toward me. I didn’t know what I was thinking, but before I could say or do

something I would regret, Leon grabbed my wrist, pulling me back toward him and wrapping his arm tightly around me. At that moment, Miguel grabbed his son by the shoulders and turned him to face Caroline.

Leon's grandfather croaked out a long stream of words I couldn't seem to put together. I wasn't sure if it was my distance from him, the volume at which he spoke, or the fact that I was too distracted by the strangeness of the ceremony to focus on my translation skills.

"Friends, family. We stand together today where flesh and magic meet. We come to bind two souls together so that our kind may multiply." Miguel announced.

Dom, still unsteady on his feet, just stared at Caroline, oblivious to anything else around him. I was grateful to her as I watched her take his arm to steady him. It didn't appear to be a part of the ceremony, just kindness. I knew the two of them would never love each other, but perhaps being kind to each other would be enough.

Leon's grandfather spoke again, followed by Miguel.

"In this circle, we bind you. Bound by those you know, those you love, your ancestors before you, the god who created you, and the power within you."

The circle began joining hands. Leon loosened his grip on me so I could step back. I took both his and Taia's hand, but I couldn't help but notice her vice-like grip. I could only imagine what she was going through. There she was, watching the woman she loved not only marry someone else but marry her own brother.

Tears started to roll down both Dom and Caroline's faces, and Dom grabbed onto the back of Caroline's head, pressing his forehead into hers. If I wasn't aware of all the heartbreak behind what was going on in front of me, it would have almost been beautiful.

"Your soul is no longer your own. It belongs to another. Where they go, so must you follow for as long as you both shall live."

I felt like I needed an entire textbook on how this worked, but I watched Caroline whisper something to Dom. He mouthed the word, “okay.” and suddenly it was like someone kicked his legs out from under him. He dropped to his knees and the circle around them began cheering, but Leon, Taia, and I all stood staring—horrified and perfectly still. Each of us had our reasons, but none of us could celebrate.

Just like that, it was over. Two of Miguel’s men hauled a still-reeling Dom away while a similar procession led Caroline out of the forest.

We lingered behind, moving slowly, each of us unable to speak.



Thirty-Six

The back of the house was filled with dark linens and candlelight. In any other situation, I would have thought it was stunning, but I was too exhausted and emotional to admire the decor. The idea of disappearing back to the apartment crossed my mind, but I had to see that Dom was okay. When Leon, Taia, and I arrived, he was nowhere to be found. Caroline was across the yard, holding court amongst the dozens of people coming to congratulate her. Miguel and Estela sat at the head of the table as always, the rest of the compound laughing and drinking, and the three of us—dragging ourselves to seats at a table we didn't want to be at.

Eventually, everyone sat down, but the seat next to Caroline remained empty. My mind shut off as Miguel stood up and gave another one of his speeches. I didn't know what he said. I didn't care. I don't even think I looked up from my plate. I was starting to believe that the numbness I felt in moments like these was a safety blanket. That I should be grateful for it. It showed up when feeling anything more would result in panic.

While I maintained a staring contest with the flatware, Leon's attention kept moving back to the elderly man at the opposite end of the table. I'd pieced together that the man was Miguel's father, but I had so many questions. Why was Leon so transfixed with him? Why was this the first time I'd seen him? And why, despite clearly being family, was he situated so far

away from everyone else? I was yet again in the frustrating position of having a head full of questions and being completely unable to ask them.

I had no appetite. Instead, I pushed chicken and vegetables around my plate periodically, hoping no one was paying attention.

“Jacey?” I heard Caroline say.

I shook my head and looked up at the group, unsure where the conversation had gone. I had been so checked out that it could have been seconds or hours since the last time I looked up from my plate.

“My parents were asking what your binding ceremony was like...” Caroline said.

My pulse instantly started racing as half the table looked on, expecting me to tell them about a wedding that never actually happened. “It’s a funny story actually...”

“We didn’t have one,” Leon said with a shrug.

Suddenly it was like you could hear a pin drop. Everyone was radio silent as they waited for some explanation.

“What he means is—” I started trying to backpedal, but I didn’t know how to fix this.

“We were supposed to, but I wasn’t raised by shifters, so I didn’t know how to keep it from happening on its own. Hell, I didn’t even know it could happen on its own. We weren’t even twenty-one yet, but we convinced a friend to buy us blue raspberry vodka and proceeded to get completely wasted. Jacey fell asleep next to me. I took one look at her, and... it just happened. I was hers.”

The table continued to look at us in absolute silence, but my attention was solely on Leon. There was something about his story that seemed *too* real to have been made up. Maybe it was the fact that we had, in college, gotten completely wasted on UV vodka and fallen asleep in my dorm room, but something about it echoed around in my head.

No one said a word until an accent much heavier than Caroline’s rang out from across the table.

“Oh my God!” her mother said, placing her hand over her heart. “That might be the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard!”

Leon turned his head to look at me. “I guess I was just too in love with her to wait,” he said.

My heart sank. I hated myself for leaving him, for thinking, even for a second, that I could love someone else. I knew that Leon and I weren’t out of the woods. We’d both hurt each other too badly for me to think that one conversation could fix it, but I promised myself I *would* fix it. Come hell or high water, no matter how many people he turned himself into, underneath it all, he was it for me.

“What did your parents have to say about that?” Miguel asked, his face unreadable as always.

“Well, they weren’t happy,” Leon said with a laugh, and the rest of the table joined him.

“But eventually, my dad figured we were going to be bound anyway. At least he didn’t have to pay for a wedding,” I added, knowing very well that if Leon’s story had been true, that’s exactly how my dad would feel. Thankfully, the crowd found that amusing as well, and echoes of laughter made their way down the length of the table.

Luckily, the conversation didn’t return to us, though I had every intention of asking Leon about his little story as soon as we were alone. After dinner, there was more drinking and dancing and men smoking cigars by the gazebo. If I didn’t know that half the people in attendance could make themselves look like completely different human beings at any given second, it would have looked and felt like any other backyard wedding.

“I have to go talk to him,” Leon said abruptly, pushing himself away from the table.

I instantly knew who he was talking about and looked down the length of the table at his grandfather.

“Do you want me to come with you?” I asked.

Leon nodded. I followed him out of his seat and toward the far end of the table, where his grandfather sat quietly watching the dancing and laughing of the crowd.

“*Sabes quem eu sou?*” *Do you know who I am?* Leon asked as he knelt down in front of his grandfather.

The man paused, his tiny eyes scanning Leon’s face before they widened, and a thin-lipped smile formed on his wrinkled face.

“*O filho da Constança? O que é que estás a fazer aqui?*” *Constança’s son? What are you doing here?*

I wondered why the man called him Constança’s son and not Matheo’s. Matheo was *his* son, after all.

“*É uma longa história,*” *It’s a long story,* Leon breathed, and I watched tears starting to form in those beautiful amber eyes of his.

“*Mas ela está bem? Está em segurança?*” *But she’s alright? She’s safe?*

“*Sim. Graças a ti.*” *Yes. Thanks to you.*

I was still struggling to understand, but I could tell whatever moment Leon was having with this man was too important for me to interrupt with my questions.

“*Quem fala?*” *Who is this?* Leon’s grandfather asked, nodding his head in my direction.

“*A minha mulher, Jacey.*” *My wife, Jacey.*

I’d only heard Leon call me his wife once before, and I knew he was only doing it because I’d allowed his family to think that’s what I was, but I doubted the sound of it would ever get old to me.

“Jace, this is my grandfather, Teodoro,” Leon said.

I smiled immediately. The conversation Leon and I had when I picked that exact name out of a list of Portuguese boy names online for our hypothetical adopted son flooded back to me immediately.

Leon’s grandfather gestured for me to come closer, so I knelt next to Leon in front of him.

“*É um prazer conhecê-la.*” *It’s so nice to meet you,* I said.

The man narrowed his brown eyes on my face as if trying to figure something out before turning to Leon “*Bruxa?*” *Witch?* He asked as he turned to look at Leon.

I paused. I wasn’t sure if this man was asking because he sensed something about me, if was merely assuming that I was like Leon’s mother, or if perhaps he’d just heard Victor insist I was one.

“*Metamorfo,*” Leon responded. I’d never heard the word before, but I had to assume it meant shifter.

The man turned to look at me again, holding my gaze for a long moment, and then shook his head no. “*Bruxa,*” he repeated.

Leon and I exchanged confused looks.

“Can you give us a minute?” he asked me.

I nodded and once again left with more questions than answers. *Bruxa*. When Victor was the only one spouting it, it seemed crazy, but now... was I a witch? Leon insisted that it was just a skill set, not something you were born with. Yet I couldn’t ignore that my visions hadn’t subsided even after Constança had driven Leon and me back together. That had to mean something, right? I tried to think back.

I had a pretty normal childhood. I did always seem to know what Elise was thinking when we were kids, but twin telepathy was hardly paranormal. I also had a fascination with Wicca in high school, but so did plenty of bored, suburban teens. I couldn’t forget my Grandma Marie, who always just *knew* things. She’d walk into a room and say something like, “Your uncle is going to call”, and sure enough, 30 minutes later, he’d be on the phone. I shook my head. These were all vaguely witchy things, but it wasn’t like I was making objects move with my mind or sending people into alternate realities.

I shook off my confusion and decided instead to focus my energy on looking for Dom, but he was nowhere to be found. I tried to tell myself that his absence was normal. After all, no one else seemed to be concerned about him. In fact, everyone seemed to be having a great time, so I had to believe that this was another tradition I didn’t understand. I thought to check on Taia instead, but when I eventually found her, she wasn’t alone.

She and Caroline sat next to each other at the nearly empty table. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but it was the first time I'd seen Taia smile all night. It was probably too optimistic for me to hope they would somehow find a way to be together despite the insurmountable odds against them. Caroline was now someone else's wife, but as sappy as it was, I wanted to believe that love would somehow win out.

I stood alone, watching the compound dancing around the yard with drunken abandon. It was baffling to me that they could all be so happy in a place this dark, but I reminded myself that to them, there was nothing dark about it. This was their home, Miguel was their leader, his son had just gotten married, and the son of their former leader had returned to them. They had no reason to be anything but joyous. It wasn't really that I couldn't understand it. It was more that I wished I had something of my own to be joyous about. Sure, Leon was finally there with me, but I was no closer to getting out of Brazil, and I worried that his presence would only make Miguel double down in his attempts to keep us there.

Despite my racing thoughts, a smile slowly formed on my face. I felt Leon before I knew he was there.

"Dance with me," he whispered against the shell of my ear, his arms snaking around my waist.

I turned my head just enough to face him. "You just want to pretend to be happy?"

"No," he said, taking my hand and pulling me toward the group. "I want to *be* happy. I want ten minutes where you're the only thing in the world, and I don't have to think about this mess we're in."

I smiled. How could I argue with that?

For a long while, Leon and I bounced around with the same reckless abandon as the rest of the group. We didn't know any of the songs or what on earth we were celebrating. This whole wedding was a dumpster fire, but in those fleeting moments, we were, in fact, happy.

Eventually, a slow song started, and I wrapped my arms lazily around Leon's neck.

“So you want to tell me what that was about?” I asked, nodding my head toward the tiny old man watching with perfect stillness while everything else moved so quickly around him.

“After my Mom found out she was pregnant, Matheo proposed to her, or really, he just demanded that she marry him. My Mom was having none of it and refused. She’d already figured out what he was, and she wanted no part in it. He wasn’t going to take no for an answer, and Miguel was already living here with Estela and my grandfather, so he drugged and kidnapped her.”

“Sounds like a family trait,” I said, rolling my eyes. It wasn’t lost on me that all these years later, I had been kidnapped because I was pregnant with Matheo’s grandchild.

“I think they were ultimately pretty terrified of her, and so they kept her locked up in that apartment with the intention of killing her after I was born. When my grandfather found out what they were planning, he helped her escape. We thought he passed away years ago.”

“I thought you said she had to convince them to let her keep you?” I questioned, remembering the way he explained it to me in Tavira.

“They didn’t stop coming after her after I was born or even after Matheo died, so she made a deal with them. She just ran before they could come to collect on it.”

I glanced back at Teodoro and couldn’t help but think of all the things that would have been different if he hadn’t chosen to intervene. Leon and I would have never met, our child would have never existed, Constança wouldn’t even be alive, and whatever version there would have been of Leon would have likely been just like Miguel and Matheo. The thought made me pull myself closer to Leon, as if holding on tighter might banish from my mind the idea of a world where I had never known him.

“I pieced together she’d been here I just... didn’t realize...”

“Can I cut in?” I unexpectedly heard from behind me.

Leon and I stopped dancing, and I whipped my head around. The face staring back at me instantly brought a smile to my

face. I didn't know what I believed might have happened to Dom, but I was relieved to see him standing there in one piece.

"Your wife won't mind?" I asked teasingly, although the word wife felt like marbles in my mouth.

"We both know she doesn't care," Dom said softly.

I looked over my shoulder at Leon but he didn't seem to hesitate at all as he wandered back to the table.

I took the hand that Dom extended to me, and slowly we began swaying to the music, though I was careful to keep enough distance from him that we wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

"What did they give you?" I asked, wondering what he drank during the ceremony that made him double over like that.

"It's meant to make you sick. You can't change faces or hold a change when you're in pain, so they make you sick to prove you aren't someone else," he explained.

"That's why Leon..." I said as I realized that Leon had to show up because had he been the one to go into the binding, the whole compound would have found out. Not to mention that even if, for some reason, he was strong enough to withstand whatever was in that disgusting concoction, he would have ended up bound to Caroline.

"I tried to get him to just swap back with me and stay in Manaus, but after Victor showed up in your room, he wouldn't listen to reason," Dom explained.

Suddenly, the last 48 hours snapped into focus. I didn't understand why Leon was willing to give himself up, but I realized that it was an attempt to protect me, even if it would make getting out that much harder. It was the same thing Leon had been doing the entire time I'd known him.

"How does it feel?" I asked after a long moment of silence.

"It's not what I expected," he said. I wasn't sure if he was being intentionally vague or if he simply didn't know how to describe what being magically tied to another person was like.

"What do you mean?" I pressed.

I watched as his gaze moved to Caroline, still sitting at the table with his sister.

“I thought it would be like being in love—like what my parents have, but their bond was natural, they chose each other. This is different, it’s more like this overwhelming need to make sure she’s okay. That she’s safe. That she’s happy,” he explained.

I let out a small laugh, though I didn’t mean to.

“I thought you didn’t know what being in love was like,” I said skeptically.

Dom turned his face back toward me. The look in his eyes sent my heart plummeting right into my stomach.

“I didn’t then,” he said.



Thirty-Seven

It was well past one in the morning when Leon and I finally dragged ourselves back to the apartment. The celebration was endless, and every time we'd try to escape, someone would grab one or the other of us and insist we participate in yet another wedding activity. It felt like the whole thing had gone on for days.

When we finally reached the apartment, the silence was staggering. It rang in my ears, as did all the things that felt unsaid between Leon and me. I thought I would be so exhausted I would immediately crash into bed, but instead, I was wired.

There were too many questions I needed answers to, and even though, physically speaking, I was dead on my feet, my mind was on an all too familiar roller coaster ride.

"Well, you made it through your first shifter wedding..." Leon said as we both shuffled toward the bedroom.

"So did you!" I laughed, as I let myself collapse onto the bed.

"Hopefully, it's our last," Leon sighed. He started moving around the room, undressing. My focus shifted from the ceiling above me to the half dressed man pacing around the room. My eyes moved over every inch of him, eventually settling on that

classically handsome face and the overwhelmed expression on it.

Once he changed clothes, Leon laid down next to me. Despite being all over each other the night before, there was a tension between us that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Maybe it was the experience of watching Dom and Caroline literally being forced to marry one another, or perhaps it was the conversation we'd had about the baby and Gabe, but the heaviness did nothing to calm my racing thoughts.

"Where did that story come from?" I questioned, seemingly out of the clear blue sky.

"What story?" he asked, turning his head to face me.

"Blue raspberry vodka," I reminded him.

"You don't remember—"

"I remember, but I'm talking about the rest of it."

"I just made it up," he said with a shrug. "I figured using something that actually happened was—"

"Leon."

He stopped speaking immediately.

"Where did it come from?" I asked again, giving him the opportunity to tell me the truth one more time.

"It's not important," he muttered, fixing his gaze back on the ceiling.

I still hadn't learned when to let things go, so I reached for his chin, urging him to look at me.

"If we're going to do this, you have to stop keeping secrets from me," I said, trying to keep the edge of hurt out of my voice.

Leon closed his eyes and took in a deep breath before he responded.

"I'm not trying to keep secrets from you... I just don't want —"

"Don't want what?"

“To scare you away again,” he admitted softly.

The words stung, but I understood why he was scared. The last time he opened up to me, I ran. I wasn't sure that I could be blamed for the way I reacted, but I also couldn't blame him for being fearful that it would happen again.

“Okay, I get that. If the tables were turned, I would be scared too, but I have been kidnapped, threatened, imprisoned, harassed, and even stabbed, and the *only* way I can prevent any of that from happening again is to get as far away from you as I possibly can. Yet here I am. I don't want out, if anything, I'm begging you to let me further in. If that isn't proof I'm not going to run again, I don't know what is.”

His eyes searched mine. I watched the wheels turn behind them as he tried to decide if he could trust what I was saying. The fact that he even had to question it gutted me, but I didn't look away.

“Okay,” Leon finally sighed. “I didn't make it up.”

I paused for a minute, trying to work out what he meant. “You're telling me that...”

“I... accidentally bound myself to you a few months after we met,” he clarified.

“What?!”

“No one taught me how to control it or even told me what it was. We were drunk, and you fell asleep, and I looked over at you, and it was like the same time I admitted to myself I was in love with you, something just snapped inside me. I thought maybe I was just so drunk I was imagining things. It wasn't until later that I realized what happened.”

“How did you—”

“You remember that first winter break when I just showed up at the house?”

“Yeah...” I said slowly, trying to follow where he was going. I'd thought about that break so many times. I even told EJ about it while we were stuck in the basement, but I had no idea it was significant.

“I told you my mom didn’t make it in from Portugal, but she did. It’s just that as soon as we were separated, I started losing it. She put two and two together and figured out what happened.”

“But I thought witchcraft could undo a binding,” I said.

A smirk crossed Leon’s face. He seemed impressed that I remembered that particular fact or maybe just surprised that I was now talking about the supernatural like it was an everyday occurrence. A year ago, if someone told me that I would even be having this conversation, I would have thought they needed to have their head checked, now I didn’t bat an eye at witches, shapeshifters, and unseen magical binds.

“She offered. I said no.”

My mouth dropped open a little, and I stared at Leon in disbelief. “Why would you say no?”

“I don’t know. I think I just wanted to believe that if it happened, it happened for a reason,” he said, though I suspected there was a bit more to it than that.

“So you just signed up to let your feelings for me torture you?”

“Kind of,” he said with an empty laugh. “If you haven’t noticed, letting my feelings for you torture me is kind of my brand,” he added sarcastically. “I couldn’t stay away from you for weeks, it hurt too much, so I just showed up on your doorstep and hoped your parents would take pity on me,” he finished.

I nodded as I tried to process the fact that there was so much more behind that memory than I knew. Suddenly, another memory came flooding back to me.

“That’s why you were on the phone with your mom the night I came home,” I realized.

“Yeah...” he said, his eyes making their way to the wall behind me.

“You were talking about the bond. You said it was going to kill you.”

“It wouldn’t have, not literally, but that’s what it feels like...” he murmured.

“I don’t understand. Why would she say no when she offered to do it before?”

“She was trying to protect the baby, I think. She probably thought keeping the bond in place might bring us back together. She also asked me dozens of times over the years, and I’ve always told her no, so she didn’t exactly believe me when I said that’s what I wanted.”

“Wait, what about when I was with Brian?” I asked.

“It doesn’t require me to be in a relationship with you. It’s just this internal drive to be near you, to protect you. I could still do that. You being with Brian hurt for other reasons but not because I was bound to you.”

My mind raced around, trying to take everything in. The room was silent. The only sound was the echoing of the reception continuing far off in the distance. At every turn, I seemed to be confronted with the fact that I didn’t know what was going on right in front of me.

“What are you thinking?” Leon finally dared to ask me after I had been quiet for too long.

I propped myself up on one elbow as I peered down at him.

“That it’s kind of funny that I’ve technically been telling the truth this whole time,” I said, shaking my head. Leon’s gaze was full of questions. “By shifter standards, you *are* my husband,” I said with a laugh.

Leon chuckled a little though the worried expression on his face hadn’t softened.

“I’m glad she didn’t do it,” I said.

“You are?”

“This whole situation is insane. The fact that people can turn into other people and your mother can do literal magic is crazy. But if you’re telling me that something inside of you knew that we were supposed to be together before I did, that doesn’t exactly surprise me. Literally, everyone we’ve ever met knew we were supposed to be together before I did.”

This time the laugh that came out of him was genuine and full of relief.

I looked down at my ring for a moment. “You asked me to never take this off again...”

“I meant it,” he said softly.

“Then I want you to promise me you’ll keep the bond.”

Leon tilted his head to the side. He seemed so confused by the words I was saying. It was as if I was suddenly speaking French.

“And what if you decide you can’t do this?” he asked me.

I knew the question was coming. I also knew that there was nothing I could say that would completely alleviate that fear for him. It would probably be a long time before he stopped looking over his shoulder to make sure I was still there. I knew that was my fault, but I also knew carrying around the guilt of it wasn’t going to serve me. The only thing I could do now was rebuild.

“It’s the same promise. I keep the ring. You keep the bond. We don’t give up on each other.”

I wanted Leon to say yes, but I could see the war raging behind his eyes as he looked at me.

“Jace, I don’t think you know what you’re saying...” he breathed.

“What don’t I know? That being with you could get me killed? That your family is a bunch of crazy misogynists with weapons who want to keep us here against our will?” I said, listing off the issues at hand as if they were nothing more than minor inconveniences.

“It’s more that, even if we—”

“Stop,” I said, reaching up to grab Leon’s face and force him to look at me again. “I do not care,” I asserted.

“But—”

“I told you in Tavira that there was nothing you could tell me that would make me stop loving you. I wasn’t lying, Leon. I don’t care who or what comes at us as long as there’s an us to protect.”

“And Gabe?”

I still tried to avoid thoughts of Gabe or how much I must have hurt him. I hadn't been fair to him any more than I had Leon, I knew that, but I could only atone for that once I got out of this mess. Until then, it was easier not to think of it.

“Is an incredible human being who cares about me a lot more than I've earned, but he deserves someone who can be whole to him. He deserves to be the absolute love of someone's life, and you are already the love of mine.”

The hesitation on Leon's face finally seemed to clear, though something else crossed his face as he stared back at me.

“Can I ask you a question you're probably going to hate?”

I nodded slowly. Though his constant doubt was starting to weigh on me. He was justified, and if I had to fight his doubts for the rest of my life, I would, but that didn't mean it was an easy pill to swallow.

“Is it me or the baby?”

“What do you mean?”

“You've just changed so much, and you're sitting here telling me everything I've ever wanted to hear, but I can't help but wonder—“

“If it's because you're the father of my child and not because you're you?”

“Something like that,” he said.

“You,” I assured him. “I don't need you to have this baby. In fact, I was prepared to do it on my own if I had to. Hell, Gabe even offered to help me raise it,” I admitted.

A low growl of disapproval was Leon's only response.

I pushed him playfully. “My point is that none of this is because I have some delusion of us being a perfect family. It's because I love you, and sooner or later, I'm going to make you stop doubting that.”

“How about now?” he asked me.

I swear my breathing stopped.

“Are you saying...”

“You keep the ring. I’ll keep the bond.”



Thirty-Eight

It almost seemed like a punishment when the next morning, Leon and I woke to the sound of pounding on the door. I was so exhausted that the persistent sound immediately caused a headache. I sighed heavily and started to get out of bed, but Leon grabbed my arm.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said with a sleepy half-smirk before throwing the cream-colored duvet off himself, and heading for the living room.

I’d been on my own long enough, I’d almost forgotten what being with Leon was like. His first instinct was always to protect me. That made sense now that I knew about the bond, but the truth was he started protecting me the moment we met. We weren’t out of the woods yet, but being near him made me feel truly safe for the first time in weeks.

“I am really tired of this. What the fuck do you want?” I heard Leon snap from the living room.

“They don’t usually let whores in church, but Miguel seems to think your wife should be there,” Victor said with a laugh that reminded me of a buzzard.

I threw the covers off myself and dashed into the living room, sure that Victor’s words would be met with Leon’s fists.

I got there just in time to watch my fiancé shove Victor with enough force that he stumbled back into the hall and hit the wall behind him with a loud crash.

“Leon!” I called after him. There was a very real part of me that didn’t want to stop him, but I learned the hard way about the reason why shifters couldn’t hurt each other, and I knew if I let Leon beat Victor to a bloody pulp, it would only give Victor license to do the same.

Neither man even glanced in my direction. Instead, Leon had Victor pinned against the wall. I wasn’t entirely sure who would win if it came down to it. While they were similar in height and build, I got the sense that Victor got into physical altercations often and I’d never actually seen Leon come to blows with anyone. He’d been close a few times but nothing like this.

“Call her that again, and I will rip your fucking throat out,” Leon growled.

I could only see so much of Victor’s hard, normally expressionless face, but I watched it twist into a predatory smile.

“What else do you call a married woman who’s been sleeping with her husband’s cousin?”

I clamped my eyes shut, sure that the next thing I would hear was the sound of Leon’s fist connecting with Victor’s face. However, when I opened them, Leon was shoving Victor further down the hall and away from the door.

“Stay the hell away from my family,” he said before turning back toward the door and slamming it shut.

I stood there watching Leon as he leaned back against the front door, trying to regain some form of composure.

“Your family?” I said, not trying particularly hard to hide the smile forming on my face.

I knew there was nothing I could do to change Leon’s feelings about having children. I didn’t plan to try. After seeing firsthand what his family was like, it seemed completely justified. However, once in a while, he would say or do something that made me think he might come around to the idea.

“Is there something else you’d like me to call you?” Leon said with a smirk.

“If Jacey doesn’t work, you could try...love of my life, goddess of my idolatry...”

“Goddess of my idolatry?” Leon asked with a laugh.

“If it’s good enough for Shakespeare, it’s good enough for Leondro Acosta.”

“And what should I call our daughter?”

“Our daughter?” I jerked my head back slightly at the sound of that. This was the first time anyone had referred to our child as a daughter. At every possible turn, I was being told I was having a son like it was a matter of fact.

“Wishful thinking.”

I’d heard so many people I knew say the only thing they cared about when it came to their pregnancy was that the baby was healthy. Yet there we were, hoping that our baby was a girl so that there was no way she had a magical gene that would make her capable of turning into other people at the age of ten. I shook the thought out of my head and tried to stay present with Leon. This was the first conversation we’d had since he showed up that wasn’t heavy or difficult.

“You’re going to have to take the lead on this one. I don’t have a phone to look up Portuguese girl names,” I said teasingly.

“You’re letting me name our baby?” Leon said with a pretend look of shock on his face.

“I’m letting you make suggestions,” I corrected him.

“Andréia,” he said with a suspicious lack of consideration. Almost as if he’d thought of it before.

“Any reason why?” I asked.

Leon came toward me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me closer.

“It means brave,” he whispered.

An hour later we were sitting in the splintering wooden pews of that all-too-familiar church. I promised myself that as soon as we found a way out of Brazil, I would never sit through another painfully boring mass as long as I lived.

The service seemed like it was never-ending. It certainly didn't help that I only understood a handful of words the priest said or that Victor kept staring at the two of us like a snake ready to strike. I thought Leon's presence might be enough to deter him from his predatory behavior, but it was only getting worse. There seemed to be nothing that was going to stop him.

I sat as close as I could to Leon. I had gone toe to toe with Victor on more than one occasion. I wasn't afraid of him, but something felt like it was brewing again and being close to Leon was the only sense of safety I had.

While I never really knew what was being said up at the pulpit, I'd been to enough masses to know what to watch for to signify the end of the service, so when the priest started to give concluding rites, I breathed a sigh of relief.

I kept myself glued to Leon's side as we followed the rest of the compound out of the chapel and down to the patch of dirt where the fleet of black town cars dutifully waited to take us back to the prison masquerading as an opulent house.

I felt relief for the first time in hours until Leon unexpectedly let go of my hand. I followed the direction of his gaze to find Dom attempting to signal Leon toward him from several feet away.

"Give me a second," Leon said to me, and I watched as he headed toward Dom.

Leon hadn't even made it ten feet away when I felt a rough hand grab me and yank me in the opposite direction. I had eyes on both Dom and Leon, which meant...

"Get the fuck off me!" I yelled as I snapped my head around to find Victor yanking me toward him.

He had to have lost his mind. Not only was his wife present, but so were Leon and Estela. He was like some kind of feral

animal that had finally lost its mind to rabies. I yanked hard against him, but before another expletive could leave my mouth, Leon was charging back in my direction. This time he didn't hesitate, and his fist immediately made contact with Victor's face. The sound was a heavy thud, followed by Victor stumbling backward.

I expected someone to jump in or stop the two of them, but the compound just gathered around like the fight was some kind of spectacle.

“That's it! I knew Matheo was in there somewhere.”

That set Leon off, and he punched Victor again and again. The two of them start pushing, shoving, and hitting each other repeatedly like it was some kind of schoolyard brawl.

When it was clear no one was going to intervene, I started toward the two of them, but I caught a glimpse of Miguel just as he made some sort of hand gesture, and quickly one of his men dove for me before I could get in the middle of things.

The whole thing felt like it was in slow motion. I watched Estela say something to her husband, but he simply shook his head, and the fight continued.

Victor landed a punch of his own to the side of Leon's face, and I had to look away as he stumbled back in pain. Victor, however, gave Leon no moment to recover. Before I knew what was happening, he'd somehow gotten Leon to the ground, and was hitting him relentlessly.

I desperately looked at Dom from across the circle that had formed. “Help,” I mouthed at him. Knowing he was the only one who would.

Dom looked at me for a long moment as if considering his options, but ultimately he shook his head in frustration, and rushed into the middle of the crowd, pulling Victor back.

“*Já chega!*” *Enough!* He yelled at the two of them.

Victor swung around to face Dom before shoving him back several steps.

“*Não te metas nisto!*” *Stay out of this!* Victor shouted back at him.

Dom stepped around Victor and started to help Leon out of the dirt. Victor, however, had no interest in letting that happen and shoved Dom back again.

“This again? What the hell is wrong with you? *We* are your family,” Victor continued.

The man holding me back was so focused on what was going on that I managed to slip out of his grasp and get to Leon. I knelt down next to him. He was pretty banged up, but thankfully, nothing seemed like a serious injury.

“We don’t need to do this here,” Dom said, trying to reason with him.

I slowly started to help Leon to his feet as best I could.

“You’re only doing this because you’ve been obsessed with that bitch since we sent you to her,” Victor barked out.

I froze. *Sent him to me.* I quickly looked to Dom for some kind of explanation, but he looked more shocked than I did.

“What is he talking about?” I finally spoke up.

“Nothing, he’s cra—”

“Did you really think that we didn’t know, little witch?” Victor said, a smile crossing his bloodied face.

“Know what?”

For the first time since the fight started, Victor seemed to be aware of the people surrounding us. He took a step toward me, but Leon stepped in front of me, blocking his path.

“You and Domingos. All the sneaking around. Do you think we didn’t know about it? We sent him to you so we knew what we were dealing with. Miguel only made him bind because he was acting like a lovesick puppy,” he hissed.

I narrowed my gaze on Dom. I couldn’t work out what that meant or what Dom had told them, but he lied to me. That much was clear.

Finally, Miguel spoke up.

“*Isto acabou,*” *This is over.* Miguel finally spoke up, no doubt to keep the rest of the conversation from being heard.

Suddenly everyone broke apart and quickly started moving toward the town cars as if they didn't want to be caught watching for even a second after Miguel declared the fight over.

I switched my focus to Leon. I would deal with Dom and whatever he'd told his family later. The only thing that mattered to me was making sure he was okay.

"I don't know what you are, but you're no shifter," I heard Victor mutter under his breath as he passed by me.

I felt my stomach turn on itself as I remembered what they'd done to EJ's wife. Thankfully before I could panic, the part of me that had kept me fighting all this time took over. If they knew, that meant I was on borrowed time. We had to find a way out, and we had to do it before I gave birth.



Thirty-Nine

The last thing on earth I wanted to do was go to a gathering. Well, that was the second to last thing I wanted to do. The actual last thing I wanted to do was see Leon get into another fight, and I knew that if we refused to attend the gathering, Miguel would only send Victor, and we'd be right back where we were hours ago.

Leon and I rode back to the house in complete silence. I didn't dare breach it, but I would occasionally look over at him. He stared directly ahead of him, barely blinking, the muscles in his jaw clenched so tightly I could see them straining along the side of his face. I couldn't help but think about the way things used to be and who I used to be. I wasn't sure how long I'd been with Leon's family, the days all seemed to blur together, but I did know that I felt like someone entirely different. The fights over Natalia, the emotional tailspin over Cash, the magical beach in Tavira... it all seemed so small.

Occasionally, I would question what came next. I wanted a life with Leon. I knew that for certain, but all that I'd endured led me to wonder if we could ever return to what we once had.

The truth was, I wanted my life back, but not if it meant going back to the person I was. I was stronger now than I had ever been. I didn't know if I had my own sense of self-preservation or impending motherhood to thank for it, but the

woman I was a year ago wouldn't have made it this far. She wouldn't have survived.

When the car pulled up to the house, I trailed behind Leon to the apartment. He still hadn't spoken, and while I wanted to give him whatever time he needed to cool down, I couldn't help but wonder what was going through his head.

Leon opened the door to the apartment, and just as I was about to follow him inside, I felt someone reach out and grab me again. This time it was a gentle tug at my arm, nothing like Victor violently yanking me around, but my reaction was still the same. I rolled my eyes and swung around to face the person who'd grabbed me.

"Jesus Christ! Seriously?" I said before I realized who was behind me.

Dom, despite being able to tower over me, looked remarkably small. It was hard to be angry at him when there was so much remorse in his face, but it didn't change what he'd done.

"Can we talk?" he asked me.

"I don't have anything to say," I sighed. I was telling the truth. I'd done enough screaming, crying, arguing, and swearing for a lifetime. I felt betrayed, there was no doubting that, but whatever fight was left in me needed to go toward getting out of this place, not yelling at Dom for putting my life at risk.

"I'm sorry, *linda*. I just—"

"Don't," I warned.

"Please just—"

"I need to take care of Leon. You should go," I said and reached for the door, intent on closing it on him. However, Dom was faster than me, and he grabbed the door to keep me from shutting it in his face.

"Could you just listen to me, please?"

"I don't know why the men in this place have no concept of boundaries, but I said no." I asserted. "Go back to your family. We both know that's where you belong."

Dom looked at me wide-eyed like I'd just slapped him, but he let go of the door. I didn't think twice before I shut it. I didn't want to hurt Dom, but I also knew I couldn't trust him. Whatever Leon and I did next, we had to do it on our own.

"Are you okay?" Leon asked me from the kitchen as he dug around in the freezer, likely looking for something for his slowly bruising face.

I took a deep breath and then made my way over to him. "I should be asking you that question," I admitted as I carefully wrapped my arms around his torso.

"I've been better," Leon said with an empty laugh.

"Go sit. I'll figure out what to do with your face," I teased as I nodded toward the couch.

Dutifully Leon left the kitchen and collapsed onto the couch while I hunted for something I could use as an icepack. Thankfully, there was an ancient, freezer-burned bag of frozen strawberries calling my name. I grabbed it, a kitchen towel, and the sad excuse for first aid from the bathroom before shuffling over to him.

I stopped directly in front of Leon and watched as those remarkable eyes of his slowly looked up at me. Even battered, he was still the most breathtaking man I'd ever seen.

"Hi," I breathed, echoing the first thing that came out of my mouth when I saw him again.

Leon tilted his head to one side as if trying to figure out what I was thinking.

"Hi," he responded slowly.

I placed my collection on the seat beside him before straddling his lap.

"If this is what happens after I get punched in the face, I should really get in fights more often," Leon joked.

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the towel-covered berries. "Hold this," I said as I placed them against his face. I then got to work cleaning up the gash across his right cheek. "I think that might be a bad idea," I said.

I felt Leon's free hand slowly make its way up my thigh, stopping to rest on my hip. I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from getting distracted.

"Oh really? Why is that?"

"Because I think we discovered you actually really suck at fighting," I responded.

We both started laughing, but before we could enjoy the moment any longer, another ill-timed knock signaled that whatever time we'd been given to get ourselves together was up.

"We're coming," we both shouted in annoyance at the same time.

The rain in Brazil always came without warning. It seemed clear when we'd gotten back from mass, and yet by the time Leon and I left the apartment we could hear the heavy rain beating against the windows that led to the courtyard. For a brief moment, I'd hoped that meant there wouldn't be a gathering, but we quickly realized that we could hear the sound of talking and laughing echoing down the halls. We followed the sounds until we reached a dining room I'd never seen before. The moment we stepped foot in it, the room went silent.

All eyes followed Leon and me as we took the only available empty seats. This time there was no ornate table decor or unnecessary place cards; however, the entire center of the long, mahogany banquet table was filled with tall, white taper candles.

The room reminded me of Miguel's study. The furniture was dark, expensive, and likely custom-made. There were also no windows anywhere, which made the already uncomfortable space seem suffocating. Combine that with the fact that we were literally dining with the enemy, and the whole thing felt more than a little insidious.

My mind raced with thoughts of what Miguel did and didn't know. There was a possibility that Dom hadn't told them

anything at all, and that Victor was just assuming that I wasn't a shifter based on something he'd observed. However, I knew that wasn't likely. What I didn't know was what else Dom shared with his family? He'd still sought out Leon. He still attempted to save my life on more than one occasion. Or was that all some elaborate scheme to get Leon here? Suddenly I wished I'd let Dom explain.

I looked up at Leon's cousin from across the table.

"I'm sorry," he mouthed to me.

I shook my head. I could appreciate whatever sense of guilt he was feeling, but I also wasn't about to absolve him when I didn't even know what he'd done.

My eyes moved from Dom to Victor's wife. To my surprise, both she and Victor seemed to be avoiding all eye contact with anyone. However, I watched his wife for a long time, and she seemed... scared. I couldn't really piece together why until Miguel spoke again.

"We should discuss the laws," Miguel announced more than said as he turned to look at Leon.

"What about them?" Leon asked, sounding dismissive.

"I would say the fight was fair, do you agree?"

Leon narrowed his eyes at Victor before turning his attention back to Miguel.

"Sure," Leon shrugged.

"But Victor attacked your wife," Miguel continued.

The look on Victor's wife's face went from fearful to full-on panicked in a matter of seconds. Suddenly, I understood why the two of them seemed so cagey.

In theory, the concept that every punishment should befit the crime made sense. However, in practice, it seemed rather barbaric.

"I'm not going to attack his wife," Leon said, rolling his eyes.

"You don't have a choice," Miguel shot back at him.

Leon defiantly rose from his seat. I couldn't imagine what he was about to do, but the entire room stared at him in silence.

He walked around the table to where Victor's wife was sitting and held out his hand to her, all the while staring directly at Miguel.

The curly-haired woman looked to her husband, but Victor didn't say a word. Her hand trembled as she took Leon's and stood up.

“És brasileira?” Are you Brazilian? He asked her.

“Boliviana, mas percebo-te.” Bolivian, but I understand you. She responded.

“Lamento que tenhas um marido que te põe em perigo só para parecer poderoso. É patético e tu mereces melhor.” I'm sorry that you have a husband that would put you in danger just to make himself look powerful. It's pathetic and you deserve better.

I didn't think I'd ever been quite as in love with Leon as I had been at that moment.

The woman just stared in absolute shock as Leon returned to his seat. Even Victor looked completely dumbstruck.

“And you're satisfied with this?” Miguel asked though it was clear by the pursed look on his face that he wasn't pleased.

“Very,” Leon said before locking eyes with Victor across the table. “Maybe you'll remember that the next time you think about laying another hand on my wife,” he said.

I was so used to Victor's bark that I was almost shocked when he didn't say a word. His entire body was tense, and his face was completely unreadable. He quickly broke eye contact with Leon, and everyone at the table resumed their meal in silence.

I lowered my head, trying to hide the smile spreading across my face.

“I fucking love you,” I whispered while maintaining eye contact with my salad. His hand found its way to my thigh and gently squeezed in response.

It was so quiet it was starting to make me nauseous. The only sounds in the room were cutlery clinking against ceramic plates and people awkwardly murmuring to each other.

“The binding was lovely,” I finally spoke up. Hoping maybe that would start some kind of conversation.

Caroline immediately stopped eating and glared at me. “Thank you,” she said. It was shocking how her voice could seem so sweet and appreciative, but the look on her face was nothing but pure rage.

“Now if only my Taia wasn’t so picky, all my children would be bound,” Miguel said.

“Ela estará pronta em breve.” She’ll be ready soon enough. Estela said gently.

Taia sat completely motionless in her seat, and when the room fell back into silence, I was grateful for it. Clearly, polite conversation wasn’t going to happen with this much tension in the room.

“There’s one more matter that needs to be discussed,” Miguel jumped back in. I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

“What’s that?” Leon said, still sounding completely uninterested. He was perhaps the only person in this compound who didn’t jump to attention every time Miguel spoke.

“Have the two of you come to a decision?”

I knew that sooner or later, Miguel was going to ask. What I wasn’t expecting was that he was going to ask in front of the entire community.

“Yes,” Leon said.

I whipped my head to the side to look at him. We hadn’t even discussed Miguel’s ultimatum. I just assumed that we would find a way to escape this place long before we ever had to decide.

“We’re staying.”



Forty

When the man I loved made the sudden declaration that we were staying in Brazil, I had two options. I could question him in front of a room full of people, or I could hold my tongue and trust that Leon knew what he was doing. Trust wasn't easy for me. I'd been betrayed one too many times, and found myself constantly watching for whatever was lurking behind me. Who could blame me? In the span of a year, I'd been through more suffering at the hands of men I loved than I knew what to do with. Yet something in me told me to hold the line. Leon and I had to be a united front. Not just in front of his family, but in everything from here on out.

The uncomfortable silence of the gathering was suddenly filled with cheers and congratulations from people that now believed their prodigal son had returned for good. I sat there in the midst of it all, speechless and confused.

I was grateful that, unlike other gatherings, the meal didn't last deep into the night. Instead as soon as everyone finished their food, they began to slowly filter out of the dining room.

I stood to follow Leon back to the apartment, but before we could make it out the door, Miguel grabbed Leon by the shoulders.

"You made the right choice," Miguel said. He was practically beaming.

Leon nodded in the direction of the exit, indicating that I should let him and his uncle talk. I was more than a little curious about where that conversation would go, but I also didn't have any desire to be around Miguel any longer than I had to.

I quietly slid out of the room and started toward the apartment.

As I came upon the door to the classroom I'd once used to sneak out of the house, I noticed it was wide open. The lights were still off, and from a distance, I couldn't see anything inside, but one of the strange things about the house was that no door was ever left open. Every hallway was just a long line of closed, unmarked wooden doors. I slowed as I approached it. Perhaps I was being paranoid, but the fact that it was so out of the ordinary and the tension of the meal I'd just been forced to sit through had me on edge.

I heard a sound the moment I stepped in front of it and immediately jumped.

"Linda!"

As soon as my brain registered the word being loudly whispered at me, I rolled my eyes and turned to face the darkness of the room. A hand reached for me and pulled me abruptly inside before the door slammed shut.

"What are you doing?" I asked as my eyes strained to find Dom in the darkness.

"Will you talk to me, please?"

"You didn't exactly really give me a choice," I grumbled.

My eyes eventually adjusted, and there was just enough light coming in from the courtyard that I could make out the outline of Dom's body, though I couldn't quite see his face.

"I just need to explain," he said.

"You never give up do you?" I asked, shaking my head.

I knew that I needed to hear Dom out. He might not have deserved it, but I had to know what exactly Miguel knew.

"Not when it comes to you," Dom said.

I let out a heavy sigh. "Okay, talk."

“Miguel knew you were hiding something when you first got here, so he sent me to you hoping that I could get you to trust me,” he started to explain.

My stomach churned as I realized I didn’t want the play-by-play.

“Do they know I’m human?”

“Yes,” he said after a long pause.

“Dom...” I griped.

“That’s all they know! I swear!”

“Is that supposed to make it better? EJ’s wife was human too, and look what happened to her! You telling them made me disposable. The only reason I’m even still here is because I’m pregnant, but what do you think is going to happen to me the moment I give birth?”

“Leon’s here. Miguel got what he wanted. He’s not going to hurt you.”

“We both know that’s not true. You said yourself that if Miguel found out, he would kill me,” I said.

If I could see him, I probably would have punched him, but the last thing I needed was to revisit the shifter laws and end up getting punched myself.

“Why?” I asked him.

“Why what?”

“Why did you pretend you were helping me? Why make me go to such lengths to pretend I came from a shifter family when they already knew?”

Dom didn’t respond.

“Why!” This time I yelled.

“Stop yelling!” Dom whispered. “It was like I couldn’t stay away. You were different than anyone I’d ever met, and I wanted to be close to you. I thought if you thought I was helping you, you’d let me,” he explained.

“That is so fucking selfish!”

“I know. I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“I have to get out of here,” I said as panic started to rise.

“Let me help you,” Dom said.

“You’ve done enough,”

“*Linda*, please just—”

“Do you swear they don’t know anything else?” I asked, trying to find some way to calm my nerves.

“I promise. That’s all I told them.”

I took in a shaky breath. “You went and got Leon, you let him take over your life so there might be a chance he could get me out, and you were rushed into marrying someone you don’t even like because of our actions. Those things are still true despite what you did, but I can’t let you be a part of this anymore.”

“I just want to make sure you—,” he explained.

“I know, but I’m not yours to protect.”

There was nothing left to say. I just left him standing there in the dark.

I was already in bed by the time Leon returned, but I immediately felt a sense of relief just knowing he was there.

When he made his way into the room, he looked... heavy. Since he showed up, it seemed like he was constantly carrying the whole world on his shoulders, and while I wanted to help him carry it, he seemed resolute not to let me. I wondered how things might have been different the first two times I tried to escape if he had let me in on the plan.

He had a look of dread on his face, almost as if he were expecting me to start yelling at any moment. I had every right to. He dropped a bomb on me, but when Leon opened his mouth to speak, no doubt to explain, I interrupted him before he could get a word out.

“Come to bed,” I said.

I knew we had things to discuss, but I didn’t want to do it with him standing over me. If we were going to be a team, I

wanted us to talk like a team and not like he was calling all the shots. We tried that. It hadn't gotten us anywhere.

I waited to say anything until Leon finished getting ready and crawled into bed with me. We laid there for a long moment, staring up at the ceiling.

"So I guess we're moving to Brazil..." I said without turning to face him.

"We're not moving to Brazil," Leon grumbled as he turned his head to give me a look.

I gasped in mock surprise. "Really? But I love being held captive by your family in the middle of the rainforest! I thought we'd grow old together in this room that locks from the outside and name our baby Miguel!"

Leon elbowed me playfully.

"Are you going to tell me what the plan is?" I asked.

"I don't know yet," Leon admitted.

"What do you mean you don't know? You just told Miguel we were staying here."

"Because it's safer if he thinks we're complying. The rest I still have to figure out."

"*We* have to figure it out," I corrected him.

Leon went quiet.

Even when we were just friends, I constantly wanted to know what was going on in his head. Maybe somewhere deep down, I'd always sensed that there was more going on behind the surface than he was letting on. I never could have imagined that the thing he was hiding was supernatural abilities. However, we were well past the point that he needed to hide who he was from me, and yet, he still felt like a mystery I needed to figure out.

"You can't keep trying to do this on your own," I suddenly said.

"Jace, you wouldn't even be in this mess if it weren't for me," he argued.

It was the first time I could really hear the guilt in his voice. On some level, perhaps he was right. If it weren't for my relationship with Leon, I obviously wouldn't have been abducted by his family, but I didn't blame him.

"This happened *to* both of us, not *because* of you," I said.

I'd been through hell. There was no denying that, but Leon had been through a hell of his own. This wasn't his fault or his doing. The only people to blame in this were his family.

"I don't know how you can see it that way," he said, shaking his head.

My brows knit together as I tried to figure out how to get him to see things the way I saw them.

"Because we have to see everything that way from now on," I started.

"I don't understand."

"What is a marriage, or a family for that matter, if it's not a team? If we have to fight something, we have to fight it together. If I started blaming you for this, then I'm making an enemy out of the only real ally I have." I turned to look at him, my eyes dancing over the profile of his face. "You have been my best friend for nearly eleven years, Leon. We have gone through our entire adult lives together. What makes you think you need to do this alone?"

He turned to look at me.

"You're right," he admitted.

"I know I am," I teased.

"We should probably try to sleep," Leon said

I nodded before he got up to turn out the lights.

"Tell me a story?" I asked once he'd returned.

"A story?"

"Yes."

"What kind of story do you want to hear?"

"Tell me what happens next," I said.

He was quiet for a long time, no doubt trying to think of how he wanted this story to go. “We’ll have to find someplace safe for you and the baby, but we’ll find somewhere we can both be happy. You’ll go back to designing. We’ll have a daughter. She’ll have your eyes, and your laugh, and the same random freckles you have across your cheeks, so naturally, you will both have me completely wrapped around your fingers. She’ll grow up creative, strong, and probably a little scrappy. Then you and I will get old and fat together. We’ll make each other breakfast and make each other laugh. You’ll still never take your clothes out of the dryer, and I will be as in love with you as the day I met you until the day I die,” he said.

My heart ached inside my chest. I wanted that life so badly, and yet, there was still a very real part of me that was terrified I’d never have it. That we might not make it out of this. The hope that any part of that might be true, was the only thing that kept me going.

Leon and I stared at each other in the dark. The room was barely illuminated, but those eyes still dug into the depth of me, the way only his could. It was baffling to me that despite feeling exactly this, every time he looked at me, for all of those years, I was still so clueless about the way I felt about him. All I knew was that I could never question it again. The way I loved Leon was all consuming, and even when I thought for a brief moment I might be able to walk away, it pulled me back. Of course it did, he was my home.

Slowly I inched my hand toward him. My fingers barely brushed his as I continued to look at him.

“What does it feel like?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“When you were Dom, you told me that shifters feel things differently, more intensely. So when I touch you... what does it feel like?” I asked slowly.

“Like I’m on fire.”

My eyes slowly moved from his eyes to his mouth.

“It’s not so different then.”



Forty-One

When I awoke, I was alone in bed yet again; however, the smell of pancakes filled the tiny space we'd been confined to, and I could hear movement from the other room. *We'll make each other breakfast.* The gesture wasn't new to me. Leon and I cooked for each other all the time back home, but the familiarity of it filled me with a hope that had been lying dormant for longer than I cared to admit. I wasn't naive enough to believe that we could go back to the exact same life we had before all of this happened, but knowing Leon was there, still in love with me, and making me pancakes was enough to make me believe that whatever came next we still had a shot at being happy.

"You're taking this husband thing really seriously," I joked as I emerged from the bedroom to find a shirtless Leon shuffling around the kitchen.

He looked a bit out of place in a kitchen so small, but the sight still made me indescribably happy.

"I've been taking this husband thing really seriously for years," he said with a laugh.

He had a point. At Elise's engagement party, my mother pointed out that even though Leon and I had just started dating, we had essentially been together since we were teenagers. I missed her. I missed my entire family. I could only imagine what they were thinking, and how worried they must have been.

It was probably equally terrifying to them that Leon was now missing, too.

I sat down at the stools that faced the kitchen as Leon pushed a plate of food in front of me. It was the first time since arriving here that anyone had fed me something American. I dug in immediately, savoring not only the food but the mental relief of simply eating breakfast with the man I loved and not worrying about how to survive.

Leon came around the counter and sat down next to me. I looked over at him, remembering that home wasn't New York, it was Leon. It had always been Leon. All of a sudden the idea that we might not be able to go back didn't scare me quite as much.

"So... we need to come up with a plan..." I said. I had been on borrowed time since I got to Brazil. Now that I was sure Miguel knew that I wasn't a shifter, I knew my safety would only last as long as I was carrying Matheo's grandchild.

I was nowhere near giving birth and barely showing, but I wanted to be far, far away from Leon's family as soon as possible. They would likely ask for an ultrasound soon, and I knew the gender of our child also played a part in whether or not Miguel thought he could dispose of me.

"I know, but we can't do it here," Leon said.

I looked around the room. I knew it wasn't bugged. If it had been, Miguel would have known a lot more than just the fact I was human.

"Why?" I whispered dramatically, playing along with the idea that we could be heard.

"It's not worth the risk plus, I want Miguel to think we're playing by his rules."

"So where are we supposed to talk about it?"

It wasn't like we could just jump in the car and take a nice drive. We tried that already. It didn't work.

"We're going to ask permission to leave."

I looked at Leon as if he'd been dropped on his head.

“You think we’re just going to walk into Miguel’s office and say, ‘Hey bro, we’re gonna take a day trip away from the prison. We’ll be back in a few hours?’”

Leon shook his head. “That’s the thing, Jace. He doesn’t think it’s prison. Have you noticed they haven’t locked that door since I got here? Last night, I told him I was tired of fighting who I was and that I wanted to belong to this community. He has no reason not to believe that, so if we act like we plan on making this our home then so will he.”

I looked at Leon skeptically. Everything else we’d tried hadn’t worked, so we had nothing else to lose, but I definitely didn’t believe that Miguel would just let us waltz off the grounds.

We finished eating and then started getting dressed. I didn’t know where Leon planned on taking me, but I only had the same handful of outfits to wear on repeat over and over again, so it wasn’t like it took me long to decide.

As we both prepared to leave the apartment, I caught Leon just staring at me as I pulled a less-than-ideal top I’d found in Manaus over my head.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” Leon said.

I was pregnant, wearing fast fashion from a Brazilian mall, and didn’t have a stitch of makeup on my face. I was pretty sure I was the least beautiful I could possibly be at that moment.

“Do you need your eyes checked?” I asked him playfully as I continued to get ready.

“You do realize when I met you, you dressed like 90s grunge and Tumblr had a slutty baby, right?”

I rolled my eyes. Everyone dressed like that in 2012.

“And I fell so in love with you I couldn’t get over it for 10 years. I don’t think this is going to phase me.”

“Don’t even get me started on the outfits Frat Boy Leon wore,” I teased.

Leon moved toward me. His hand reached around the back of my neck as his thumb gently stroked my cheek.

“You’re always going to be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he said softly.

He brought his lips to mine gently before taking my hand and leading me out of the apartment.

I’d only made the walk from the apartment to Miguel’s office twice, but each time it filled me with dread. It wasn’t just the man behind the colossal desk that made me want to turn and run, but the feeling the moment you stepped inside. There was only darkness there.

I held onto Leon a little tighter as he knocked loudly on the door. “Just follow my lead,” he whispered.

“*Entra,*” we heard from the other side of the door. The same way I had the first day I was there.

“This is a surprise,” Miguel said as he stood up from his seat. I could see the wheels turning as he looked Leon and I over, but when he’d decided we weren’t there in anger, his signature feline grin spread across his face, and he gestured to the chairs facing his desk. “Have a seat,” he said.

I breathed a small sigh of relief when to my right, I noticed Estela sitting in a reading chair on the other side of the room. She didn’t say anything, but she, too, seemed surprised to see us.

Leon and I did as we were told and sat in the stiff leather chairs. There was only about two feet of distance between us, but any distance from Leon at that moment made me uncomfortable.

“How can I help you?” Miguel asked coolly.

“We’d like to go to town.”

Miguel cocked his head to the side as if almost puzzled by the request. Perhaps he was simply confused as to why Leon thought he would allow such a thing, but for whatever reason Miguel seemed to at least entertain the request. “Why?”

“We need some things for the baby,” Leon responded with an almost astounding level of calm.

“We’ve had plenty of babies here. I’m sure we can find you the things you need,” Miguel said dismissively.

“Yes, but at home I would have had a baby shower and gotten to pick out things from a registry. I’m not going to get to experience any of that, so it would be nice if we could pick out a few things that were just our son’s”

Miguel’s eyes narrowed at me as if he could stare the truth right out of me, but I didn’t flinch.

“It would mean a lot to us,” Leon added.

“I don’t—” Miguel started, but Estela, angel that she was, interrupted him.

“Você se lembra de como era com o Domingos. Deixe que eles se divirtam escolhendo coisas para o bebê, meu amor.” You remember what it was like with Domingos. Let them enjoy picking out things for the baby, my love, she said gently.

Miguel sighed. “Alright, but one of my men will drive you,” he said.

I remembered Caroline saying there was nothing Estela could ask for that Miguel would deny her. I didn’t know if she had some sense that she was helping us, or if she was merely being maternal, but she had just managed to give us exactly what we wanted.

“Thank you,” I said.

“We should only be gone a few hours,” Leon added.

“You’ll join us for dinner tonight,” Miguel commanded.

Leon nodded. “We’d be happy to.”

I would have rather been stabbed in the arm by Dom again than eat dinner with Miguel, but if Leon believed that pretending we actually wanted to be here could help us, then I was willing to play along.

The man driving the town car didn’t even make eye contact with us, let alone speak. It was clear that he was only there to do one thing, and that was keep us from running. I was surprised Miguel didn’t send Victor to monitor us, but I hoped his absence

meant he'd been sent somewhere by Miguel, and we would be free of him for a while.

Leon and I both knew better than to speak openly in front of anyone we didn't know. However, after several minutes of silence, it felt like saying nothing was just as suspicious, so we decided to entertain ourselves by talking about absolute nonsense.

"Do you remember my grandmother, Swanhilda?" I turned and asked Leon.

"Of course, how could I forget her and her forty-eight parakeets."

"Well, we think she's finally lost it." I squeaked out, trying not to laugh.

"Oh no, what happened now?" Leon asked with a dramatic amount of concern

"She started training the birds to steal things from the neighbors."

"What did they steal?"

"Well, you remember Mrs. Hawkins from next door?"

"Oh no! Not the wigs!"

I had literal tears in my eyes, trying not to completely crack up. "Yes. The wigs!" I choked out, trying to take deep breaths to regain my composure. "They took them all and made a giant nest!"

Leon couldn't keep a straight face, so he buried his head in my shoulder, silently laughing at the bizarre story we concocted. We'd accomplished our mission. We managed to keep ourselves entertained but gave the man in the driver's seat nothing he could bring back to Miguel. Unless the shifter king wanted to know the latest gossip about my fictional, German, bird-loving grandmother.

We eventually pulled up to some sort of baby store in Manaus. It looked like any other children's boutique you would see in America. The sign was in Portuguese, of course, but there was a window display of oversized brightly colored blocks,

giant stuffed animals, and tiny mannequins wearing adorable pastel outfits.

Leon and I slid out of the car, and as we suspected, our driver didn't move. He probably didn't think it was necessary to follow us into a building that only had one door. If we tried to leave, it would be obvious.

Inside, the shelves and racks were filled with everything from pacifiers to onesies. We had no intention of having our child here, but we had to return with *something*.

I wandered over to a rack of tiny outfits and began flipping through them, pausing at a tiny pink tulle dress.

"We should probably grab boys' clothes, in case they ask to see any of them," Leon said from behind me.

I frowned a little and then put the dress back on the rack.

Leon seemed to notice the shift in my mood and came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"We will buy her all the tiny dresses in the world when we get home," he whispered.

I nodded, trying not to let my emotions get the better of me. I pulled a tacky little sailor outfit and handed it to Leon.

"Okay, I have a question..." I said, although I had a feeling I already knew the answer to what I was about to ask.

Leon turned to face me.

"Can we use your *other* abilities to get out of here?" I asked quietly, though I had no reason to believe that the woman behind the counter spoke English. She was too busy on her phone to even notice we were there.

Leon's gaze dropped and he was quiet for a long moment as if weighing the answer in his mind. "Yes and no," he muttered. He looked up at me but his body stiffened as he continued. "I can't just send everyone to another reality while we waltz out the door if that's what you're asking."

I suspected as much. I knew that if Leon had anything in his arsenal that could help us he would have done it already.

However, I wanted to understand how all of this worked. “Why?” I asked.

“First of all, I can only alter one consciousness at a time,” he started but once again diverted his gaze away from me before he continued. “Second of all, you can’t get into another reality unless someone who knows how puts you there and you can’t leave one unless someone takes you out...”

I wasn’t sure I was following. “What does that mean?”

“If I put someone in another reality and ran, their mind would be permanently stuck in one place while their body was in another...”

“I don’t—”

“They would die, Jace.”

I took a deep breath. While there was a very real part of me that wanted to see Miguel rot for everything he had done not only to me but to EJ, his children, and countless other people, the truth was I wasn’t a killer and neither was Leon. I didn’t know that I was prepared to take someone’s life and I could tell by the way Leon spoke that he wasn’t either.

I thought for a moment before it finally hit me. “Okay, I think I have a plan.”

“What do you need me to do?” Leon asked me without hesitation.

My brows shot up. “You’re just going to let me take the reins?”

He and Dom had been doing all this plotting and planning without giving me any idea what was going on, so the fact that Leon was going to defer to me was more than a little surprising.

“I have been treating this whole thing like some kind of rescue mission, and as much as I want to swoop in and be the hero, *you*, Jacey Lange, are the only person who’s successfully been able to get *anyone* out of this place. So just tell me what you need. If anyone is going to save us, it’s going to be you.”



Forty-Two

When we returned from the store, we had several bags of tiny outfits and random baby necessities for a son we hoped we wouldn't have. I found it funny that a year ago, when Leon and I were joking about hypothetical children, long before we'd even kissed, let alone made an actual baby, I told him that if we had one, it would have to be a boy. Suddenly, that was the last thing either one of us wanted. In truth, I wouldn't have minded a son. I just knew that not only would Leon's family be a constant threat if we had one, but Leon would likely carry around nothing but guilt over passing on what to him felt like a disease.

As we made our way through the house, we were again careful not to say anything we shouldn't. Leon was right. We couldn't take any chances this time. There would likely only be one more chance at escaping Miguel. If we were caught again—I shuddered at the thought.

Leon and I stopped dead in our tracks as we reached the door to the apartment. It was left ajar, and while we didn't hear any movement inside, we both knew that wasn't how we left it. Leon reached an arm in front of me, gently moving me behind him before he shoved the door open.

Nothing.

The lights were off, the room was silent, and nothing seemed to be amiss. That was until we were greeted with the eerie sight

of a dark gray crib, now taking up most of the free space in the small living room. I was no stranger to small apartments. Leon and I had plenty of space in our loft, but being from New York, nearly everyone I knew lived in a place they wished was bigger. However, seeing that crib sitting there highlighted how ridiculous it would be for the three of us to permanently *live* in this guest suite.

I rolled my eyes and dumped the shopping bags inside the unnecessarily large piece of furniture. There would still be months before our child was anywhere near arriving, leaving absolutely no reason for baby furniture in the middle of our living room other than to make some sort of statement.

“I hate him,” I said grumbled.

“Join the club,” Leon responded.

“Well, he certainly loves you.”

That wasn't entirely true. Miguel didn't love Leon. He didn't know Leon. Miguel loved his brother, despite the monster Matheo seemed to have been. The constant pursuit of Leon was because he was the last piece of that terrible man left in this world. What Miguel didn't realize was that there was no trace of Matheo in Leon. His brother was long gone. I had Constança to thank for that.

“He's just testing us,” Leon explained.

He was probably right. I didn't exactly get the sense that Miguel believed our story about going shopping for the baby, so this was likely some obnoxious attempt at seeing if we would be grateful for his *generous* gift.

I turned away from the crib and looked at Leon.

“What was your childhood like?” I asked him.

“Is this a therapy session?” Leon chuckled.

I was used to Leon deflecting this particular question, but this time it was important.

“No,” I said. “It's just that even after all this time, there are still things I don't know about you. I've tried not to bring them up because every time I did you would get cagey about it or change the subject. Your family is one of them...” I said, rolling

my eyes to make it clear I could see why. “But your childhood is the other.”

What I didn't need Leon to know was that I wasn't asking out of curiosity. I was asking because the parallels between the way he grew up and how I would most likely have to raise this child weren't lost on me. I just wanted some idea of how hard it was going to be.

“It was hard,” Leon said as if he could read my mind.

I nodded as I waited for him to go on.

“The first thing my mom did was change my name.”

“Wait! You had a different name?”

“Not exactly. In Portugal, you choose from a specific list of baby names, you can't just make one up. That includes the way you spell them, and Leondro is properly spelled with an a. My mom was too attached to the name to completely change it, so when we got to the US she changed the spelling and gave me her last name instead of Dos Reis.”

“Got it,” I said, remembering the misspelled place cards at every gathering. I was already learning things about Leon I didn't know.

“Every year, like clockwork, we would move. The only exception was high school because my mom thought it was important that I went to all four years in one place, but she spent every second of those four years completely terrified,” he explained. “I think it was harder for her than it was for me. She didn't speak English, and her parents took care of us financially, but it wasn't a lot of money. We also couldn't go back to see them, which wasn't easy for her. She couldn't really make friends because of the language barrier, and I couldn't really get close to anyone because we'd just have to leave again. College was honestly the first time I didn't feel completely alone in the world, and honestly, that mostly changed because of you.”

I took in a slow breath, trying to steady myself.

The idea that Leon didn't want children now seemed so much clearer to me. Who would want to raise a child that way? I couldn't change my mind now, and I wasn't sure I wanted to,

but the weight of how my entire life was now forever altered finally hit me, and it sat heavy in my chest.

Maybe I was being selfish. I'd always wanted to be a mother, and I wanted this baby because it was Leon's, but it was because it was Leon's that the three of us no longer had any chance at a normal life.

There was nothing I could do or say. I just walked over to my fiancé, wrapping my arms around his torso. "I'm sorry," I said with my face buried in his chest.

I wasn't sure if I was apologizing for how he had to grow up or for making him look down the barrel of doing it all over again, but I was sorry all the same.

Hours later, Leon and I found ourselves seated in the same dining room we had been in the night before. However, this time the massive table in the center of the room was hauntingly empty. There was only Miguel and Estela, who sat at one side of the center of the table. The two of us sat opposite them, the same excessive row of taper candles situated between us. It was, without a doubt, the most uncomfortable meal of my life.

I didn't expect there was anything I needed to fear, but Miguel and that room still gave me anxiety. I tried to focus on Estela instead, who sat there, as always, looking unrealistically beautiful in a dark red satin blouse. It was strange how much safer I felt when she was in the room. She hadn't done much, but her warmth and the tiny moments she advocated for me would probably stay with me long after I left this place. I would likely never see her or Dom or Taia ever again, and while it was safer that way, there was something a bit sad about that thought.

"Thank you for the crib," Leon said, breaking an uncomfortable silence between us. To his credit, there didn't seem to be an ounce of sarcasm or annoyance in his voice.

Miguel looked up from his food and smirked. I wasn't sure if it was Miguel's smug face, the baby, or the stress of the earlier conversation between Leon and me, but I had no appetite. I tried

not to draw attention to myself by occasionally picking at the meal in front of me.

“My brother would have wanted his first grandchild provided for.”

“We really appreciate it,” I added, willing my voice to be as even and unaffected as possible.

As if something I said caught his interest, Miguel tilted his head to one side and looked at me.

“You know I find you interesting, Jacey,” he said.

My stomach lurched, but I didn’t let it reach my face.

“Why?”

“You just seemed *very* determined to leave, and now you’re perfectly content to stay?”

I knew that Miguel was smart enough to know that we didn’t just all of a sudden and for no apparent reason want to become part of his little circus.

“I was determined to get to my husband. If this is where he wants to be, then I’m *perfectly content* to be anywhere he is.”

“I suppose my son helped you realize that?” he retorted.

In my head, I was leaping out of my chair and hurling my plate of food at Miguel’s head before attempting to strangle him. I wasn’t even sure Leon or Estela would try to stop me, but on the outside, I didn’t move, not even an inch.

“Your son was a good friend to me when I needed one,” I said calmly.

“*Você não está comendo,*” *You’re not eating,* Estela remarked, completely ignoring the conversation at hand.

“*Não me estou a sentir muito bem,*” *I’m not feeling very well,* I responded.

“*É o bebê?*” *Is it the baby?*

I shook my head. The truth was I didn’t know. I’d never been pregnant before, so normalcy was lost on me. “*Não sei.*” *I don’t know.*

“Do you need a doctor?” Miguel asked, almost sounding annoyed.

“No, it’s just a bit of naus—,” I started.

“We’ll send for one,” Miguel said, cutting me off. “It’s about time we make sure you’re having a boy anyway,” he added.

I reached for Leon’s hand under the table, squeezing it as I plastered a completely false smile on my face.

“Thank you. I would appreciate that.”

I knew that was coming. Miguel was much too fixated on my baby to leave its gender up to chance. Plus, if we were having a girl, it would make getting rid of me that much easier for him. My stomach lurched again.

“The doctor Jacey saw in Manaus speaks English,” Leon jumped in.

“Nonsense! We’ll have the family doctor come. She speaks Portuguese well enough.”

I hated the way Miguel liked to talk about me as if I wasn’t there.

I turned to Leon. “It’s fine. It’s just a quick check-up and a sonogram. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about.”

He looked at me for a long time as if weighing whether this was a point he needed to argue. When he was Dom, he went out of his way to make sure I had a doctor that spoke English. It meant the world to me, but I knew no matter how hard he argued, Miguel wasn’t going to budge.

“Okay,” he finally said before turning back to Miguel. “Thank you,” he added.

There was only so much I could take of thanking my captor like he was some kind of doting grandparent and not Satan himself.

“Would it be alright if I turned in for the night?” I asked.

Miguel didn’t respond. He just waved his hand dismissively.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Leon asked.

“No, finish your dinner. I’ll be fine.”

“Eu a levarei de volta,” I’ll take her back, Estela said, as she stood up from the table.

Estela took my arm as we started out of the room. Leon and Miguel continued talking. He and I glanced back at each other for a brief moment, and then I let Estela lead me away.

She was completely silent, so I didn’t bother trying to keep a conversation going. As much comfort as I took in her presence, I knew the sooner I was alone, the better.

After a few moments, we reached the door to the apartment. She grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me to face her. The look on her face was almost sad, but I couldn’t understand why.

“Cuide de você, minha garota.”

Take care of yourself, my girl.



Forty-Three

The bathroom floor was covered in blood, my blood. I should have been screaming. In my head, I was screaming, but the sound hadn't come out of me yet. Instead, I just stared at the blood, my blood, and I waited.

There was a version of me that clicked on time and time again when the trauma of all I'd been through became too much. She didn't feel anything. She just barked out instructions, one foot in front of the other, in order to survive.

I looked at a clock on the bathroom wall. I watched it tick. Time to scream. I needed help.

I took in a sharp breath and let out a sound so loud and piercing and primal, I thought it might send the walls crashing down. *Good job. It will only take Leon a second.*

I could only imagine what I looked like, on my knees, shaking, covered in blood, and screaming like a banshee. Horror didn't even begin to describe it.

Leon threw the door open, and I saw it on his face, the terror of what was in front of him.

"Holy fuck." His voice was shaking.

That was the only moment he hesitated. The next thing I knew, Leon was picking me up off the ground. One arm around

my back, the other behind my knees. “I love you,” he kept whispering to me over and over again, like some kind of prayer.

By the time we made it into the hallway, Dom was headed straight for us. He stopped in his tracks when he saw me. Leon just kept moving toward the front door.

“Get us, someone, to drive us to the hospital! Now!” he shouted over his shoulder.

Dom disappeared in the opposite direction.

Leon held me tightly as the house started to come alive. The first person who made it to the foyer was Caroline. That didn’t surprise me given that she and Dom were now sharing a bedroom.

“Oh God!” Caroline said as her eyes went wide. She just stood there, staring in absolute shock.

Next were Miguel and Estela, followed by Victor’s wife, and one of Miguel’s men. Each of them, half awake and dressed in night clothes as they dashed out from the hallway.

“I have keys!” Dom shouted as he sprinted through the group of onlookers and toward Leon.

Neither Dom nor Leon waited for permission, but before we made it through the threshold, Miguel called after us.

“Roberto will go with you! We’ll follow!” he yelled.

The man chased after us, and when we got to the car, Leon slid into the back, still holding me tightly. Dom hurled himself toward the driver’s seat, and Roberto quietly climbed in, making the sign of the cross over his chest as the car screeched away from the house.

I didn’t know how long the car ride took. It didn’t feel like I was inside my body anymore.

Just wait. You’re almost there.

When we arrived at the hospital, Dom and Roberto made themselves scarce, but Leon didn’t leave my side. We didn’t say much. We both knew what was happening.

After they examined me, a doctor came into the room. He spoke directly to Leon. He didn’t even glance in my direction. It

was just as well. I could hear the two of them speak, but translating the words was impossible. I stared intently at the back of the doctor's head, hair full of grays, trying as hard as I could to concentrate, but I just couldn't get myself to understand. Maybe it was for the best.

Leon turned to me, about to explain, when we both heard Miguel seemingly on the phone in the hall.

Ainda não sei, mas se o fez, temos de nos livrar dela. Se a irmã quiser comprá-la de volta, ótimo. Caso contrário..." I don't know yet but if she did, we need to get rid of her. If the sister wants to buy her back, great. Otherwise...

"I'll be right back," he said gently.

I nodded before laying back in the stiff hospital bed. I stared at the stark white ceiling above me, and I listened.

"What did they say?" Miguel asked.

"They don't know yet. Another doctor is supposed to come talk to us," Leon explained.

"How is she?"

There was no concern in Miguel's voice at all. He might as well have been asking about the weather.

"She lost a lot of blood," Leon responded.

"Don't worry. We can always find you another wife," Miguel said.

I shut my eyes and waited for Leon to react. I was sure I would hear a fight breaking out. It was perhaps the cruelest thing I had ever actually heard someone say out loud.

Instead, everything went quiet, and then I heard the sound of a woman's voice, just familiar enough that I could take some comfort in it.

"Are you the father?" she asked.

"Yes," Leon said.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but the baby didn't make it."

“Okay...” Leon said. I didn’t think he knew what to say.
“Can I take her home?”

“We’d like to keep her overnight.”

“Sure, that makes sense,” he said, his voice cracking at the end of his sentence.

“I’m going to go make sure she’s comfortable, but if you need anything or you have any questions, let me know,” the woman explained.

I heard the sound of her shoes against the linoleum floor as she entered the room though I couldn’t see her with the curtain drawn across the center. It didn’t really matter. I was too busy listening.

“I’m sorry,” Miguel said. His voice was stiff as it came out of his throat.

“I think I just need some time alone with her,” Leon explained.

“Of course. Roberto will stay with you until I can find Victor.”

Victor was the last person we needed.

“Thank you.”

I could only imagine the amount of restraint it took Leon not to rip Miguel limb from limb. If I weren’t laying there feeling like I was watching the whole thing from outside of my own body, I might’ve even done it myself.

I heard Leon enter the room as soon as Miguel’s footsteps retreated down the hallway. The heavy metal door shut with a thud behind him.

There was a long pause before the doctor pulled back the curtain.

“Are you out of your mind?” she nearly screamed at me.

“It worked, didn’t it?” I countered as I sat up in bed.

“Where the fuck did that blood come from?” she demanded.

Leon stood there, arms hanging at his sides as he stared at me blankly. All the color had been drained out of him, and he

couldn't really seem to bring himself to react to anything either of us was saying.

"I can't have a conversation with you like this," I shot back.

The doctor rolled her dark eyes before smoke began to curl around her. Moments later, Dom was standing in her place, but Leon still couldn't pull his eyes away from me.

"Explain!" Dom demanded.

"It was hers," Leon said softly.

"What?!?"

"The doctor. He gave me a lecture about letting her self-mutilate and asked if I wanted her put on a psychiatric hold," he went on.

"But the baby is..." Dom started.

"The baby is fine. I'm fine." I said, before pulling up the hospital gown just enough that Dom could see the gashes I made across my thighs.

"Are you insane?" Dom gaped at me.

"This was our only chance of getting out of here. If I screwed it up or he suspected anything..." I didn't want to finish that sentence.

"You scared the shit out of me!"

It was obvious I'd scared Leon too, even though he hadn't said much yet. He knew the plan, but I didn't prepare him for the lengths I was planning to go.

"Can you give us a minute?" I asked Dom.

Dom looked like he wanted to say more but he thought better of it, nodded, and started for the door.

"I'm glad you're okay, *linda*," he said over his shoulder before leaving the room.

Everything went silent, and Leon continued his empty stare.

"Come here, please?" I finally said after what felt like ages of silence.

Leon quietly walked toward the bed, and I got up on my knees wrapping my arms around his neck. I held him as tightly as I could.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as he buried his face in my neck.

“It felt so fucking real,” he gasped out.

“I’m so sorry. They just had to believe the baby was gone so they wouldn’t come looking for it,” I explained. “But it worked, we got out.”

“We’re not out of the woods yet, Jace,” he said as he pulled back to look at me.

“I know, but that was the hardest part,” I said.

Leon took a step away from me, and I watched something cross his face that I didn’t understand. I wanted to know what was going on in his head, but there was simply no time.

“Alright, we have to get moving,” I heard Dom’s voice return from the doorway behind me. He entered the room with Roberto following behind him. I quickly rushed over to hug the man.

“*Obrigado,*” *Thank you,* I said, giving him a meaningful look.

“*Só precisamos que você fique por algumas horas para que possamos nos adiantar,*” *We only need you to stay for a couple of hours to give us a head start,* Leon explained.

The man nodded before smoke filled the room again, but this time, the person looking back at me was me.

“*Obrigado, avô,*” *Thank you, grandpa.*

It was the second time Teodoro had stepped in to save Leon’s life, and though we both knew we would likely never see him again, I promised myself that if we did end up with a son, that son would have his name.

We left Teodoro in that hospital room as quickly and quietly as we could. Leon and Dom found me a wheelchair so I didn’t look strange creeping out of the building, still dressed in a flimsy fabric gown. We all held our breaths as they pushed me down halls, constantly looking in every possible direction.

Now that Miguel thought his precious great-nephew was gone, he had no reason to stick around. I was of no value to him anymore, and he was likely hoping that I would pass away in the night so that he could console Leon and find him a proper shifter wife. However, Miguel had no doubt sent Victor to take Roberto's place, and we had no way to predict when he would show up.

We'd made it through hallway after hallway, praying we wouldn't see Victor's diabolic face lurking around each corner.

It was like we collectively breathed a sigh of relief when we saw the metal double doors that led to the back of the building. Dom held the door open as Leon pushed me through it.

"What the fuck?"

We all froze. Time froze.

Victor had been outside the back of the building smoking a cigarette, but the moment he saw the three of us, he drew a gun.

My mind flashed back to the first time Victor threatened me with that thing. Unfortunately, this time Dom didn't have a gun of his own.

Leon and Dom both looked at each other quickly, some silent agreement between the two of them. They both charged before Victor could say another word or even think to fire his weapon.

I watched in horror as they both struggled with him. Suddenly, I saw Victor go unconscious, his body limp. I assumed Leon had sent him into some altered reality, maybe he had, but then I saw the blood and the knife Dom had hidden on him that was now protruding from Victor's side.

"Oh my god," I stuttered.

"Shit! I didn't mean to—" Dom started as he looked down at the blood covering his hands.

"We have to go," Leon commanded.

I couldn't tell if Victor was alive or dead. Selfishly, I hoped he was dead.

Dom continued to gape at the body on the asphalt.

"Now, Dom!"

I grabbed Dom's arm as the three of us sprinted for the car and sped off into the night.



Forty-Four

I heard the sound of crying. It wasn't in the room with me, but it was just close enough that I was woken from sound sleep. I opened my eyes and sat up in bed. I was, yet again, in a place I hadn't fallen asleep. I blinked hard as I tried to figure out where I was. The bed wasn't familiar to me, nor was the apartment, but I could smell the faint hints of cinnamon in Gabe's *Henry Rose* cologne. I started to realize that I recognized the collection of house plants and the vinyl records.

This was a vision, no doubt, but *why was I seeing Gabe?*

I got out of bed and followed a hallway filled with unique art pieces along the walls.

The place was beautiful and much bigger than Gabe's tiny studio in Brooklyn.

As with any vision, I knew that once I saw what I was meant to see, I would ultimately wake up. However, I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for.

I heard the crying again, this time much closer. I turned the corner into a spacious living room and watched as Gabe, a little older and more put together than I had last seen him, crossed in front of me and went down the hallway. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed that sweet face until I saw it again, and my heart ached a little.

As I stepped further into the room, I saw... myself. I was older too, and my hair was much shorter. As I might have guessed, I was intensely working on a sketch. I'd never seen a vision of something that hadn't already happened before, yet there I was.

"Mommy, can we have pizza for dinner?" I heard a tiny voice from behind me.

"Teo, we can't have pizza for every meal, my love," I responded.

I held my breath and turned to see a little boy, maybe six. I felt my eyes well up as I looked at him. He was the spitting image of Leon. The same jet black hair, the same honey brown eyes. Even the look on his face when I told him no, reminded me of Leon.

"Can we have calzones then?" he countered.

"That's just pizza pockets," I said with a laugh. The laugh was real. I was happy.

Gabe returned to the room with an infant in his arms. She was swaddled in pink with a mess of sandy curls on her head. Something in me knew she was mine.

"Is she okay?" I asked him.

"Yeah, just fussy," he said before making his way over to me and kissing the top of my head.

"Dad, can we please have pizza?"

Dad?

No, this wasn't real. It wasn't a vision, it was a nightmare. There was no way. I wouldn't raise Leon's son without Leon. Unless...

My heart began racing. I walked over to myself and tried to pick up the cell phone on her desk. I wanted proof that Leon and I had just broken up and were very effectively co-parenting. I didn't *like* that version of the future, but I needed some other explanation than the one settling in my chest and stinging my eyes with tears, but I couldn't touch anything here. I couldn't change anything I was seeing.

We were happy. This family I had with Gabe, we were *happy*. But how could I be happy in a world where there wasn't Leon?

Whatever this was, vision or not. I didn't want it. I didn't care how happy I was. I didn't want it.

I sat straight up in bed only to find myself in a tiny inn in Manaus.

"Yes, I'm sure she's okay, Elise. I know this sounds crazy, and I promi—" Leon was saying into a cell phone.

"Elise?"

Leon turned to look at me, clearly surprised to find me awake. I held my hand out for the phone. There was a bit of concern on Leon's face, but he handed it to me nonetheless.

"Ellie?" I said.

"Oh my god, Jace," I heard my sister gasp into the phone.

The sound of her voice sent me into a fit of tears without warning.

"It's so good to hear your voice," I said, choking on my words.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes... No... I don't know. I just really miss you," I sobbed. I had been trying so hard to compartmentalize the thoughts of my friends and family so that I didn't get completely overwhelmed by what had actually happened to me, but the moment I heard my sister's voice it hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Nate and I are sending a plane. We're gonna get you home, okay?"

"Okay. I love you," I said.

"I love you too, Jace. It's going to be okay," I handed the phone back to Leon and waited for him to finish his conversation with my sister.

The car ride was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Dom stared straight ahead as he drove without even glancing at either of us, while Leon held onto me like he was afraid he might lose me if he let me go. We were almost done. We were almost free. I tried as hard as I could not to think about my vision.

I wasn't a witch. I didn't have magical powers. I wasn't capable of seeing the future. The last twenty-four hours had been some of the most dangerous of my life. It was no wonder that I was having strange dreams.

I had no idea how long we were in the car. I was so anxious to get on that plane and far, far away from the threat of Leon's family that every second felt like it took hours.

It wasn't until the car pulled into a private airport and we found ourselves on a dirt road toward an airstrip that I started to feel like I could truly breathe again.

As I looked out the window, a jet came into view, and on the side of it, the words *Montgomery Enterprises*. They could have been the most beautiful words I had ever seen.

Dom put the car into park, and then I watched as he made his way around and slid into the back of the car with us. I didn't understand why no one was moving. Freedom was *right there*.

"What's going on?" I asked

Leon's breathing slowed. "I'm not coming with you," he said.

My eyes went wide as I pushed myself back in my seat. "What are you talking about? Yes, you are!"

"Jacey, I can't."

"Yes, you can! You have two legs. Now get out of the car and use them to walk on the plane!"

"Someone is waiting for you on the plane that will help make sure Miguel doesn't come after you, Gabe will be waiting for you at JFK, and your sister will help you pack up the loft and find another apartment," he rattled off, refusing to meet my gaze.

"Gabe? Why Gabe? I didn't choose Gabe."

“Because he’s the only man who loves you who doesn’t have blood on his hands,” Leon snapped.

I snapped my head to the right to look at Dom.

“I can’t do this,” he said, barreling out of the car, leaving Leon and me alone.

“You promised me!”

“I know,” Leon said, his voice starting to shake. “But if I go with you they will keep chasing us. You will have to give up your entire life, and we will have to raise this baby the same way I was raised.”

“I don’t care,” I said, trying to keep myself together.

“If I just stay here, you get to have a normal life. You get to raise our kid and be happy with a man who loves you. If I have to give up my life to make that happen, then I’m going to do it, Jace.”

“Leon, please,” I begged. The tears were falling so hard that I could barely get the words out.

He reached for my face, his thumb gently stroking my cheek. “Let me do this. I didn’t want a family. I didn’t want to be a father. That was never in the cards for me, so let this be my last act of loving you. Let me give you your life back.” It was then the tears started falling for him too.

There was a very real part of me that knew that everything Leon was saying was true. Any life we had together was doomed by his family.

“I should have never done this. I should have never told you how I felt. If I had just left well enough alone, this never would have happened to you,” he admitted.

“Oh God,” I said, pressing my hand to my chest as my heart slammed against my rib cage over and over. “You actually regret this?”

“No. I don’t—Jacey, you have to get on that plane.”

I struggled to catch my breath. I struggled to find words though I knew I had to. I couldn’t let it end this way.

I angrily wiped the tears from my eyes. “You promised me. I keep the ring, you keep the bond, remember?”

“I lied,” Leon said, and I could feel my heart cracking.

“You don’t get to decide this for me. You don’t get to decide whether or not I want to fight! Your family rained hell down on me, and the only reason I survived that was so that I could get back to you. Not back to New York, not back to Gabe, not back to my career, Leon. I didn’t even do it for our baby. I clawed my way out of this for *you*, and if you think I wouldn’t do it all over again, you’re out of your mind. You are the love of my life. There is no one else but you.”

I looked at the plane knowing very well that every second I stayed in Brazil, I was unsafe.

“I will do what you want, and I will get on that plane, but you have until it takes off to follow me and fight with me because you said it yourself, that bond happened for a reason. It was always supposed to be you and me. But if you don’t, I’m not going to go home to New York and play house with Gabe. I will have this baby, I will leave it with my parents, and I will come right back here and drag you home because I am not giving up on you.”

“You can’t—”

“No! I am done with men telling me what I can and cannot do or trying to save me in ways I do not want to be saved! You either come with me now or I come back for you later, but those are the only choices I’m giving you.”

Leon grabbed me and pulled me toward him. His lips crashed with mine. The kiss was hard and deep and full of all of the raw emotion coursing through the two of us. He was kissing me goodbye.

I pulled away and reached for the door handle.

“Get on the plane,” was all I said. I didn’t let him respond. Instead, I slid out of the car and made my way toward freedom.

I looked over at Dom. He was still standing at a distance. I could only imagine what he was thinking. I started towards him, but he held his hands out, urging me not to come closer. He was

no more ready to say goodbye than I was, and so, he just waved, slow and resigned. All I could do was wave back.

I would have taken him with me if I could. He deserved to know a life that wasn't this cruel and broken, but we both knew he couldn't be separated from Caroline and even if he could, Miguel would never let him leave.

I slowly ascended the stairs, ducking my head slightly as I entered the oval-shaped doorway. I didn't know what Leon was talking about when he said there was someone on the plane until I looked up and locked eyes with him.

“Hello, girl.”

I rushed so quickly to hug EJ that I almost knocked him over.

“What are you doing here?” I asked through the tears that had not yet stopped running down my face.

“Leon thought you might need some help, and I need to get the hell out of Brazil,” he said.

“Yeah, so do I,” I said with a poor excuse for a laugh. “But how—how did he find you?” I asked, completely baffled by the fact that I was once again face to face with the man I'd saved.

“When he found out what you did to help me escape, he sent Dom looking for me,” he explained.

I didn't know how long we had until take off. All I could do was look helplessly out the window at the car as I waited for him to come to his senses.

Eventually, a red-haired flight attendant made her way toward EJ and me.

“Miss Lange, I just wanted to see if there's anything you need before we take off.”

The car was still there, but Leon hadn't moved.

“Can we hold the plane a little while longer?”

The flight attendant looked hesitant but pasted on a smile anyway.

“I'll see what I can do.”

“Is he coming?” EJ asked me.

“I don’t know.”

Acknowledgement

A girl with words.

Too many and never enough.

I have managed to write two entire novels so far in my career, yet when it comes to the gratitude I feel toward the people who helped make that possible it is hard to find the right words.

I will always start by thanking the three incredible women whom I have been lucky enough to call my family. My mother, Gail Torres, and my sisters, Constance Torres and Kayla Etheridge. It is them you have to thank for the art I create because without their love and unfailing support, I wouldn't have been brave enough to follow my heart and share my work with the world.

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Lastly, to the incredible readers who have loved this series so far, I hope that I have done you proud. It has always been my dream to have people read and truly love my work. It is you who made that dream a reality.

About The Author

Roxanna Mason

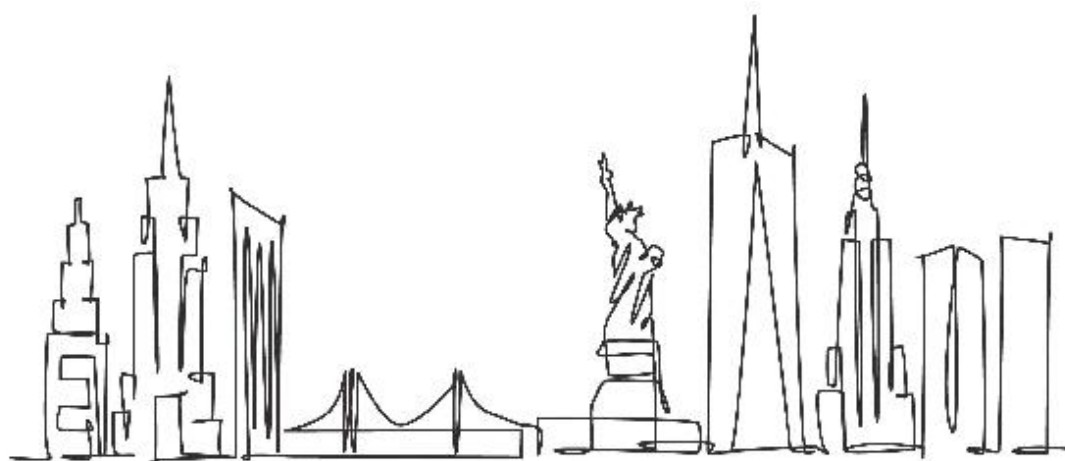


Roxanna Mason is a paranormal romance author and formally trained actor from Los Angeles, California. It was her deep love of storytelling that led her to study theatre and that same love of storytelling that drove her to write her first novel. When not writing, Roxanna is binge watching horror films, creating vegan recipes, and dancing around her living room to Fleetwood Mac.

Jacey and Leon's adventure will continue in *Scarred*, coming in 2024.

Follow Roxanna on Instagram and TikTok
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date on the third book of
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