

KACEY LEE
BECKY TAMA

THE
ANSWER
IN
AUTUMN

SOLSTICE SHIELD
BOOK

3

Blurb

Nothing like your life blown to bits... or should I say lives.

Needless to say, the guys and I aren't talking because of what they hid from me, but that doesn't stop my questions from plaguing me. I know just the man to help give me answers as long as I can trust him when he says he respects my space. And despite everything, I miss them, all of them, but I no longer know if I can trust my heart when my head says something else.

All I want is to decide my own fate, but I don't even know that's possible, and with Dr. Smith still on the hunt, I may lose my chance to decide forever.

An intriguing contemporary why choose fantasy romance. Suggested for 18+ due to language and adult situations.

The Answer in Autumn

BOOK 3

SOLSTICE SHIELD

KACEY LEE

BECKY TAMA

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*For those who want to choose for themselves.
Fuck fate.*

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Chapter One

“And that’s why the second time that happened, I figured I’d been ghosted and I blocked her.” My date, Jonah, shrugged before downing his gin and tonic. “Wow, that’s sour. Like, has it expired? Does alcohol go bad?” He peered at it.

I shifted in my seat, the smile really starting to hurt now on my face. “Maybe you could add something sweeter to it? I used to work at a bar, and —”

“So anyway, then I went out with Mary. Or was it Sally?” Jonah peered into the middle distance.

I curled my nails into my palms. What could I use as an excuse to escape?

At least I hadn't dressed up, wearing the same strappy dress I wore for my Tinder profile picture so my date would recognize me. I had to do a double check for Jonah; his profile picture was about ten years and eight inches out of date. Stated height, that is, not anything else. I swore there would not be anything else.

I sipped my drink, not even pretending to listen to him go on about his recent failed dates. Haru sometimes talked a mile a minute, but at least what he said was interesting and he listened intently to me, soaking my words in like a plant does the sun. And Otto might be reading but he would definitely listen at the same time too . . .

I shook my head. I had to stop my mind from wandering down that path. That weird part of my life was over and done, and it had been three months already. Yes, they were hot and interesting. Yes, we'd had some pretty cool adventures, and I'd gotten used to the ability to travel all over the world instantly and missed it intensely. But they were certifiably insane if they thought I was some kind of reincarnation of their dead girlfriend.

I forced myself to focus on my present—key word being “my.” I'd just got out of a situation where I felt like my destiny was out of my control. No way was I going to run right back into another. I rubbed the scar on my palm, fingers sliding over the shiny burn, before I put my hands down firmly. “So,” I said to Jonah. “That was the past. Let's focus on the future. What do you —?”

“I was talking,” Jonah said scathingly. “Don't interrupt.”

I tossed my drink back. “Sure, you were talking *at* me as opposed to with me. I don't want to focus on your previous dates. I wanted to get to know you, but it seems like now I'll be failed date number six. Or was it seven?”

He flushed. “You should be grateful. Your Tinder picture looks like you put on twenty pounds.”

I stood up, scraping the chair on the floor. Great, Half the restaurant paused and turned my way. “Yeah, and my thighs could break a brittle twig like you. And I promise,” I leaned over to give him a good look of my cleavage he'd never touch, his eyes bugging, “You'd like it, too.” I stood abruptly, his eyes snapping back to my face. Figures. “Real men like meat. The dogs can have the bones,” I retorted, throwing my napkin down onto my half-eaten plate.

He curled his lip. “You'd better pay for that.”

“Sure. I'll pay for yours too. Cheapskate.” I walked to the bar, trying to

sashay a little in my heels.

By the time I got there, my face was red with embarrassment. “Check, please,” I said, over it. Everyone was looking at me, and why wouldn’t they be? This was entertainment. Unfortunately, it was also my life.

The girl behind the bar gave me a sympathetic look and a wink. “I comped your meal for being a badass,” she said.

“That’s sweet of you. Thanks.” I paid the remainder, left her a large tip for the kindness, then strode out of there. Jonah had already gone, perhaps with his tail between his legs, and probably preparing a tale of how insufferable I was.

Outside the air was cool. It had been hotter than normal these past few weeks, so the colder weather was welcome. Unfortunately, whenever I thought of the weather, I couldn’t help thinking of the seasons. Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter, brought on somehow by actual people. It sounded wild, and I’d never said it out loud in case someone overheard and sectioned me, but it was true. Watching Haru grow plants had only been the start. Next was Summer and his smoldering desires, the heat of which still burned inside me. Otto’s quiet but serious contemplation, and Winter’s gruff but diligent attention.

I put my hand on my phone and pulled it off again. No, I would not text any of them to see how they were. Nope.

A door swung open in front of me and I dodged, satisfied I still had my reactions. Blonde hair and exposed skin from a tiny top spilled into my arms, and I held up my old coworker Lillian.

“Oh my goooooood! Mariiiiiiiiiiii!” she shrieked, throwing her arms around me. “Quick, help! I’m on an awful Tinder date.”

“Me too. I can rescue you.” I chuckled. Half a year without seeing Lillian, and we just fell right back into lockstep. I hadn’t seen her since the shift when I broke into—Nope. Not going to think about it.

She gave me a messy kiss on my cheek. Hells, she was drunk. “My hero,” she sang as I walked her down the street.

The wind picked up, playing around my ankles and flapping my dress and Lillian’s hair. “You look gorgeous,” I said, and I meant it. She was all dolled up like the night my Shield coworkers came to my second job at Mystique. The night I met Haru for the first time—Nope. *Stop thinking about it!*

She batted her eyelashes at me. “Thanks.” Her face fell. “What happened to you, Mari? Julian and Mark said you quit, but they transferred ages ago

and I was gate guard with a bunch of newbies.” She made a face like she tasted a lemon.

“Mm, kind of,” I replied. Julian had been in Estonia when CSON imprisoned me when they were trying to catch Winter. “Where were they transferred to?” I asked, trying to sound innocent.

She sighed. “Somewhere in Europe, I think. Sounds dreamy.”

I nodded. Maybe Lillian hadn’t been aware I’d been imprisoned. I really hoped not, and she was the sort to wear her heart on her sleeve.

We went into another bar that was fortunately not Mystique; I’d had it with that place and its memories. This was a trendy gastropub, huge copper tanks and pots arranged behind the servers. I looked up and down at the drinks on offer. There were a lot. How was I supposed to make a choice?

Lillian lunged out of my arms to poke at a pump. “Oooh. Try this one! The Heffer . . . Heizer . . .”

“You’ve had enough already, Lils.” I clucked my tongue. “I’ll take a red ale,” I told the server.

“That’s not it. That one,” Lillian insisted, jabbing a manicured nail at the shiny advertisement propped up on the bar.

I stiffened. “I make my own decisions, thanks.” She raised her eyebrows at my curt tone. I felt heat creep up my neck as I mumbled, “I want to make my own choices.”

“Sure, but it’s just a drink.” She pursed her lips as we collected our glasses—mine frothy amber ale, hers an ice water—and sat at a tall table. “So, what’s new? The last time I saw you, you were in the car with the hottest guy ever. I had no idea he lived there. What’s in the house? What’s it like?”

I took a sip, thinking fast. I couldn’t tell Lillian practically anything about the house or the guys who lived in it. She would never believe me, but still. “Oh, you know. Lots of rooms. I probably shouldn’t discuss it in a public place, we do—I mean, you guard the place. We don’t want people to overhear.”

She scowled. “No, I was let go. Me and the newbies. They’ve got all new people there now. Whatever.” She flicked her fingers and shrugged.

All new Shields guarded the house? My stomach soured. What was CSON up to?

No. I wasn’t involved anymore.

Still, maybe I should text one of them to let them know something was up. It might be nothing, but when it came to my old organization I very much

doubted this was a benign move. They had paid me to break in to feed a key card through a door, something I thought was fairly harmless—apart from the breaking in—until I learned that the doors led to different parts of the world. CSON used the key card to get in, and they used it to try to grab Winter. They took me instead as a consolation prize.

Remembering the days locked in a sterile white room made me shudder. The guys had combed the world looking for me and had broken not only some doors getting me out but the local weather systems as well, as they shouldn't be in one place all together outside the house. Even the gentle Otto had turned cold with fury, downing Shield agents with a single touch by infecting them with his grief and worry.

Lillian put her head in her hand. “So what are you up to now? Still with that gorgeous guy?”

My heart squeezed painfully. “No.”

“Aw. What happened there?”

“Just . . . a different way we viewed the future, that's all.” *Or should I say the past.* I shook myself, forcing a smile. “Plenty of fish in the sea, right?”

She put her hand over mine. “It must have hurt. I can see you're putting on a brave face.”

My mouth opened and closed, surprised she could see through me. I was losing my touch. I'd always had a good game face but this hurt deeply, like I'd lost more than just another boyfriend.

Lillian gave me a concerned look. “I'll change the subject. Where are you working now?”

Ah, another sore spot. “I'm in between jobs.”

“Oh, like me. Another security gig?”

“No, actually, I'm looking at positions with charities.” I had decided that was what I really wanted to do, how I was going to make a difference, right before it all went tits up.

“Oh, I could totally see it.” Lillian tapped her glass against mine. “Here's to finding Mr. Right and the best jobs ever.” She downed the rest of her water. “It's getting late. My roomies will chew me out if I wake them up getting home.”

“Sure.” My mom was probably still awake, pacing the floor waiting for me. “We can share a taxi,” I offered.

We went outside to hail one, the night getting colder and colder. My phone vibrated with a single text message. Probably Mom. I pulled it out to

reassure her.

My heart clenched. It wasn't from her.

We need to talk flashed on my notifications. Above it, in bold, was one word.

Otto.

Chapter Two

I stood outside a local bakery, checking the time on my phone for the eightieth time.

10:59am.

Otto should be here in one minute. This had been the most nerve wracking fourteen hours of my life. I'd barely slept, which equaled putting makeup on to cover the bags under my eyes. And putting on makeup meant I had to dress up. So, here I was, on a day a little brisker than the others, in heeled boots, hip-hugging dark jeans, and a plunging cardigan with a bra that made the ladies especially prominent. Definitely not the usual sweats and slippers I'd been sporting recently.

My stomach churned. I looked ridiculous. I had even put more effort into how I looked now than I had for my date last night.

“Marigold.” His deep voice resonated from behind me, and I whirled around, breath catching in my throat.

Otto had halted a few paces away, hands tucked in the pockets of his tweed coat, which buttoned up and hung down to his brown pants. His soft smile brightened his eyes behind his glasses sitting on the broad bridge of his nose.

“Hi,” I mumbled, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

His eyes lingered on the movement with astute attention before roving over the rest of me. “You look well. Good.”

My heart pattered in my chest a little harder. *No, bad Mari. This isn't a date. He lied to you and hid things from you and you're pissed. Pissed. Pissed. Pissed.* Somehow the reminder did very little as the ice around my heart melted some with his calming presence around.

I pressed my nails into my palms. “Are you using your powers on me?”

His eyes widened minutely. “Uh, not intentionally. My apologies.”

The serene feeling pulled away from me a little, allowing annoyance to bloom in its place. I folded my arms over my chest. “Not intentionally?” *Yeah, right.* Otto was the most controlled person I knew, not just with his words, but with his emotions and everything else.

He cleared his throat. “Let's say things haven't been the easiest since you've been away.”

“Uh-huh. You said we needed to talk.” My heels ached and my toes were going numb.

Otto nodded to the cafe, a common lunch spot in town. “Shall we go have a seat?”

My insides twisted into a knot. That felt too much like a date. I didn't want a formal meal. I couldn't be stuck at a table across from him. I was too jittery. I half-wished I was working out with Haru instead.

“Maybe a coffee to go?” I countered even as my feet screamed at me to accept.

Another kind smile. “Sure.”

Butterflies unfurled in my curling stomach, feeling foreign.

He was nervous, and with his powers unchecked it was seeping into me.

I side eyed him as we walked, his steps measured but tiny lines of worry creased his forehead. Losing his control over his powers twice so close

together was unlike him.

I wanted to know what his intentions were, why he wanted to meet. I bit my lip as we strode side by side to the front door. Before I could reach for the handle he stepped forward to open the door for me.

“After you,” he urged.

Stepping inside my nose flooded with not only the bitter strength of coffee, but also the sweetness of melted chocolate, the freshness of newly baked bread, and the warmth of vanilla. My mouth watered.

“Something smells delectable,” Otto said from beside me, eyeing the display cabinet of all the freshly baked items.

“You took the words right out of my mouth.”

We smiled at one another, and the fullness of it made my body do funny things; like lean toward him. The way his face lit up when he truly smiled made him so handsome. It was hard for the rest of the world not to melt away.

I blinked, pulling myself back to reality, and stepped away from him and up to the counter. “I would like a large coffee with cream, and, uh,” I eyed the case, “a chocolate croissant.”

“You know,” Otto’s voice purred from over my shoulder, “I could take you to France to get the real thing.”

A shiver ran down my spine. He could. It was the transition of seasons. That was why he could meet me in town.

“That won’t be necessary.” I paid the cashier, giving her a quick smile before grabbing my to-go cup and bag.

Otto ordered a tea with milk and sugar as well as a biscuit, which he quickly had to correct to ‘cookie’ because in the United States biscuits are an entirely different food item.

Once outside we meandered along the street, enjoying our drinks and the decadent baked goods. Yes, the chocolate croissant was the best I’d had in Vermont, but it would never come close to getting the real thing in Paris. I was half-tempted to see if Otto would still take me because now I craved the real thing.

“Well?” I said, breaking the silent trance we both seemed to be in. “You wanted to talk.”

“Yes. I came to give you this.” He reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out a bracelet. My heart stuttered. What looked like blue beads sat alongside perfectly preserved flower blossoms, shades from deep cobalt and

navy through to turquoise and ice-blue.

It was the bracelet Haru had made me. I'd left so abruptly and hadn't gone back to the house to grab my things. My heart pulled as I stared at the piece of jewelry. I could hear Haru's laughter in the back of my mind, the warm twinkle in his eye as he gave it to me.

Otto held it out to me. "Haru insisted I give this to you. He said it was a gift and he wanted to make sure you had it."

I pried my eyes from the bracelet. "You wanted to meet up to give me *this*? That's all? You sent an alarming text, ominous even, and that's all? I thought someone was hurt, or something had happened to Winter. I thought you'd found out more about that weird non-profit *Ecotics* or that you were in trouble—" I snapped my mouth shut and spun around to compose myself.

Shit. I had completely revealed that I still thought about them. I didn't want him to feel my hurt over what had happened. As much as I wanted space, I was still drawn to them and couldn't get them out of my damn head.

The silence stretched between us, my heart thudding so hard I could hear it in my ears. *Oh, shit, he felt it. He must have picked up on it. Crap!*

Was he not going to comment on my minor freak out? My chest relaxed as he acted like nothing had happened.

From the corner of my eye, I saw two figures keeping pace with our stride on the sidewalk across the street. With the chill in the air I was surprised to see they had no jackets, showing off their tattoo-covered arms. I bit down on my laugh at the matching purple viper tattoos that snaked along their left arms. I didn't think there was a single person I could imagine getting a matching tattoo with. Well, maybe my brother.

Their heads turned my way, gazes hidden behind dark glasses and slicked back hair reflecting sun rays.

A chill ran down my spine. They were broad and overly muscular like they spent their days in the gym to beef up. The air about them seemed off though. This town was more or less filled with families and the elderly. They didn't fit.

I opened my mouth, ready to point them out when Otto cut in.

"Mmmm . . ." Otto moaned. "What's the smell? It smells amazing."

I looked at him, mouth hanging open, to see his nose in the air as he sniffed. Peering back over my shoulder, the men were gone. I shrugged it off and turned back to Otto, lifting my own nose to join him and inhaled. A savory assortment of herbs overlaid with meat overwhelmed my senses.

“I think it’s coming from there.” Otto nodded to a small shop with a short line outside a little hole in a wall. He quirked an eyebrow at me. “What do you say?”

I couldn’t stop my smile. “Absolutely.”

The line went quickly because there were only different styles of pulled pork sandwiches on the menu—quick to make while staying super fresh. I took my first bite and my tastebuds erupted. I expected the barbeque sauce to overtake the sandwich, but I could still taste the rosemary and oregano while the crunch from the coleslaw added another layer to the fare.

Otto was silent too as he ate then pointed to the corner of my mouth. “You have some . . .”

Face flushing, I wiped at it with a tissue.

“No, it’s—” He reached out with his thumb and gently swiped at the corner on the other side of my mouth, a tingle along my skin following in its wake. He brought his saucy thumb to his mouth and sucked. His luxurious lips filled my vision, the way they moved reminding me all too well of what they were capable of.

My belly swooped. I didn’t know having food taken off my face by him could be sensual. *New kink unlocked. Wait, no, no, no kink! Normal . . . uh . . . thought. Ugh.*

I ducked my head and, after swallowing, gave a quick and strangled, “Thanks.”

"You are very welcome."

I needed to stay centered, focused on my goal. He’d given me the bracelet. What was he sticking around for?

Duh, Mari. He wants to talk to you.

We continued on our way, wandering the streets. A crisp wind swept through my hair and I wrapped my arms around my middle. We walked away from the traffic toward the square, the businesses starting to gear up for ski season and the glut of tourists we would soon have.

I cleared my throat. “I guess you might not visit this town very often. It’s on your doorstep, but it’s not like you have to come here for groceries.”

“You’re right. Would you give me a tour?”

“Sure.” What would Otto want to see? Glancing at his attire, I said, “You’re not dressed for a hike, though we have plenty of trails around here. We could have gone along the summit of the Toll Road, but my favorite is Smuggler’s Notch. It has a dense rich forest and a really narrow mountain

pass that makes you feel hemmed in until you come out the other side and boom, vista.”

Otto chuckled. “I’d love to see a *boom, vista*.” He beamed at me. “Your vocabulary is certainly evocative, Marigold.”

I laughed, and I was transported right back to Belo Horizonte with Otto unsure of my motives. Hell, I’d been unsure too, following orders until it became clear it wasn’t helping the guys at all. Now we were the other way around, me wondering if I could trust his motives but the conversation was so relaxed and made my heart flutter in a good way. Traitorous heart.

“I am deeply sorry my text alarmed you.” Otto tucked his hands into the pockets of his tweed coat. “I—we—er . . .”

“Wanted to check in on me?” I finished for him, side eyeing him for confirmation.

A small chuckle escaped him. “Are you sure you don’t have powers to read people?”

“Yeah, pretty damn sure.” I huffed. “I would love to know nothing more than what you’re feeling right now. I’m not a huge fan of being an open book for you when I feel lost in the dark with you.”

Otto stopped and turned to me, deep gaze finding and holding mine. His eyes were sincere, baring himself to me. “I’m feeling whole for the first time since you left, while at the same time despondent because I know today will have to come to an end. I’m worried about you while wanting to respect your request, and angry that we didn’t handle the situation better. But most of all . . .” He reached out, pausing, before his fingers grazed along my jaw. “I feel regret.”

“Th—that’s a lot to feel.” My words were so quiet I wasn’t sure he heard them.

“Indeed.” His hand dropped away, and my body leaned forward of its own accord, searching for his touch again.

I shook my head and took a step back. “I’m sorry. I can’t,” I choked out. I couldn’t get pulled into their world again. It was too confusing, too easy to lose myself while I was trying so hard to find myself.

Otto’s face fell. “I gathered as much.”

Of course he did. He knew what I was feeling better than I did. I tucked my hair behind my ear. “But I want to try.”

Otto’s head shot to attention, his mouth slightly open like he hadn’t been expecting that.

“I mean, I want to understand everything better,” I corrected. “I don’t want to move back in, but I feel incomplete too. I want answers and,” I bit my lower lip, “I’m hoping you’ll help me find them.”

He stepped forward, grabbing my hand in his own like I was his tether. “Yes, absolutely. Anything.” His eyes glistened with such hope it nearly broke me in two.

Moments like this were what made me believe I wasn’t just some repeat of a past love for them. How Otto looked at me made me think maybe they really did want me for me, but I couldn’t be sure. Until I understood everything better, I never would.

One thing was for sure. if I didn’t try to figure it out, I’d regret it for the rest of my life.

“I’d like to keep this between us for now,” I added. Desire, need, fear, confusion, lust, anger; I was already feeling too much that I was a bit woozy from it all. My stomach cramped at the idea of facing the others. I wasn’t ready.

“Of course.” Another soft smile, so different from Haru’s beaming one. One main thing they had in common was how easily they gave their smiles to me.

I squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

Otto reached into his pocket again and pulled out the bracelet. “May I?”

Releasing a breath I nodded, and Otto tied it around my wrist. “It’ll mean a lot to him that you accepted it.”

My breathing was shallow as I processed his words.

I hope I don’t end up regretting getting involved again.

Chapter Three

"I'm home," I called to Mom and Chris as I opened the door. Once inside I slid off my shoes and curled my toes into the new carpet. I'd splurged on new carpeting in the house, an expensive project to be sure but something to keep me occupied.

They had arrived back from their trip a month and a half ago, tanned, tired, and full of stories of the wonderful things they had seen and done. I listened with a smile pasted to my face, and it was sweet how they tried to cheer me up from my breakup by telling me how Chris had managed to talk to some local boys in Italian and how they'd gotten invited for dinner by the boys' families and all the other adventures. But all I could think about was

Summer whenever they mentioned their holiday.

"Hello, Marigold. How was your date?" Mom came around from the lounge, grinning broadly.

My heart always eased seeing her happy. "It wasn't a date," I reminded her firmly.

"Oh, yes, you did say." Her eyes twinkled. "What's that you have there?"

"Mm?" I lifted my arm, the bracelet sliding down my wrist. "Oh, this."

Mom homed in, humming with a smirk. She was moving around a lot more pain free since I'd taken her to a neurology specialist. The bill for that hadn't landed yet though, even though it was supposed to have arrived weeks ago.

She took my hand, admiring the bracelet. "Goodness, Mari, these plants look so real. This is amazing craftsmanship."

I stifled a giggle. The plants were real, grown in Haru's cupped hands between us until it weaved around my wrist. He had then asked them if he could preserve them in resin. "Yes, it is."

Mom grinned at me. "So, it definitely wasn't a date?"

I fought the urge to roll my eyes and lost. "Yes, Mom."

"Oh, so it was?" Her face brightened even more.

"What?" I laughed. It felt good to laugh after so long. "I was agreeing that it *wasn't* a date."

"Oh, I thought you meant it was." She kept hold of my hand. "You seem cheerful, Marigold. Good."

Aw, man. I thought I'd done a good job of holding myself together.

She dropped my hand and shuffled to the coffee maker. "Whoever you went to see, I'm grateful to them. Definitely go out to see them again."

My stomach flipped. I'd have to see him if I wanted answers, but just Otto. Not the others, not yet. The questions were so broad and frightening. Was I controlled by destiny, or am I in control? Was I able to make decisions for myself, or was I forever stuck by other people's decisions for me? The minute I thought I was making a life for myself it turned out I'm a reincarnated mate. I wanted to know I was choosing them on purpose and they were choosing *me*.

I turned the bracelet over, the tiny leaves gently brushing my skin. How was Haru? He had to be really struggling if Otto agreed to bring me this bracelet . . .

No. I braced myself against the counter. I wasn't going to feel any kind of

sorry for them. Haru had built up this big trust thing between us and it turned out they had been keeping something huge from me.

"Oh! We got this today," Mom said, handing me a letter. It had the neurologist's letterhead on it. At last. I braced myself for the rows of zeros I was about to see as I unfolded it. Yep, there they were. Holy shit, that was a lot of numbers —

And right at the bottom, the total was in black rather than red. *Paid in full. Thank you for choosing us.*

What? I turned the letter over. Had insurance covered it with no copay?

"Marigold? Everything okay?" Mom asked.

"I think so?" It was bound to be a mistake. A clerical error of some kind.

Summer. It had to be. How in the world had he—I smacked my forehead. He probably had a finger in this medical business somehow, and had seen our names come up. Talk about stalker. A stalker who pays obscene medical bills.

Well, it would be really stupid not to take it. He had money to burn, literally; I was proud but not dumb. I wouldn't be able to pay him back, but this would more than cover the months of my life I'd wasted in that house. I'd call this even.

I folded the letter and put it in our 'To Sort' pile. "Well, that's one less thing to worry about. Just need to find myself a job now."

Mom popped a capsule into the coffee maker. "I'm glad you're not doing security anymore."

I thumped down at our dining table. "Yeah, but all these charity positions need some amount of experience. I want to find a good job, too. I can't just wing it."

"I'm sure you'll find something," Mom said, with the indefatigable confidence in me and my abilities that only a Mom has.

"Yeah." I pulled out my phone to have another look at vacancies, and my stomach somersaulted. A text had arrived from Otto.

Thank you for meeting me. Delighted to help you in your quest for answers. How would you like to start?

Fabulous. He was keen. I didn't know how I wanted to begin just yet though, so I scrolled the job site first. There wasn't anything I hadn't already applied for. Marketing manager, fundraising assistant, accountant . . .

A name caught my eye. Ecotics. The charity Summer sent obscene amounts of money to. I screenshotted it and sent it to Otto without a second

thought.

Ping.

You want to start with continuing our investigations into this outfit?

I smiled to myself. Only Otto could sound so formal in a text.

Just thought you should know, I replied.

Mom chuckled and kissed my cheek. "You're definitely more cheerful today, Marigold. I'm so relieved that this 'crying into ice cream on the sofa' phase seems to be passing."

"Thanks," I said drily, moving to my room. I laid down on my bed, phone in hand. I hadn't been sure what to expect from my meeting with Otto, but I guess I was happier after seeing him.

Another ping from a notification on my phone. *I thought about what you said regarding the apparent urgency of my earlier communication. Written text can be read multiple ways, and it isn't always clear what the intention of the author is. As humans, we look for non-verbal signals too after all, and*

He'd run out of space. I snorted to myself, watching the three little dots dance around as Otto typed away.

My apologies, there seems to be a character limit to these communiqués as well. The thrust of my missive is, I am deeply sorry for any stress I inadvertently caused.

I hearted that then texted back, *It's okay.*

Ping.

A little heart! How wonderfully darling. How did you do that?

I typed back the instructions when suddenly hearts appeared on all my messages. *You worked it out, it seems!*

Ping.

Yes, it's rather intuitive. Such a wonderful invention that's taken the world by storm.

I sat back. To them, cell phones had only appeared in their last blink of an eye, whereas I'd had them all my life. This life, anyway. Whatever that meant. I needed to understand what exactly this whole reincarnation business was about. If it was even real. I mean, did everyone reincarnate? How did that work? Would I always be me? What made me *me*, anyway? Was it being raised in the same family—some deadbeat dad, an overworked mother, and a little brother who was too smart for his own good? So many questions that needed so many answers.

Talking about text, do you have anything written down from, well . . . me?

Past me that is.

A pause. Then three little dots bounced up and down. *Yes. My most precious tomes.*

My heart raced. I want them. I suppose they are mine, right?

The dots spiked up and down furiously. Stopped. Up and down again. He was choosing his words carefully.

Ping.

Yes, they are. I find I am torn. Of course I want to give you all your old journals, but some are very old and delicate. I'd prefer they stay in my library. I do assure you this isn't a ploy to have you come to the house to read th

"Ha!" I laughed. "Oh, Otto. Short and sweet just isn't your skillset."

Ping.

It seems brevity is not in my power. Nevertheless, I will continue: I don't want to damage the older tomes. I can give you the latest. A set of three notebooks.

My heart hammered, quaking in my chest. *Thanks. I do want them as soon as you can.*

Ping.

At once.

I got up and changed, brushing out my hair and removing my makeup. Nerves tangled inside me like the knots in my hair, painful to brush through but needing to come out. What would these books be like?

A knock at the door made me jump and drop my brush. He was here already?

I ran to the door and wrenched it open before my mom could answer it. The corridor was empty, and my chest hurt. Probably for the best. I looked like shit while getting ready for bed.

I looked down at a small brown paper package, wrapped with light blue string. Holy crap. I picked it up carefully.

These were them.

"Otto?" I whispered. He had been here, right outside Mom's apartment, and so quickly. I knew they could travel fast because of the house's doors, but that was incredible.

"Hey. So. I know you're there," I said, still keeping my voice low so I didn't disturb the neighbors. There was no response, just my words echoing back to me, small and full of bravado with any actual courage. My hands

shook as I held the books and what they contained. I knew he was trying to respect the distance I kept insisting on, but I needed him now. Needed someone next to me when I opened these and confronted what could be inside.

I couldn't hear anyone in the corridor or on the stairs. I was alone with these journals, apparently written by me. Past me.

I was trembling as I padded back to my room and put them on my bed, handling them like they were a bomb or something. I grabbed my phone and exhaled heavily as I opened my messages.

I'm scared, I typed. My finger hovered over send. What exactly did I expect him to do?

I put my phone on the bedside table and took a deep breath. I could do this. It was just reading.

Ping.

My fingers fumbled with my phone.

I have delivered them. I can only imagine what you're feeling, and so far away from you, I can't tell exactly. I should think a mixture of anticipation and perhaps fear.

Another quick ping; he was getting faster with his lengthy communication at least. *There is nothing to fear, Marigold. You have always been and will continue to be resilient. I am here for you, now and forever.*

My eyes blurred with tears, and I fumbled the keyboard. "Oh, shit!" I'd sent my message: *I'm scared*.

Ping.

You can do this. I believe in you. Plus, it's just words. Words can't hurt you.

I snorted. "Tell that to the authors that reach out and yank my heart out with their stories."

Ping.

Apart from novels where we are very invested in the characters and their fates."

I grinned through the tears. We were on the same wavelength.

His texts continued, *What am I saying, of course words hurt. But these are your words, Marigold. Yours.*

Sounds hollowed out to nothing as the world melted away. I swallowed to clear them. "Yeah. My words."

I tugged the pale blue string open. I could tell Otto had wrapped it from

the clean, crisp lines of the paper, visible as I unwrapped it. Taking a deep breath, I finally looked at the brown leather diary. I ran my fingers over the intricate pattern pressed into the front cover then picked it up. It had weight to it but didn't feel familiar or anything like that.

It was an old book, but not musty. I breathed deeply of the pages, but all I could smell was the library: Otto's fresh cedar and pine scent with a little of the roaring fireplace. A lurch like I'd dropped from a significant height swooped through my stomach, tears pressing against my eyes. I wanted to be back there so badly.

The lights flickered overhead and I glanced up. They had been doing that recently all across town, and everyone put it down to weather interfering with the power lines. Coupled with these books though, thoughts of ghosts swam in my head.

I pushed them back and threw open the front cover of the first one. Out slid a thin, odd shape, fluttering onto my bed. A pressed flower had been hidden between the pages. A buttercup. My heart hammered even faster. Fuck. *Fuck*. The owner of this diary had had so many experiences with the guys and I was about to face them.

I snagged my phone, hissing when my shaking fingers couldn't open the right app. Finally I got it open and swiped out a message while dashing my tears away.

I need you.

Seconds later, there was a knock at the front door.

Chapter Four

“I’ve got it!” I hollered, scrambling off my bed and racing to the front door. Halting at the threshold, I took a moment to finger brush my hair and calm my breathing, even though my heart raced inside my chest. Once I was calmer, I pulled the door open.

Otto stood a pace from the entrance, as dapper and put together as he had been earlier today, completely unfazed.

“You got here fast . . . again,” I noted. “Were you just outside the building?”

“No, no,” he reassured me, but his lips pressed into a thin line. I narrowed my eyes at him. “Then how’d you get here so fast?”

He shifted from one foot to another as though nervous to tell me, but it was Otto, so of course he answered. “The house seems to have wanted to keep us connected.”

“Meaning?” I pressed, gripping tightly to the door.

Now he was really uncomfortable, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m assuming you haven’t noticed the new, er, let’s call it a ‘hall closet’ on the bottom floor of the apartment building.”

My eyes widened. Now that he mentioned it, right at the bottom of the stairs there did seem to be—“A new door!” I gasped. Becoming hyper aware we were out in the open, I lowered my voice to a whisper. “The house made a new door? Here?”

Otto nodded. “It appears so. We discovered it a few days after you left.”

Again I glared, imagining what the guys could have been doing all this time. Were they taking their stalker abilities to the next level?

Otto held up his hands. “Don’t worry, Marigold. We learned where it led, but then made a vow to not use it unless it was out of safety or request. Yours specifically.”

My shoulders relaxed. They were taking my declaration for space seriously. The way that warmed my insides only made my head spin more.

“Well, thanks, I guess. Even if it’s creepy.”

“Don’t blame us. It’s the house,” Otto corrected.

“Yes, a very, very creepy house.”

Otto chuckled, the soothing sound instantly loosening my breath, which seemed to relax Otto too.

Shit, he felt everything I did. I really needed to be more aware of that again.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

Otto met my eyes. “Don’t worry. It’s not only your nerves I’m feeling. If anything, I should be saying sorry to you.”

I flushed a little at his insinuation. To think that I could make this drop dead gorgeous, brilliant, unflappable man become as organ twisted as myself seemed preposterous. I was never one that men grew nervous or bashful around. If anything, I became one of the ‘bros’ or easily friend-zoned women. Nothing of undying interest. That is, until them.

“Honey, aren’t you going to let your guest inside?”

I jumped at my mother’s voice behind me. “Uh, come in,” I said as I stepped aside.

My mother bustled forward, beaming at Otto as she took him in, and used the moment to introduce herself. “Hello, forgive my daughter’s poor manners. I’m Beth.”

“Hello Mrs. Stewart. I’m Otto. The pleasure is all mine.” His hand enveloped hers, and he even gave a slight bow, which I assumed was an old habit.

With his head lowered, my mom looked over the top of it to where I stood and mouthed ‘oh my’ at me.

I turned and shut the door before my mom could see my flushing cheeks, and knowing Otto no doubt felt my embarrassment only heightened it until my stomach flip-flopped.

“Would you like some coffee? Tea?” My mother had yet to let go of his hand.

I spun around and grabbed his hand out of hers. “That won’t be necessary, but thanks!” I dragged Otto away with his warm hand wrapped around mine.

“Let me know if you change your mind!” My mom called after us right before I shut my bedroom door.

I dropped Otto’s hand, swallowing at the missing contact, and pressed my back against my door. “Sorry about that.” I released a soft chuckle.

“Your mother was kind, even enthusiastic,” Otto said as he took in my stark room, eyes roaming over every small inch. Naturally his gaze lingered on my paltry bookshelf of five books, most of which were leftover classics from high school.

“Yeah,” I laughed awkwardly, “might be the first time I’ve ever brought a guy home.”

He turned to me, one eyebrow arched.

“Not that I’m bringing you home,” I sputtered. “I mean—she hasn’t really met any guy that . . .” I trailed off, unsure of exactly what to call Otto or the rest of them. We had never really given ourselves a title beforehand and now it was even more confusing. Clearing my throat, I headed to my bed and plopped down next to the diaries. “Feel free to make yourself comfortable.”

The bed dipped as he sat down on the other side of the books. His back was straight, hands placed in his lap. His formality had my insides doing somersaults and as though I needed to balance it out, I wiggled backward until I hit the wall behind me and crossed my legs under me.

Otto watched me, an indecipherable look in his eyes. “Trying to put some

distance between us. Don't you trust me?"

Considering this was the first guy who'd ever been in my bedroom, and he was like a piece of dessert ready to be unwrapped, it wasn't that I didn't trust him. I didn't know if I trusted myself.

I grabbed the brown leather diary and opened it without answering, flipping through the pages until Otto's name caught my eye.

Last night with Otto was unlike anything I'd experienced. Not to say the others didn't have their own talents. I love the way Haru can help open me up to new experiences or how Summer's control allows me to let go. Or the way Winter's stoic nature melts away leaving us to bare our souls. But Otto . . . Oh, Otto. Just the thought still has my toes curling. He reads me like one of his precious books. He knows exactly when to push, to pull back, and how to use his fingers, tongue, and member to drive me to the brink of insanity as he brings me to climax after climax. It had been a while since it was just the two of us, but I swear he made me burst eight times last night.

My face flushed. Otto had definitely made me orgasm, but this insatiable side of him I had yet to experience. I was actually almost jealous. And the rest of it . . . It was like I could've written it myself, the way she . . . me . . . she—us—damnit, however you wanted to describe it—wrote about the other guys, it was like the words were taken right out of my own mouth.

I lowered the book, keeping it at an angle so Otto couldn't fully see what piece I was reading. "How many?"

"How many what? Books?" Otto's finger grazed against the spines of the others. "I admit there are quite a few more at my library, but I figured this was enough to get you started. If I am mistaken, I will happily —"

"No," I shook my head, "how many, uh, versions? Has it just been me and Rose or . . ."

"Ah," Otto sighed. "You are the fourth version, as you called it, of yourself."

"Am I," I hesitated, biting my lip, "always the same?"

Otto gave me one of his soft smiles. "Yes and no. It is always inherently you. Your upbringing may be different, but some key things remain. Your determination, your quest for adventure, your love of life, and your kindness and selflessness."

"I see." At least I kind of did. "What were the other names?"

"Well, you know Rose's name, but there was also Dahlia, Yasmin and Lily."

“All flowers,” I noted. My previous selves may have had different upbringings and ethnicities, but it seemed there was more commonality aside from personality traits.

“I must admit,” Otto turned his head, hiding his face in a shy manner that was unlike him, “Marigold is my favorite so far.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Really?”

His eyes crinkled as he smiled. “Yes. Marigolds symbolize strength, hope, life. They represent the light that lives within each person. All of those things are exactly what you bring to us.”

I didn’t know if it was his words or the way I barely breathed that made me dizzy, causing a giddiness to glide through my limbs. I finally understood why he always chose to call me by my full name instead of just ‘Mari’ like I usually preferred.

“Plus, it is one of the few flowers that can live through every season.” This time he beamed, and again, that smile stole what little breath I had left.

I didn’t know what possessed me to do it. It was like my brain turned off and the draw to him, to these things he said about me and *my* name, but the next thing I knew I had closed the two feet separating us and was pulling his face toward mine until our lips met.

He froze at first, but after a heartbeat, his lips molded against mine. He tasted of earl gray tea. His hand came up to cup my neck, pulling me deeper into his kiss. Our lips moved in unison, teasing and delicious as we fell into the void where nothing else seemed to exist except the feel of the other’s lips. Needing a moment, I pulled back.

Otto released me reluctantly, chest rising and falling fast. We stared at one another. His gaze was dark and tempting with such deep desire it was difficult to keep my head on straight. The more time that passed caught in each other’s stare, the more logic entered my brain until the realization of what I’d just done slapped me across the face.

I plopped backward, cheeks heating from embarrassment and anger at myself. No. I needed space. But damn it all to hell, I *wanted* him. I *wanted* all of them. Rose’s words were getting in my head.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” I uttered as I reached up to touch my swollen lips.

“I didn’t mind.” Otto’s lighthearted tone reminded me of Haru, of how that was something he would’ve said, but instead of making me feel better it made me feel worse because it only made me miss him.

Fuck.

“This was a bad idea.” Tears threatened in my eyes. I refused to cry, but I was dizzy, not less. He shouldn’t have come. “I think you should go.”

Otto paused. From the corner of my eye, I knew he was watching me, but I couldn’t meet his gaze. “I understand,” he said after a moment, rising from the bed. He headed to the door. “If you ever need me, I’m only seconds away. Just text.”

The door handle squeaked. “Otto!” My head shot up, heart hammering. I didn’t want him to leave like this.

He stopped, turning back toward me with an eyebrow raised.

“I . . . I—” Shit, I had no freaking clue what to say to him. I was overwhelmed, but I needed some kind of hope I’d see him again soon. My chest ached at the thought of him leaving even if my brain said that was what needed to happen. “I want to come to the library.” The words flew from my mouth. “When I’m done reading these,” I added quickly, pointing at the diaries. “I’ll write my questions down and then I can read the others?”

Otto smiled. “Of course.”

“But,” I chewed on my bottom lip, “I don’t want the others to know.”

Otto’s eyes softened. Of course it took no further explanation as to why. “I will find a time when you can come in unnoticed. I shall text you to arrange something. How does that sound?”

I nodded. “Good,” I mumbled.

“Very well. Have a lovely rest of your evening, Marigold.”

I watched him leave, mouth hanging open in a goodbye that never escaped me. After five minutes had passed, I slumped, causing my head to hit the wall a little too hard, but the jarring brought me back to reality.

Picking up the diary, I opened it to the first page.

“Alright, Rose. Bring it on.”

And I read.

Chapter Five

I read until my eyes were closing like the delicate pages of the thick book as I turned each one. Rose's diaries were accounts of what she'd done in the day along with little sketches of scenes. Some were landscapes. Some were really detailed studies of plants. But every now and again one featured a few profiles I recognized as the guys. Perhaps later she would have more detailed sketches of them. I kind of wanted to see but also didn't want to at the same time. They might look different, but mostly what I'd see is the love shining in their eyes for the person doing the drawings: their love for Rose. Not me. If they had a different expression for her than they did for me, well . . .

I yawned again. I wouldn't be able to sleep with these books within arm's reach, but they really were just an account of times, places, and what she saw. She had a bit of a poetic turn of phrase and it seems she wasn't big on exclamation marks at least. Rose felt familiar, but it still felt like I was reading someone else's diary. She felt separate from me. I got up to put on some coffee, drumming my fingers on the countertop.

It was hard to see what she could have done to anger Winter so much. In both Haru and Summer's special memory doors, which the house kept locked away from everyone including the guys, I'd seen Winter attack Rose. Or seemed to, anyway. She was pretty innocuous so far. No evil plans or plots scribbled in the margins.

The coffee machine dripped to a stop and I swiped my cup up, draining it in one. I let my tired eyes rove over the counter toward the pile of mail. Mom usually sorted that out as it came in, but she'd been pulling lots of double shifts recently, almost like she was making up for all the vacation time she'd taken. I opened them to sort through them for her. Bill for me, bill for her which I would put in my pile, and . . .

I stared at the handwriting on the next envelope as I tore it open with the letter opener. I knew that handwriting. It would be scribbled as a quick addendum to our birthday cards, where Mom would write how proud she was of us, and Dad would just sign. My heart picked up as the folded paper inside eased out.

“BETH,

Hope you and the kids are keeping well. It's hot here, had to put the AC on extra. No doubt you're cooler up north, lucky you.”

I SNORTED. “LUCKY INDEED.” He had left us up here; he had dragged us up here and then fucked off one day. He was writing to us after all this time, and I gripped the letter as intently as I had Rose's diaries.

“So THE PICKINGS are slim down here and I haven't been able to find steady work. I heard you went on some big blow-out vacation; nice for some, eh? I just need a couple thou to settle that electricity bill, and I'll be back on my feet once the weather cools off.

“Thanks, Beth.”

NO SIGNATURE. No sign off. No PS, give my love to Mari and Chris or, even better, a blow-by-blow account of where he had been this whole time. Nope, just asking Mom for more money.

This didn't read like a letter out of the blue, which meant this couldn't have been the first time he contacted her. There wasn't even details on how to send him money, and I could only conclude one thing. She'd sent him money before.

Fuck that.

I hunted around the house, opening cupboards I hardly went through, searching. Mom could have hidden these anywhere.

My fists clenched, and I had to drop the letter before it got screwed up. A lot of the mess we had been in was because of his piss-poor financial decisions, and now he was after more money.

"Mari?"

I whirled around to face Chris coming out from his room. His tousled hair was lighter from all the time spent in the sun on the trip Summer had arranged to keep them safe from CSON, but the bags under his eyes were back.

"Chris. You still up?"

"Yeah. Exams come quicker every year." He reached for the coffee pot. "I'm gotta hit the top every year if I'm gonna get valedictorian status when I graduate."

My heart damn near exploded. Chris was amazing, not because of what Dad did, but in spite of it. I couldn't be prouder . . . and worried. "Don't stay up too late, m'kay?"

"Sure." He gave me a cheeky side-eye. "What are you up this late for? You're not studying. What are you looking for?" He peered at the counter and my heart leaped, thinking I'd left the journal there. No, it was safe in my room. I couldn't explain to myself, let alone him or mom, that I was born-again; quite literally.

"Not exactly." I smoothed out the letter from Dad and lowered my voice. "Look, I—I found this. It's from Dad."

Chris came around behind me, tiredness stripped away as his eyes brightened. "Really? He wrote to you?"

The note of hope in his voice cut me. "No. He wrote to Mom. I—I'm sorry, but it seems like he's been writing to her a lot." I watched him as he scanned the letter, then turned it over as I had, looking for the rest of the

explanation or at least a note to us.

“There’s nothing else, is there.” It wasn’t a question, and Chris’ voice cracked a little. He cleared his throat as building clouds of anger brewed around me. “Why hasn’t Mom said anything?”

“Said anything about what?” Mom came into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes. “I heard banging. What are you two doing?”

“Us?” I placed the letter down on the counter between us. With Chris and I on one side and Mom in her robe on the other, it was like a jury and the accused. “What are you doing, you mean.”

I slid the letter across to her. She only had to glance at the handwriting to go pale.

“Ah,” she said.

“Ah. Yeah.” I resisted the urge to slam my hand on the counter. “How long has this been going on?”

She bit her lip and wrung the robe in her hands. “A few years. He . . . he contacted me to let me know he’s doing better, and he wanted to see you. He—he just needed the cash to get up here.”

“No way,” I said with a groan. “You didn’t fall for that, surely.”

Her eyes flashed. “I wanted you to see him, have an opportunity for a relationship with him if you wanted. I wanted you to have the choice.”

Choice. I’d had fewer choices every year as the bills piled up, as Mom’s health wavered, and as Chris’s school opportunity turned into another money sink. As for where we had started, deep in the hole, that was Dad’s fault.

Mom was staring at my hand. I’d screwed up the letter in my fist. I relaxed it with an effort.

“Fuck,” Chris muttered.

“Language!” Mom said, almost a reflex, and I started laughing. It wasn’t happy laughter exactly. Maybe slightly hysterical. More like laugh or cry.

“Well, it’s not great, is it?” Chris snapped. “You’ve been sending him money to come see us, and he hasn’t come.” He shoved away from the table, pacing behind me.

Mom took a gulp of breath, which turned almost into a sob. “. . . I didn’t say anything because I wanted him to actually be in the same town before I did.”

“That was prudent,” Chris said, and I smiled over my shoulder at him. He was so smart and funny, and God how it tore my heart thinking of how Dad had missed it all. It hurt, and the only thing that welled in that reopened scar

was boiling rage.

Mom wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"No. It's not your fault." I paused, sighing. "Well, sending him money was misguided," I say.

"He's the one taking advantage of you," Chris said with a snarl. "Cut him off."

"I have. I stopped responding to him a year ago."

"Right." I eyed Mom. She was as much a victim as Chris and me, trying to parent us through Dad's shitty choices the only way she knew how. The difference was she needed to be protected from her own nature. "Don't send him anything. Give me his bank details."

She nodded once, drawing her robe tighter. "Alright," she said softly, and I felt like the biggest asshole.

Well, the biggest, kingpin asshole was Dad, so I didn't feel *that* bad.

She left to go to bed, and I flattened out the letter.

"She's protecting us again." Chris sounded like I felt—annoyed but understanding. "I get why she did it, protecting our good memories of our father rather than exposing him for the shit he is."

A smile tugged my lips into a lopsided grin. I'd find out where he was and confront him.

"What are you smiling about?" Chris frowned at me.

I laid my palms flat on the counter on either side of my steaming coffee mug. "I'm going to track him down and ask him myself."

Chris raised an eyebrow. "Good luck with that. Probably need some kind of Tardis to hop around after all his aliases."

"I know." My grin intensified.

I knew just the guy to call to make it happen.

Chapter Six

I ran the folded edge of the letter from my dad between my thumb and forefinger again as I waited in front of the new closet door on the first floor. Should be any second now.

The handle twisted and Otto's head popped through the opening. As soon as he saw me he smiled, making my heartbeat thunder rapidly. "Ready?"

"Uh huh." Nerves rattled my bones as I stepped forward. Otto swung the door wider and I stepped back into their house. I breathed in deeply, to steady myself and to just . . . be, for a moment.

I followed Otto to the library, memories of the good times and trying times washing over me. All the walls we'd put up between us: protecting the

secret that they apparently knew me and then falling in love with me without me being part of it; then trying to live around it by not telling me. I tried to breathe through it, but it was hard when I could literally see the boys all around me in every aspect of the space. Twisted vines had scrambled up along the ceiling and trailed down each and every corridor as if searching for light, but they'd been stopped in their tracks by fall, all of them withered and dormant.

Otto walked brusquely, more vines wilting in his wake. I'd never seen his power so potent.

"Summer is finishing up some last-minute needs at one of his businesses before the change of seasons is over. Winter and Haru are off together in New Zealand for the day to help make the transition less jarring. We have the place to ourselves," Otto said over his shoulder, a small smile on his lips.

It did help me relax a little, but a piece of me sank too. I didn't think I'd ever been in the house without at least two of them present, and knowing they weren't there not only made the house feel emptier, but me too.

Otto passed a corridor and a flash of color at the end caught my eye. It was a door with beautiful flowers blooming all around it. I'm not a flower person, but I could sure as hell identify roses at fifty paces, yellow and pink heads nestled among the rest of them.

"That's pretty," I said, but then my stomach dropped. "Is that another Haru door?"

Otto came back to look at it with me, shrugging. "Hm. No, I don't think so."

I pursed my lips and walked on. I didn't want him to get close in case he caused the flowers to go dormant. Pushing my nails into my palms to ground me, I said, "So, thanks for helping me with my requests."

"You know you can ask for anything and have it granted," Otto said, low voice rolling around me like a comforting warm blanket. "Anything, anyone, anytime."

"Right." I swallowed hard. Today was about getting answers; I had to keep focused on that and not how being near him made me feel. "First thing I want to know. How would you go about tracking down a specific person?"

He looked at me sharply. "Who do you mean?"

Wow, *jumpy, much?* "My dad is sending demanding letters to my mom. I'm going to make him stop it, but I need to know where he is first."

"Your father," Otto's eyes focused on me, while his shirt strained against

the buttons from a deep breath, “goodness, he’s in trouble,” he said wryly.

Having Otto as an emotional barometer was kind of refreshing. I didn’t have to explain what I was feeling. He already knew. “Yeah, he is in deep shit and doesn’t know it. Well? Can you help?”

“Absolutely. Just give me a name and any known aliases, last known location —”

I stomped alongside him. “Mark Stewart, plenty of aliases, and last known location to me was . . .” My throat closed. “Our house.”

He’d left fifteen years ago. The lump in my throat got bigger.

Otto’s hand slid closer. “I understand.”

He did. He felt this with me. I shook myself to keep from taking his hand. “You got all sus when I asked if you could help.”

“I did. I thought you meant Dr. Smith, perhaps still considering her a threat.”

“No, she’s long gone, right?” I halted in the corridor. “Right? Summer made sure she’s not employable by research agencies.”

“Almost correct. *I* made sure of that.” Otto turned to face me. “I may be something of a shut-in nowadays, but I have my uses.”

I mulled over the word nowadays. “That reminds me of the office Summer said I could decorate. It was clearly once yours though.” Saying his name hurt, as did remembering how invested I had been in getting to know them. Little had I known he was just trying to recapture *my past lives*, not me for myself. Hot bubbles of anger fired in my gut until my stomach turned sour and made me queasy.

No doubt Otto felt my anger. He reached out toward my face as if to cup my cheek, but drew his hand away with a grimace before making contact. “I’m sorry,” was all he said, as if it were all *his* fault.

“It’s fine. Let’s get on with these diaries,” I said, my voice flat.

The library itself was exactly how I’d remembered it: polished hardwood, stacked fireplace blazing merrily, and the armchair with its colorful throw. On his desk there must’ve been a stack of at least fifty books, and even from here I could see the yellowed edges of the brittle paper, which made sense because Rose had existed a century and a half ago. The rest were older than that.

Seeing them, these tomes holding my supposed previous lives reduced to ink on flat pieces of paper, I halted in place. This was a really, *really* bad idea.

Otto rubbed the back of his neck. “I know it’s a lot, but I didn’t really know where you’d want to start. Although, I will happily direct you if you have a time specific in your mind you want to investigate more.”

Stepping forward as my eyes roved over the volumes, I was struck by something. Yes, I wanted answers, but this almost felt invasive. Especially after reading the few Otto had given me. It held her fears and desires, and details I had yet to understand how I felt about. But there was one person I was extra curious about.

“Who was the first version of me you met?” On the far corner of the desk seemed to be the oldest manuscripts, hand bound and so frail I was worried they’d fall apart if I breathed too hard.

“That would be Dahlia,” Otto answered as he headed straight for the diaries that had caught my eyes. “Then Yasmin, and then there was Lily.” He stepped forward to the next row of towering books. “And finally, Rose.” Half of the desk must’ve been taken up by her volumes. I was unsure if it was a materials situation where she could afford more paper, or if Rose was particularly fond of keeping track of every detail.

I headed to Dahlia’s meager stack and carefully flipped open the first page. It wasn’t in English, the writing so faint that even if I could understand the language, I doubted I would pick up on much.

Otto peered over my shoulder, drawing my attention, and when he looked at what book I had opened he closed his eyes and began to recite. The first line, the words came out in a musical lilt unknown to me. I presumed it was in the language the book was written in. The words flowed swiftly from his full lips but then transitioned to and stayed in English. “I found the last of them. He is already losing memories of his human life. Like the others, it grows foggy. I called him Winter, since their name seems to be the first thing they forget. He’s powerful, strong, and has a brutal nature I don’t want to tame. And yet, there’s a softness to him, like cozying up beside a fire as snow gently falls from the sky to cover the land in a smooth blanket. He’s quiet, but there’s a lot to him. I feel that bringing them together somehow is the right thing. Not just for me but for them. They feel as unbalanced as this world, but somehow, when we’re all together it makes sense. We make sense. I know my time with them will be shorter than the lives they live. Summer hasn’t aged a day since I first met him. Meanwhile it’s been twenty years for me. Gray hairs are starting to peek through. But my life is fulfilled with them in it, and I plan to fill their lives with as much happiness as they bring me

with the time that I do have.”

I was so caught up in her words that I barely noticed when Otto’s recitation ended. That was until a gentle thumb swept over my upper cheek. It wasn’t until that moment I realized I had started to shed silent tears. Closing the book, I turned to Otto.

The paper I’d brought with all the questions I had written down was crumpled in my hand. In reality I didn’t need it.

“How?” My voice was weak. “How is this possible? Reincarnation. Finding one another. The fact that you live one life while I don’t . . . All of it.”

Otto cupped my cheek, which I leaned into. “That is a mystery still to me. What I do know is that it is a marvel, a blessing, and one I will cherish until my days are done.”

“How can you love so many?” The way he seemed to cherish every version of me left me breathless.

He smiled. “How can *you*?”

I hadn’t realized I’d used the word love until his return question washed into me. It had slipped out of me so easily like it was always there, ready to use. Did I love them? Each of them, in their own way? I thought I did before, but after the secrets they had kept and everything that had happened, I didn’t know if I was ready to go there. I was still finding myself and understanding who I was. I wasn’t ready to get lost with four men, no matter how amazing they each were. Not before I had a chance to live for myself. My life was only just beginning.

Otto interrupted my thoughts, which I was thankful for because I wasn’t ready to answer his question. “It isn’t loving multiple women, Marigold. It is getting to fall in love with *you* over and over again. Sometimes your favorite color is different. But it’s always some kind of blue. And figuring out which shade it is this time around is half the fun.”

My breath hitched. “Does this mean . . . I have no choice?”

“You always have a choice, Marigold.” Otto stepped closer to me, his cedar scent filling my nose. “We would never force you to do anything you didn’t want; even be with us.”

“But isn’t this, like, destiny or something?”

He gave a one shouldered shrug. “You could call it that. But I believe we make our own destinies. We would never make you be with us if you didn’t want to be.”

I swallowed thickly. They had already proven that by keeping their distance when I asked for it.

“I’m not saying I don’t want to be,” I uttered. “I just want to know it’s my choice instead of something decided for me.” Speaking the words out loud, the ones that had consumed me over these many weeks as I’d tried to figure out exactly what I wanted, was a weight lifting off my chest.

Otto pulled me into him, wrapping his arms around me in a supportive embrace. “Nothing will ever be decided for you.”

I relaxed into him, pressing my face against his firm chest. “It really doesn’t bother you? Finding different women, falling for different women, and sharing them all? Even if it’s technically me. It doesn’t make you feel out of control?”

He took a deep breath, my head raising a little with the action. “I don’t view it as different women, but different versions of the same woman, and each version of you is beautiful. You are each ticklish in different ways, for example, and it’s a joy to find out where each time. It’s akin to falling in love with someone while you’re both young. As you go through life, you change and you grow. You become new versions of yourself as you gain new experiences. However, they are all still inherently you, and instead of your partner missing that older version of yourself, we cherish and fall in love with every one.” His voice rumbled through his chest, soothing me. “For me, this is one life, and I have the luxury of falling in love with every variation of you, while gaining the pleasure of getting you to fall for me and getting to experience the world through your eyes all over again. You are a blessing to us in more ways than you’ll ever know. *You* are who we choose, Marigold.”

I didn’t know what to say or how to respond. My heart swelled at the sentiment, but I was still terrified of truly letting myself fall—of losing myself to them. I wanted them to be my choice as much as Otto made it seem like I was theirs.

But at least I knew that. *I was a choice*. One they made over and over again and didn’t seem to have any regrets about. I just needed to make sure the same was true for me.

Leaning my head back, I peered at Otto. The kindness in his eyes, the adoration, as he looked down at me could’ve melted me from the inside out.

“How do you know it’s *me* you want and not some memory? You’ve only known me for a few months. How can you be so sure I’m what you want?”

He reached up and ran a finger over the side of my face, never taking his

eyes away from mine. “I know more than you realize, Marigold. I know that you get fidgety and restless like Haru, which is why you need to exercise, and the fact that you two can do that together is wonderful. I know that you would do anything for your family but the burden gets to you, which is why allowing your walls to come down around Summer and have someone else be in charge for once is cathartic for you.” He pulled his hand away and held up a finger. “Despite that,” he objected to himself, “you don’t like to feel powerless and need a level of control yourself.”

I grew dizzy with his words. Here he was describing me in ways I didn’t think anyone knew or noticed, not even myself, and I felt like I was being laid bare not only in front of him but in front of myself.

He continued, “I know you hate garlic.”

I gaped, blinking.

Otto released a short chuckle. “Which Winter hasn’t realized yet, and none of us have told him because it has been far too amusing to watch him try to figure out your favorite dish.”

“*That’s* what he’s been doing?” I squeaked.

Another laugh. “Indeed, quite to our delight. You’ve been the hardest for him to pinpoint, but I think the challenge is good for him. Honestly, I think the focus is one of the reasons he’s gotten better at controlling his powers. Let’s see, what else,” he mused. “You would prefer leggings over jeans, which I have no problem with considering how tight they are against your voluptuous thighs and arse.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Really? When I swung back to face him his smile had widened, and he cleared his throat before continuing. “You enjoy a medium blend from a French press when making coffee. You love to travel, which is fortunate for us, and you soak up knowledge of other cultures in a way that even I’m jealous of.”

All of that struck like he was hitting little bullseyes inside me. *Ding, ding, ding*. It was me alright. Or her. Us? I shook my head and latched onto the last thing he said, snorting, “You? You’re practically a walking encyclopedia.”

His brows shot up. “Goodness, you know what an encyclopedia is? I didn’t think anyone your age—Ow!” He grinned and rubbed at where I had batted him on the chest. “You forget, Marigold, I’ve had centuries to acquire the knowledge I possess. Your retention of information in such a short amount of time is something to be desired.” His face turned serious, all humor dying out as his gaze pierced me. “And what you need to know is this

is all *you*—Marigold Stewart. These are not things you have in common with the others.” His finger hooked under my chin, lifting it. “These are things that I have come to admire and love about you, and only you.”

And there it was. The ‘L’ word. I did the only thing I could think in that moment after everything he’d just said. About how much he truly saw me for me.

I didn’t know how we would figure this out, but I wanted to. Desperately. We’d only known each other for a few months, and yet.

It felt like lifetimes.

I kissed him. Again.

Chapter Seven

His hands roved over my body, lingering on top of my curvy hips. His tongue delved into my mouth, tasting and toying with me. My core heated, my panties growing slick from the meticulous way he teased me.

My arms wound around his neck, pulling him closer and bringing my body flush against his. His hands slid from my hips to the swell of my ass. His hard length pressed against my stomach through his jeans, beckoning to be set free.

My clit throbbed. I needed a release. Rose's words played in my head with the number of orgasms this man could give a woman.

Fuck, I wanted that. It was like I'd been shoved into the back of a closet over the past month, left to get dusty as I'd tried to regain my footing. In this

moment, there was a peek of light from the bottom of the door, leading me to the freedom, to the ecstasy, that I so greatly desired.

The only way I'd be able to figure this stuff out was with them. We were all in this together.

"Marigold." Otto broke away, breathing heavily. His pupils were so dilated his eyes were dark. "Don't mistake me I want this, desperately, but . . . Are you sure?"

What a sweetheart. I smiled and squeezed his shoulder. "Thank you for checking, but yes. I want to know so much; I need to know more about why me, why us. Why is this happening?" There was more, so much more, I needed to know the answer to. I spent my life trapped by other people's decisions, unable to make choices for myself. Was this a choice I could finally make for myself, or was I still trapped?

And again, why me? Did they only love me because they were somehow required to? Otto's words suggested that they didn't. That they loved *me*. And I wanted more of that.

I dragged Otto's lips back to mine as my fingers traveled down his firm torso and fumbled with his belt. It took longer than normal to loosen because I didn't dare break our kiss, as if he'd be snatched away from me if we stopped.

His hands traced my sides. "Fuck," he moaned into my mouth. He continued to move down my body, fingers hooking into my leggings to pull them down to my ankles as he kneeled before me. "Marigold, my beauty."

He must've truly been right at the brink because he didn't waste any time teasing, instead attacking my pussy like a starving man.

His tongue swiped down my center, releasing a torrent of pleasure that threatened weakness to my legs already.

My hands grasped the desk as I leaned against it for support.

One leg at a time, he fully removed my leggings before pushing my legs further apart. His fingers slipped through my folds where his tongue didn't.

He moaned into me, the vibrating sensation taking the pleasure to a whole new level.

"You are decadent." He stopped, pulling back slightly to admire what was before him. "And oh so fucking wet."

"Don't stop," I begged, needing to feel him everywhere.

He gave a devilish smile—one I didn't know he was capable of and had Summer flitting through my mind. "With pleasure." He dove back in with an

increased intensity.

His fingers dipped further inside of me. They crooked, gliding against my g-spot while his tongue worked my clit.

It didn't take long to get to the edge. And unlike Summer he didn't hold back. He dipped a third finger into my pussy, filling me more and sucking on the bundle of super-charged nerves. I exploded with an orgasm, screaming his name. My legs shook and if it weren't for the desk holding me up, I would've collapsed against him.

Most people would have slowed down as I rode out my orgasm and pulling away when it was over. Not Otto. He licked harder, finger-fucking me with more vigor. My senses were overwhelmed. I tried to pull away from so much stimulation. His free hand gripped my hip, holding me in place. I couldn't see his face anymore. He was too buried between my legs as he devoured me.

I came again without warning. "Fuck!" I cried out, uncaring if someone heard us. It felt too good.

This time his movement slowed as my orgasm lessened. He rose from the ground, chin and lips glistening with my juices. With bated breath and still a little dizzy, I grabbed his shirt and pulled him toward me as he pushed his pants down, kicking them away.

His lips met mine, then his tongue. I tasted myself all over him, and it was hot as hell. His hands found my hips again, lifting me from the desk before moving over my ass. He made a move to pick me up, and I broke our kiss with a gasp.

"You can't carry me. I'm too heavy." My hands gripped his shoulders, my body tensing.

He lifted me with ease, brushing my bare core against his hardness. "Stop struggling and relax."

I gaped. "How are you this strong? Are books really that heavy?" My legs wrapped around his waist.

He didn't answer and just smirked as he spun me around.

My back hit a bookshelf.

"You were quite naughty, Marigold." Otto's gaze bored into me as his smooth cock grinded against my soaking core.

I bit my lip. "Sorry, couldn't help myself." Both of us knew I wasn't sorry at all.

"I'm not Summer. I won't punish you, per se. But you better hold on tight

because I'm not stopping," he warned.

My heart hammered at this, a thrill jolting through my body.

He lined the head of his cock with my entrance, and instead of entering slowly and giving me time to get used to him, he thrust in with ease. A split second later, he pulled almost all the way out, this time slamming into me.

I groaned, head lolling onto the books behind me. I guess he had already warmed me up. He continued to drive into me with precision. His eyes never strayed from my face, watching every reaction, every moan, and gasp. I adjusted to him with hardly any effort until his cock was hitting the perfect spot.

"Holy shit, Otto." My fingers dug into his back as I held on for dear life. This only urged him to slam into me faster, grinding against me with every stroke.

One of his hands gripped my ass harder while the other came free to reach between us and found my clit. His grinding stopped, not going into me so deep that it rattled the books, while his fingers swirled against me. Instead his movements became relentless, his cock sliding in and out of me at speed. I didn't even go a full second without his cock brushing against my g-spot. My pussy tightened around his cock, pleasure ballooning.

His thumb pressed against my clit.

I came unraveled. I pressed into him and found his lips. I rode out my third orgasm with my tongue in his mouth, wanting to close whatever distance was between us.

I expected it to end and for him to come. He didn't.

Otto continued to rub my clit and fuck me, stars filling my vision. "Come for me again, Marigold."

Instantly, another orgasm built inside of me at the command. I needed more, after so many orgasms I was almost going numb like my body couldn't take any more.

"Fuck me harder," I begged.

"With pleasure." He removed his hand from between my legs to grip my ass once more and slammed into me. Every time his skin slapped against my clit, I grew closer, eliciting small gasps from me.

The only sounds in the room were our harsh breaths and the slick slapping of his cock into my pussy.

I tightened more at how much his cock filled me now. "More," I gasped.

He gave it to me. This time he fully lost control. I'd probably have

bruises from where he squeezed my ass so hard. It felt amazing.

With one last slide, he burrowed himself deep inside of me.

I cried out, my orgasm exploding around his cock and blackness taking over my sight.

He buried his head into the crook of my neck to muffle his own groan. His hot seed spurting inside of me, his cock bouncing with the effort as he ground against my core.

We held onto one another for dear life as we rode out our mutual ecstasies.

Pulling back, he smiled at me as we caught our breath. Not just with the same satisfaction I felt, but also with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“Okay,” I said, leaning heavily against the wall. “Now, let’s set some ground rules.”

Chapter Eight

I practically skipped to the bookstore. It had been a few days since I'd come home from the mansion, texting Otto back and forth as we set some expectations. Otto was the go-between with the guys. I made sure I was really making this decision with a cool head, and I was pleased with what we were proposing.

Rule one, no more hiding things. It was a mutual requirement. I would tell them when I felt uncomfortable, and they wouldn't hide anything else from me.

Rule two, I had questions I couldn't even put into words so I wanted time to develop and ask them.

And rule three, we all had to continue with our day jobs. They couldn't neglect their work, and I needed something that was all my own. A career was a good place to start. While I was still waiting to hear back from some job prospects, I decided to do some more research on my own—non-diary oriented.

I was typing another message to Otto, *Heading to No Shelf Control, want me to pick you up anything?* Before I could hit send, I smacked into a hard chest.

“Ack!” I stepped back. “Sorry,” I said as I looked up to a reflection of my startled face in a pair of dark sunglasses. “Sorry again. I’ll just be on my way.” I leaned to the right, readying to step around this behemoth grimacing at me.

“Not so fast.” His hand landed on my shoulder, a dark purple viper tattoo on full display.

I sucked in a breath in recognition, but before a peep could escape, a massive, calloused hand clamped over my mouth from behind.

The two men dragged me into the alley, while all I could do was muffle-scream and kick my legs. Despite trying to use my weight to my advantage, their hold was unyielding and there was no getting out of it.

They threw me against a brick wall, blockading me so I couldn't even see if anyone was there to call for help.

My eyes assessed them, taking in their dark blue jeans, Dickies boots, black t-shirts, and tattoos that seemed to be laughing at me. The space between them and me and me and the wall was going to make it difficult to defend myself.

“What do you want?” I spat. “Who are you?” They didn't seem like CSON operatives. Their stance didn't show military training. It wasn't rigid enough, and if their glasses broke in a fight it could hurt or blind them. And unless Dr. Smith was resorting to hiring thugs, that didn't match up either.

The one on the right wrapped his hand around my throat.

Damn he was fast.

“Who said you could speak?” he snarled with a squeeze.

I managed to keep breathing despite the tight grip. It was clearly meant more for intimidation than incapacitation.

The other one leaned down close to my face. “Let this be a warning to you and yours. Darius is pissed. He doesn't care how he gets it, but he's owed. Got it?”

I said nothing, my brain whirring to figure out what the hell they were talking about. I didn't owe anyone anything. And who the fuck was Darius?

The one holding my neck pulled me forward. "Did you hear him?" A gold tooth glinted from his sneer.

"Oh, I didn't realize I could speak now," I managed.

"Answer the question!" His arm bulged, and I scoured them for weaknesses. I had no weapons, and even if I managed to get out of their grip, I knew I wouldn't make it far.

Damnit, I should've taken Haru up on his running after all.

"Understood," I said.

The beast of a man released me with a shove. "If we have to come back, you'll regret it."

The two of them sauntered away, completely exposed and so cocky about me not being a threat, I was half-tempted to race after them and show them what I could do. But men like that didn't give answers, and I undoubtedly would break a few bones against them. It wasn't worth it and figuring out who they worked for was more important. At this rate I was inclined to believe they had the wrong person, and I'd be ready for them next time.

If they wanted to come at me again, I'd make *them* regret it. I didn't know a Darius and I'd be sure to send a message of my own that they had the wrong woman.

Shaking off the interaction I continued on my way, although I didn't take my phone out again and continuously threw glances over my shoulder.

Once at the bookstore, I perused the bookshelves and as more time passed, the tension in my shoulders eased. I scoured the nonfiction section until I finally landed in the spiritual section. "Aha! There you are!" I reached out and snagged a book with a spine that read, *Reincarnation and Meanings*.

I thumbed through the pages, skimming the chapter headings and subheadings. "What is reincarnation, how to tell how you died," I mumbled to myself. "What was your past life like?" I sighed. This was useless, at least for me. Then something caught my eye, and I quickly flipped back a few pages. "Does everyone reincarnate?"

The bells to the front door rang, more distant than usual as I read.

Reincarnation is dependent on your belief system. For example, some believe you will continuously reincarnate until enlightenment is reached. Others believe reincarnation is a direct consequence of the life you lived before. For example, if you lived a good life in the past, in your next life you

may be born with more riches. While if you led a life filled with poor choices, you could come back a bug. Whatever the belief system, reincarnation is about the soul itself gaining wisdom and knowledge through multiple lifetimes and is often the reason previous lives are not remembered. Some believe there are leftover effects from previous lives. For example, if you died via drowning in a past life, you may be fearful of water in the next. Nevertheless, a lot can be learned by an individual soul when it lives multiple lifetimes.

“You know this isn’t a library, right?”

A small yelp flew from my mouth as I swung my arm, book in hand, ready to knock whoever had snuck up behind me.

Summer’s hand jolted up to catch my wrist before getting a face full of hardback.

“Holy fuck, Summer.” I calmed my ricocheting nerves with steady breaths through my nose. He was lucky I only had a book in my hand.

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his mahogany brown eyes. “Seems some things change, but your reflexes aren’t one of them.” He glanced down at the book. “I can purchase that for you, if you’d like.”

“No, thanks.” Calming myself, I turned to put the book back where I found it, and when I spun back around I truly saw him.

His dark brown hair was messy, greasy even, from a lack of showering. His usual bronzed tone had a gray pallor to it. My heart lurched. Perhaps he was sick. I knew they could die, but not from an every day illness. Dark circles made his eyes look sunken, creating a void that made his attempt at an easy going smile look more tired. He’d misbuttoned his shirt, giving the white linen a lopsided appearance, and there were clear wrinkles in his pants that his hands were tucked into.

My stomach turned. “Are you okay?” I stepped forward, hand lifted to place my fingers on his forehead to search for a fever.

He gently turned my hand aside. “Of course, *Mariposa*. Why wouldn’t I be?” His voice didn’t have his normal smooth tone. It was scratchy, like he’d been awake for several days with hardly any water.

I took a step back, frowning. “What are you doing here?”

“I had to see you,” he blurted. I rubbed my ears. Had I heard right? “I needed to say *lo siento*. I shouldn’t have lied to you. I was *estúpido*. Mari, I need you.” He moved forward, crowding me against the bookcase.

My back hit the shelves, and I held up a hand. “Summer, stop.” To my

surprise, he did. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“No, *mi amor*, this is exactly where I need to be. Wherever you are. Don’t you see that? Don’t you understand that?” Sweeping his hands through his mussed hair, he devolved into a torrent of Spanish. “*Cometí un error. Lo siento mucho. Necesito que me perdones. Por favor ven a casa, tu perteneces a lado mío. Perteneces a nosotros. No sé cuánto puedo soportar esto*¹.” He spoke so quickly I couldn’t keep up. Granted it had been a while since my lessons with Otto, but it was difficult to even pick up on a word at the pace he was going.

“Summer,” I growled between gritted teeth. “You need to leave.”

His eyes widened. “No! No! I’m sorry. *Por favor!*”

“What I mean is it’s not your season. You’re going to fuck up the weather system,” I said.

He took a wavering step back. “I—Yes, I know, but I had to explain. I see it now, what I did wrong. I pushed you too much. I shouldn’t have done that. I should’ve listened to you more.” He dropped to his knees on the ground before me, and a shiver ran up my spine. “I will do anything for your forgiveness. I will beg at your feet. I will do anything you ask. I am yours.”

Summer, the strong Summer who captivated and took control of a room within seconds, was on the ground at my feet. I hated it. If it were something I’d requested that would be different, but this was awful.

“Are you drunk?” I hissed, looking up and down the aisle to make sure no one saw.

He shook his head. “No.” His voice cracked. “I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t push me too far. It was the fact you *lied*, Summer. *Mintió*,” I reemphasized in Spanish. Seems my language lessons had stuck after all. “And you hid things from me. That’s not how relationships work. Hell, I even liked how much you pushed me. I loved I could tell you when it crossed a boundary, and you respected it. Right now you are *not* respecting my wishes or my boundaries. I’m setting it all up via Otto.”

He hung his head, swallowing several times. “You are right. I am sorry. I will go.” With a dejected slump in his shoulders, he went to push himself off the ground. He’d half risen when he fell, fire sparking from his fingers.

“Shit!” I stomped the embers bouncing across the wooden floor. “We are in a bookshop! Curb your fire before you set it alight.” Once I was sure the

store wasn't about to go up like the library of Alexandria, I squatted and reached under his arm, readying myself to take on his weight.

My palm burned and I pulled my hand away, shaking it out like I'd just touched a hot stove.

"Are you okay?" Summer rose slowly, fear coating his voice. His gaze tracked the movement of my hand. "Let me see, now."

"No, it's fine." At least, I thought I was. When the burning died down, I inspected it. The scars from snatching a hot fork out of Summer's hand flared with the most pain, but while my palm was red there were no new burns.

Summer stared at it. "I shouldn't have come," he whispered, more to himself than to me.

"Summer." I stepped forward, drawing his attention. "You're really hot." I hovered my hand above him by a few inches. The heat could've toasted marshmallows. "Like, really fucking hot."

He swiped his hand through his hair again. "I . . . haven't been feeling great."

I frowned. "Let's get you home. Where's the closest door?"

He shook his head. "I'll find my own way back. I won't bother you again."

I leveled a glare at him. "Clearly you're sick or something." That's why he'd jumped the gun and come to see me now, even though it would mess with the climate. My stomach eased. "I am taking you home."

Summer's jaw clenched, but then his face softened. His shoulders dropped as he whispered, "Alright."

"Good boy." I put my hand over my mouth, stifling an unbidden laugh. Based on the darkening of his stare, he enjoyed it more than found it funny. Shaking my head, I reached out, ready to support his weight, careful of his bare skin. "Let me help."

He flinched back. "Don't. Please."

Any other time, I would've pushed, but he wasn't himself. He clearly didn't have full control of his powers. Without Winter there to protect me from the heat, I took his warning seriously.

"I'll follow you then." I gestured for him to lead the way.

Chapter Nine

Summer weaved down the street like a man who'd spent the night binging, then staggered to a halt in front of a yellow Lamborghini.

"Holy shit, you *drove*? You didn't use a door?"

Summer fumbled for the keys in his pocket. "No. No . . . Door. Otto won't tell me which one." He dropped the keys with a hiss.

"Props to Otto for that." Before he could bend over to pick them up, I rushed over to snag them myself. I didn't need him face planting in the middle of the street. "I'll drive."

He narrowed his eyes at me, failing to hold himself steady. "Are you sure?"

“Are *you* sure you’re not drunk?” I’d worked as a bartender for years, so I wasn’t a stranger to these mannerisms.

“No.” His brows knitted together as he rounded me and headed for the passenger door, putting one foot in front of the other with firm purpose. I watched with a turning stomach as he tried to wrench the door open while it was still locked.

“Damn it!” He banged his fist on the roof. A burst of flames erupted from underneath. He jumped back in surprise, and they extinguished immediately.

Shit. I needed to get him home. *Now.*

I hit the button on the keys, eliciting a chirp from the car as it unlocked, and opened the door for him. “Get in.”

He obliged, more careful of his movements and staring at his hands like they were going to attack him. I shut the door and skirted the car to the driver's side. Slipping into the leather seat, I pressed the button to turn the ignition on and listened to it purr with satisfaction.

“Are you sure you can drive stick?” Summer actually had the audacity to eyeball me like I was a threat.

“Ha!” I barked before pushing in the clutch and shifting into first gear. “Better hold on tight, *oruga.*”

Summer choked on a laugh at my use of the Spanish word for ‘caterpillar’, which I cut off abruptly by peeling away from the curb.

“*Mierde!*” His hand lashed out to grab the ‘oh shit’ handle above his head.

A grin spread across my face. *This was gonna be fun.*

Any sane person in a Honda Civic would’ve taken at least thirty minutes to get to the mansion. In this sweet cherub, I did it in less than twenty, the engine revving whenever I pushed the gas. Summer wasn’t purring. He was shaking, shivering like he was cold when he was anything but. His side of the car had heated and heated until I’d wound the windows down. Even then it made him burn hotter, like oxygen feeding fire. Sweat crawled down my back. He was really very ill, in no condition for anything but bed.

“Holy fuck.” Summer finally relaxed as we pulled into the garage. “I think that might have been the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, *Mariposa*, but I feel like I should punish you for being so reckless.”

“Let’s get you inside,” I said, ignoring his comment, but internally I was giddy as well as worried. The adrenaline pumping through me right now was insane, and knowing the things we’d done in this garage before made his

comment much more potent. But I was here for a reason. I slid my hand across the over-heated hood of the car as he got out of it. When I'd fucked him on the hood of a car, it was before everything. Before I had learned the massive secret they had kept from me.

I nodded to myself as he walked a little more normally at least. Well, less like he was trying to keep his balance on a boat and more sluggish as he dragged his feet beside me. On the way to his room, I had to sidestep more plants. New vines from the last time I was here had made it all the way down here, potentially even worse than before I had first come, forcing cracks and holes in the wall where they were growing. It wasn't like ivy that grew over top of the wall, but it was as if there was something inside trying to break the foundations. The vines were bare, dormant, like the inside the house was in fall, but some areas were singed black as coal. There was no life left here, burned out of them in an angry conflagration.

"I'm sorry, Mari." Summer's gravelly voice was gentle.

"I know," I replied. "But it doesn't change what happened."

"Haru wanted to tell you. Actually, he was the first of us to realize who you were. But when he told us . . ." His brown eyes flitted over to me, and the wealth of sorrow buried inside them was devastating. "We had searched for almost a hundred years. It never took more than three decades to find you, or for you to find us. We waited three times that. We thought we had lost you for good."

They'd waited a hundred years after Rose passed. The incident with Winter had been one hundred and fifty years ago, so they'd had a long life together. How long would I get with them? Still, enough time had passed and they had given up on me.

"Why do you think it changed?" *Why was I different* was what I really wanted to ask, but I was too nervous. Had they given up looking and latched onto the first woman they saw?

"We messed up. And here we are doing it again in a different way." He rubbed at his unshaven jaw. "I should've listened to Haru. I was stubborn. Otto was the *conciliador*, pacifying us in a quest for proof, and Winter, well . . . was Winter." He sighed. "I'm sorry."

I reached over and grabbed his hand. It was hot, really hot, but not to where I was worried I'd get burned. I gave it a squeeze. "We all make mistakes, Summer. I understand that this is new territory for all of us. I want us all to talk, together. Okay?"

His head whipped round. “Of course. Anything. Ground me under your heel and punish me.”

Oh, my. I swallowed the swell of desire that swept through me. “Once you’re well. Which way?”

He swayed on his feet but kept his balance. He blinked slowly, as if unsure he could really see me—like I was a mirage.

“To your room, Summer,” I said, trying to jog his memory. He licked his lips, making me flush. “Not your playroom,” I said sternly, although getting the whips and chains out of my head wasn’t difficult, given he could barely stand.

“Yes, Mariposa,” he said meekly. “I will be a *buen chico*.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” I returned, and oh, how bantering with him lifted my heart.

He smiled, but his leg caved underneath him. My grip tightened as sudden heat washed over me like I’d been dipped into a jacuzzi after an ice bath: painful, but soothing. “You okay?”

“I . . . will be.” He made an effort to stand straighter but he was flagging, fast. We hobbled past a row of doors, but one stuck out to me, literally. The flower door had moved, the flowers obnoxiously large, heads nodding in our passage as Summer’s heat brushed past them. A sweet smell enveloped me, almost cloying, coming from the smallest white star-shaped flowers.

“Jasmine,” Summer murmured.

“Jasmine?” I glanced back at the door. Roses, jasmines . . . and more flowers, all strangling that door, practically reaching out toward us.

Holy shit. What kind of door was that? The ghost of girlfriends past? “Come on, let’s go. Which way?” I said, a demanding note in my voice to tell him I was serious. I was not scared. Absolutely not. Nope.

He pointed the way, and I helped him limp there. He opened the door, stepping aside to let me enter first. My feet stuttered to a stop as I took it in. An entire window of clear glass from floor to ceiling showed off the waning Vermont sky, a vista of mountains soon to be covered in snow in the distance. The windows were warped in weird places, not in a way that made me think was intentional, and scorch marks on the ceiling pointed to more of Summer’s accidents. The room itself was minimalist, with a big walk-in wardrobe where he kept his perfectly tailored sets of suits. Instead of the order I’d expected, shirts had exploded from their hangers, and ties were in a coiled mess like snakes fighting to get out of the drawers. If I thought the

burns on the vines were bad, this was worse.

It smelled of a campfire, which I assumed were from the footprints branded into the wooden floor, and the walls were brown from smoke. Somehow the walls were unscathed, not covered with the vines from the corridor, but the bed . . .

The sheets were half gone like a fire had been put out too late. The mattress had chunks missing, entire holes burned into portions of it. The pillow was new, but a pile of others had been burned to a near crisp and now laid on the floor.

Summer cleared his throat, stopping beside me. “Sometimes when I go to sleep, I wake up on fire.”

My eyes widened. “When was the last time you slept?”

He gave a one shouldered shrug. “Even when I do, it’s not sound.”

Swallowing, I nodded and walked to the bed, Summer following. I ran my finger along the linen, my throat burning with raw emotions of heartache and worry as well as the leftover fiery stench of the room.

Pulling my gaze away from the bed, it fell on Summer and I took a moment to study him. His whole body seemed wilted, ready to collapse, but he stared at the bed like it was going to consume him. Sweat beaded on the side of his temple as heat radiated from him again.

“Do you have a thermometer?” My gaze flicked to the bathroom, which thankfully still had a pearly white sheen through the open doorway.

“Probably.” He still didn’t take his eyes off the bed.

I hustled over to the bathroom and didn’t care about his privacy as I searched through his drawers. “Aha!” I found a little white one tucked under the box of Q-tips.

I re-entered the bedroom to find Summer unmoved from his spot. Chewing on my lip, I walked over to him. “Lie down,” I urged. “It’ll be fine. I promise.”

His worried eyes flicked between me and the bed. “Will you stay? Not in any . . . permanent way.” His gaze dropped. “I mean just until I fall asleep.”

It was so innocent, so sweet, and a side to Summer I had never seen. “Of course.”

He peeled off his clothes until he was in nothing but boxer briefs. He’d lost weight, which made his muscles more prominent, but the lack of fat content was troubling. Bones stuck out further than I remembered as he got himself into bed.

Once he laid down, I held out the thermometer. “Put this under your tongue,” I directed.

He took it, but there was a hint of a smile on his lips. “What?” I said, folding my arms over my chest.

“I don’t remember the last time someone took care of me.” He shoved the thermometer under his tongue, holding it still.

Deflating, I sat on the edge of the bed and waited with him. That was the thing between the two of us, the caregivers, the financiers, the control freaks—however you wanted to describe us. We were used to being in charge, preferred it, but sometimes it was exhausting and all you wanted was to be able to let go.

He gave that to me, and I had been starting to return the favor before everything had fallen apart.

The thermometer beeped. I reached out and pulled it out. “One hundred and fifteen degrees?” My jaw dropped so hard it nearly dislocated.

“At least it’s not bad enough to cause any first-degree burns. That’s one-eighteen,” Summer half mumbled.

I gaped at him, only to find his eyes already fluttering shut. I guess now I understood why he found it amusing that I wanted to take his temperature. Considering the man could catch things on fire, I should’ve known better.

I sat there watching him, the slow rise and fall of his chest, the way his face relaxed. Despite the heat, he was starting to look a little better. The sickly pallor he had first showed up with was gone, his skin now back to his normal color. It didn’t take long for his breaths to even out, becoming heavier as he fell asleep.

Still, I didn’t leave right away. I didn’t know what was happening with him, but I hated it. If he woke up, if something caught fire, I wanted to be there to help him. But in reality what could I do? CSON had proven it with my blood. I was human. I had no magic abilities. I didn’t have Winter’s ability to cool the place down. I was more likely to get hurt if a fire erupted. It was best if I left.

I stood from the bed, glancing once more over my shoulder at his sleeping form. He looked peaceful, and the air wasn’t nearly as stifling as it had been before.

I twisted the door handle as slowly as possible, trying to stay quiet so I didn’t wake him, prying it open barely wide enough for me to slip out. I flipped the light switch off along the way.

I let out a low breath, just as someone out in the corridor drew in theirs. I slipped into a defensive stance, mind whirling. Were CSON back, after Summer this time?

“It’s me,” a familiar voice said, and Haru stepped out of the shadows, his eyes firing to life like all his dreams had come true. He reached out for me then dropped his hands to his sides, looking over my shoulder. “How is he?”

Chapter Ten

Seeing him again, like this, sucked all the air out of me. Haru was haggard, his carefree smile replaced with a worried frown. He wore a sleeveless running vest and sweatpants, his usual sexy ruffled style now looking unloved and unkempt.

He backed away from me after a moment of my silence. “Thanks for bringing him back. I didn’t even notice he’d gone. What did he do?”

I glanced at the closed door. The anger from earlier had puffed out, seeing how he was having to live now. “I guess he really had to see me. He couldn’t stand it anymore.” I shrugged, wishing I could shake off the guilt just as easily. “All he did was apologize. He didn’t grab me off the street.”

Haru slumped. “He shouldn’t have approached you. It’s just . . . He’s going out of his mind.” He ran a hand through his greasy hair, before adding softly. “We all are.”

My heart panged. “I can only imagine what that’s like with powers on top of heartbreak. I—Maybe Otto has said, but I do want to see you guys. I’m figuring out some ground rules first though.”

Haru’s eyes went round. “I’ve been out a lot and not really able to focus when he tries to talk to me. That’s amazing!” His face transformed—a bright beaming smile. “No wonder Summer felt like he could finally break and tell you.”

“Yes. Well. I’m here now, so maybe we can talk.”

“Yes, yes. And I will get my shit together.” He grimaced down at his rumpled clothes. Come to think of it, Haru and Summer’s appearance was at odds with Otto’s polished look. “How has Otto been, really?”

Haru’s face fell. “Otto is the worst off out of all of us, I think.”

“Really?” That didn’t make any sense. Otto was calm, composed and, well, smelling good.

Haru nodded miserably. “Yeah. He’s feeling all this himself, and our misery on top of that. I’m amazed he can get out of bed or do anything.” His eyes widened slightly. “Not to put any pressure on you or anything. We just need to get it together. Work through some stuff.” He cleared his throat and rubbed the side of his neck. “To that end, can we—can we please talk about what happened with my door sometime?”

The shift in subject made me catch my breath. I’d broken into his door the way I’d broken into their house, only Haru had been incensed about it. “I shouldn’t have forced my way in,” I said quietly, shifting.

“No. No, you should have.” He opened his arms to me, then awkwardly wrung them together. “Can we walk and talk? I need to move before I trap Summer in there.”

I tilted my head, confused, until I looked over my shoulder. Shoots of stiff bamboo had shot up, creating a little spiky forest behind me.

“He’s going to be pissed,” Haru mumbled. Then he shrugged. “He’ll just bake it.” Haru wrinkled his nose. “There’s nothing worse than the smell of singed greenery.”

My heart broke. They had all struggled without me and they hadn’t used that to try to get me back. They hadn’t put on a show for me. This was raw and real, grief and despair swirling around them all. Only Otto seemed

unaffected, but what if that was a front? I had to admit, seeing them like this pulled at my heart.

I had to help them through it. I stepped forward, taking Haru's hand. "Let's go."

His eyes slid closed as he squeezed my hand. "Mari." We walked together, neither really leading, walking the hallways of the house. I noticed he shied away from looking at the vines trailing behind him or the grass sprouting in his footsteps. Very quickly the vines withered, thin and pale without sunlight, and hardened into brown husks. The grass went yellow and brown, spiky instead of lush.

Haru glanced where I was looking. "Otto's trying his best to dampen us, but he's dealing with his own demons. It's just amplifying everything. It must be torture for him."

I walked on, thoughtful. Otto didn't seem to be in pain. Was he hiding that from me, putting forward his best self, so I wouldn't worry?

Or, perhaps . . . That was me? Being around me, seeing me, and well, fucking me up against a wall and giving me rounds of orgasms like a prize fighter refusing to fall in the ring.

Perhaps I could get some answers for myself, as well as give Haru some closure. "So. The doors."

Haru nodded. "Yeah."

"They're memories, right? Of actual things that happened to you."

"Yes. Summer put it best. Those are places we've put into the house accidentally. The past is like a place, right? They are things we keep going over; trauma torn into us. No one wants to face it, but we have to in order to work through it."

I nodded. He put his hand over his eyes then ripped his hand away to face me. "I knew it was you early on, and I tried to convince the others. I should have used my door as proof, but I wanted to stay in the happy bubble of having you back and enjoying time with you, not dragging out my deepest darkness to show you." He huffed a humorless laugh. "Can you imagine the conversation? 'Hey there, darling, let's go over some old ground rather than enjoy the new, fresh time we have together. Oh, by the way, it's deeply disturbing'." He rubbed his forehead.

I squeezed his other hand in mine. "Yes, it is deeply disturbing, and I can only imagine what it was like for you, having that memory suddenly exposed. Summer seemed to think that's what I'm here for."

He shook his head. "You're here to enjoy your time with us, not fix us."

"Maybe that's just a side benefit," I said with a wink.

He smiled back, showing me a flicker of the Haru I knew and adored.

That's when, over his shoulder and down the corridor, that fucking door came into view. It didn't look menacing, not all covered with pretty flowers, but it had moved again. Big blousy flowerheads like cheerleader pompoms vied alongside gorgeous pink and purple star-shaped flowers.

"What's up?" Haru twisted to see what I was staring at. "Oh, new door!"

"It's not yours? It's covered in plants." I practically forced that out through gritted teeth.

"Huh? No, it's not mine."

"It's chasing me." I hurried off down the corridor, a flush rising along my neck. Haru burst into peals of laughter behind me. "Hey, it's not funny!"

"No, no, it's just, well, previously you would have said you were fine. But now you're telling me. I appreciate that you feel safe enough to tell me." He stepped beside me, chest out. "Fear not, Buttercup, I'll protect you from the door."

"What flowers are on it, anyway?"

"Oh . . . Wait." He scuttled back, peered around the corner like it was stalking toward us, then jogged back. His smile was gone. "Buttercup, those are dahlias, roses, jasmines, lilies and," He licked his lip nervously, then plowed on, "marigolds."

"Pardon?" My stomach flipped.

"The really pretty ones, the ones with golden yellow and burnt orange flamenco skirts? Those are marigolds. And there are buttercups littering the carpet like a meadow, probably because I like to call you that."

"Shit," I breathed.

"That's your door," Haru said, stare intent.

"No. It can't be." The house had made rooms for me before. It had moved Haru and Summer closer to me. But a new door, just for me? That was too much. "Where does it go?"

Haru shook his head slowly. "Only you know, Buttercup. You have my support to go see what's inside."

"What the hell? Now I baked something fucked up into the house. Great." I threw up my hands as if I could lift myself out of this latest wave knocking into me. "There's still so much I don't understand about all this. Why me? And how come I die over and over again? How is that fair?"

Haru halted, legs planted as though rooted. “Don’t say that,” he said between clenched teeth.

“But I will die,” I pushed.

“Please stop talking.”

“It’s the truth,” I said. Harsh, yes, because it wasn’t fair. How come I got old and died and they stayed as perfect specimens over the years? “Apparently I have, over and over —”

Brambles shot from the ground around Haru, creating a thick bush that enveloped him and tied him down.

I leapt out of the way. “Haru!”

“Mari.” His voice was muffled. “Stay clear, please.”

“I can get you out —”

The brambles surged, swarming him, thick spikes barbed with cruel tips. Haru commanded, “Stay back!”

I turned. “I’ll get Otto.” He could make the brambles dormant.

The vines lashed out, wrapping around my ankles and wrists and yanking me off my feet. Haru had lost control. “Otto? Help!” I yelled.

“Marigold?” Otto came running down the corridor, shirt half open revealing flashes of his chiseled chest. He skidded to a halt, staring at the mess of greenery.

Under my nose, the thick brambles bloomed with blossom and then peeled back, dead and withered, before surging again with new life pulsing over and over.

I struggled to keep my mouth clear of the vines crawling along my neck. “Otto, Haru’s in trouble. Hurry!”

Otto stared, eyes locked with mine, utterly still.

“Otto! Help!” I screamed as the vines smothered my face, and everything went dark.

Chapter Eleven

A roar shook the plants, and the temperature dropped suddenly. “Fuck's sake, Otto!” A deep voice hollered. “Don’t just stand there. Haru needs help.”

Winter!

I struggled in my leafy bonds, but I didn’t dare open my mouth in case the briars swarmed in.

“Ma—Ma—” Otto stuttered.

“Gods above,” Winter grumbled. I heard his steps thump closer. “Relax, Haru, I’ll get you out —”

“Marigold,” Otto breathed. “She is in there as well!”

Winter sucked in a breath. “Mari? Mari!” he shouted as he pounded closer.

The swooping relief in my belly was rewarded when the brambles ripped away from my face, thorns and vines shattering into shards. Winter dug me out, tearing away the twiggy ropes. His long blonde hair was tied back, blue eyes intense with anger and maybe some fear, and blood spotted his hands and arms as he tore and tugged the frozen brambles off.

I jerked forward as one frozen plant ripped my shirt. “Ouch.”

Winter’s eyes darkened. He reached in with his huge hands, sliding his palm over my shoulder to protect my skin from the thorns.

I panted. “I’m okay. Just get them off me.”

“Nearly there,” Winter murmured, distracted, giving Otto a dirty side eye. “Otto, don’t just stand there!” he roared. Maybe he hoped it would shock Otto out of the stiff stillness he’d entered.

“It’s okay,” I said soothingly, and as if that unlocked him, Otto darted into action at last, putting his hands over where Haru was buried. Immediately a serene calm like a lake spread inside me as the briars withered and became dormant, shrinking down to nothing.

Haru stretched toward me, scratches all over his arms and neck. “Mari, are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” Better than fine. So contented.

Winter lifted me into his arms, pressing me to his chest. His thundering heartbeat became my metronome. “How come you’re here?” he asked quietly, his voice a rumble.

“Putting Summer to bed.” I frowned. I glanced at Otto, who immediately dropped his hands.

The zen feeling faded, and I slid from Winter’s embrace. “He came to see me, against my stated wishes.” I put my hands on my hips, raising an eyebrow.

Winter made a guttural grunt. “I’ll freeze his balls off,” he promised darkly, folding his massive arms. He wore a sleeveless vest, tattoos on full display alongside the scratches he had endured pulling me out.

I tucked my hair behind my ears. “Thanks for saving me.”

He shifted his weight. “Of course.” His eyes studied mine as if memorizing me.

I looked down at my torn shirt, my breasts in their playful new bra on full display. “Oh.” Still, I could see out of the corner of my eyes that Winter’s

gaze was definitely locked on my face and not taking in the view. His face was unguarded, raw and so full of hope.

Otto shucked off his shirt, revealing his cut physique—seriously, books did that to a guy?—and draped it around my shoulders. “Here, take this.”

“Thanks.” I buttoned it up and turned to Haru. “I’m sorry what I said tipped you over the edge, but you usually have more control than that.”

Otto and Haru glanced at one another.

I resisted the urge to tap my foot like an irate teacher. “What’s going on? The truth, boys.”

Otto rubbed his short hair. “I don’t know exactly what set it off . . .”

“She mentioned dying,” Haru murmured, eyes hooded. “I wasn’t prepared. It spiraled out of control. I’m sorry.”

Otto put his hand on Haru’s shoulder. I wished I could be doing that. I folded my arms around my chest, rustling Otto’s shirt. “How come everything seems, well, a lot out of whack around here?”

Once again Otto averted his gaze from mine, and I threw up my hands. “Fine. Well, I’m going.”

Winter growled, “They just don’t want to overburden you. We’re losing control because . . .” His lips twisted. “We miss you.”

Missing me? They were completely losing their shit from a few weeks apart? Hell, they’d spent one hundred years searching for me. They were definitely downplaying whatever was happening. I narrowed my eyes and switched my gaze between the three of them.

Otto clenched his fists, looking down at the floor. “I don’t want you to feel obligated or pressured. We are sorting out the ground rules at your pace.”

My heart warmed with an immense swell, like I’d been picked up in an ocean wave. “Guys.” Their hearts were in the right place. I could trust that.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, exhaling sharply. “I need a drink.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, music started playing down the corridor. I peered toward it. “What’s that?”

“Fleetwood Mac,” Otto stated. “Let’s take a look.”

We walked around the corner and stopped in shock. A cocktail bar greeted us, music playing from speakers overhead and fancy golden lights twinkling in the rows and rows of glass bottles. It looked like a mix between an apothecary and a metal workshop with gleaming counters and black metal shelves and intricate bottles full of interesting colors. “Whoa,” Haru said, touching the brass handles of the drawers.

“Very cool. The house made us a new bar,” I rolled up my, or rather Otto's, sleeves and looked up at the rows of premium label booze. “I used to tend a bar. I can mix us up something.” I stood on tiptoes trying to grab the Mezcal.

“If you can reach.” Winter eased himself behind the bar, hands on my shoulders to steer me out of the way. “What do you need? This?”

“Yep. And the tequila.”

It took us a while to find everything just because there was so much, and it wasn't particularly organized. “Why is the gin over here, but the juniper spirit over there?” I said with a frown.

“I like gin,” Otto said, squinting at the other choices nearby. “And all those in that section there.”

“Juniper's mine, along with these,” Haru said, pointing.

Winter grabbed a bottle of whiskey from high up at the end. He bit the cork, yanked, then spat it out. “This is my section.”

“Oooh. So this is the Summer section.” I waved at the champagne and fine wines between Haru and Otto's selections.

“Likely.” Winter dumped a drop of whiskey on his cuts, hissing. Then he took a swig, looking at the bottle appreciatively. “Good stuff.”

I eyed the spectrum of alcohol. “Here's a challenge, then. Mixing something you'll all think is good.” I grabbed bottles from each section, sniffing, trying some and then downing the ones I liked, putting others back. Winter sat back down, watching and nursing his whiskey bottle, and Otto and Haru leaned in with rapt attention.

“Ta-da!” I poured out four glasses. “Whoops,” I said, staggering to the side and accidentally spilling the mixer. “Guess this is good stuff.”

“You did chug 88 percent proof vodka” Winter said dryly. “Not even I could do that and stay standing.”

“No, big boy?” I pushed his glass over, resting my chin in my hand, an eyebrow teasingly arched.

He glowered at the fancy glass before his eyes flicked to me. They softened. “No. It was hot, though.” He downed the cocktail in one.

“Hey!” I protested, but my cheeks heated.

He stared at me a moment more, then slowly and deliberately moved his gaze down my body, the tip of his pink tongue touching his top lip. A flash of silver from his tongue stud winked at me.

Fuck, that's hot.

I wrenched myself away to see Otto and Haru exchanging hopeful looks. “Well? Any good?”

“It's great,” Haru said, cupping it in his hands. “Smells fruity.”

“And smoky.” Otto breathed in deeply. Sitting topless in the bar, he looked delicious enough to eat.

“Right and right.” I took a sip from a metal straw. My eyes rolled back in my head from the heady explosion of tart fruit, fierce fizzy bubbles, warming cognac, and a strong finish of harsh whiskey. “Oh, yuuuum.”

I opened my eyes to see them staring. I suppose I was having a mouth orgasm over a drink. “Another?” I asked brightly.

Haru nodded enthusiastically and Winter inclined his head, but Otto pulled his close to his chest. “I should keep a clear head.”

“Sure.” He had frozen when Haru lost control of his powers. What was going on there? Maybe I could play friendly-eared bartender and find out. I sent Mom a quick text to say I'd be out late and got to work.

I mixed up another combo trying to balance out all the properties the different alcohols brought and did a fairly good job. I slid another drink close to Otto's bare elbow. “Here you go, champ.”

He gave me a small smile. “I shouldn't drink any more, Marigold. I did say.”

“You did, and I listened. This is a non-alcoholic mix up just for you.”

“Well, then. My thanks.” He took it eagerly and sipped.

I leaned into the bar, watching Haru and Winter try the new offering. Haru coughed, eyes wide, and Winter's lips thinned.

I hid my smile. “Maybe less brandy next time.”

“Mm, indeed.” Otto brought the glass to his lips. Fuck me, but I was jealous of the rim resting on those soft edges. I wanted to reach out and stroke his neck as he swallowed.

Yep, I was drunkity drunk.

“My word, this is gorgeous,” he said with a hum of approval.

“Thanks. I used non-alcoholic spirits from just your section.” I waved to the third column. “I call it, Autumn's Fall.”

“Mm. I could fall for this.” He met my eyes, their brown depths twinkling.

I leaned in, breathing in his fresh pine aroma. “Are you really okay, Otto?”

His brow furrowed, and suddenly a wave of anxiety twisted my stomach

so painfully I gasped.

The others reacted too, Winter stiffening and frowning, and Haru going pale.

Otto exhaled heavily, long and low. "I'm deeply sorry" he said quietly. "I lost control for a moment there."

Haru and Winter glanced over. "It's alright," Winter muttered, throwing the cocktail down his throat.

I put my hand on top of Otto's. He really was struggling, as Haru had said, it just manifested in a different way to the others. Instead of Summer's destruction and Haru's over enthusiastic growth, Otto suffered quietly, probably feeling all alone out of fear of spreading his emotions around and affecting the others.

I'd cheer him up. "Who's up for the third round?"

Winter roared his approval, his baritone voice shaking the glassware, and Otto shot me a grateful look.

Chapter Twelve

Winter threw his drink down his throat. “Another.”
“They take aaaages to make, you know,” I pointed out, one hand on my hip and sipping my own drink. I was on my second. Third? Regardless, I drank a little to help them feel at ease. That was the reason. Definitely.

Winter set his whiskey glass upside down on the wooden bar top. “I do know. I watch you labor over them.” He glanced up, ice blue eyes fixing me in place. “I could make it myself at this point.”

“Taking my job already, huh?” I leaned my arm on the bar in front of him, grinning. “I’m going to join a union or something. You do all the cooking, so sit back and get your drinks mixed for you, *capiche?*”

He blinked slowly at me then nodded once with a grunt.

Haru grinned widely, lighting up his face. He looked unburdened, freer than he was twenty minutes ago. It had to be the alcohol loosening everyone up; although that wasn't a healthy long-term solution, they could relax tonight and be ready to face whatever was going on with their powers tomorrow.

Speaking of, I could get some answers tonight, and I knew exactly how. As I mixed Winter another drink I asked, "Who wants to play a game?"

Haru's hand waved. "Me."

I raised an eyebrow at Winter, about to cajole him, when he said, "What kind of game?"

"Truth or dare. Heavy on the truth," I said, flashing a grin at Haru. And oh, how his smile widened. He was dazzling like this, playful and energized. I held out the drink to Winter.

"You're on," Winter said, taking it from me, a glimmer of dark intent in his eyes that sent a pleasant wash of cool air up my spine.

Oh man, I'd missed this so much. This was feeling more like the right decision to make.

"I will answer any question you have for me, Marigold," Otto said, sitting stiff-backed on his seat. I wished he could relax a little more, but he was on guard, holding in his emotions.

"Alright. A serious one to start with." I swished my drink around my glass, looking into it instead of at any of them. "Why are your powers going weird?"

There was silence for a moment. "Because we were emotionally . . ." Haru began but paused, searching for the right word.

"Fucked," Winter growled. "We had a rough break up."

Otto rushed to say, "But please don't feel bad, Marigold."

I nodded slowly. "So your powers are tied to emotions, or at least influenced by them."

"Is that a question? If so you've had two," Haru pointed out with a wink.

"I'll still answer," Otto said firmly. "We aren't hiding it from you. Yes, our powers are influenced by our emotions. If we are too happy, too angry, too anything, they can slip out of our control."

"Sounds hard, always being on guard like that." I glanced up. Otto and Haru eyed Winter with wariness in their faces, as if they were expecting him to blow up any second. Winter hadn't said anything, and while he was a little still on his bar stool, he wasn't making icicles or anything. In fact, I hadn't

seen any frozen lakes or more iced over doors in the house. But I had seen crazed plants and scorched ceilings.

“It was hard,” Winter said, knocking back his drink before pushing his glass a smidge toward me. “Another.”

“I’ll just make you a pitcher,” I said with a sigh. “Is that why the power is flickering around town?”

“That’s three,” Haru teased, but Otto raised his hand to quell him.

“The power is flickering?” he asked, frowning.

“Yes. Could it be Summer, overheating the local lines?”

Otto shook his head slowly. “No, but we have noticed our lights on the fritz and wondered if there was something big happening in town.”

I snorted. “Nothing happening there. Not really.” I put my hand on my hip. “Haru’s right, I’m cheating. So it’s your guys’ turn.”

Winter’s chair creaked as he leaned forward, the intensity in his expression spearing me in place. “How do you like your eggs in the morning?” he said, as serious as if he was asking me where the key to the treasure was or something.

I chuckled. “I like mine with a kiss,” I sang to him.

He blinked slowly. “What?”

Haru whooped. “It’s a song, by . . . by . . .” He snapped his fingers. “Dean Martin and Helen O’Connell!”

Like magic—because it was—the song started playing quietly in the bar, the woman asking how the guy liked his breakfast and him insisting anything was fine as long as she made it.

Winter slowly turned his raised eyebrows to me, looking utterly vulnerable, heart bared for me to see. Why hadn’t I realized this before? Of course they loved me. Still that nagging doubt tugged at me, telling me they might just love this mirage of their reincarnated mate. I waved my hand as if trying to get a DJ to stop, but the music played on.

Winter nodded slowly, clearing his throat. “I want the next question, too,” he told the others.

“Me first, I have a great one,” Haru insisted.

“Mine is great too,” Winter grumbled back.

I held up my hands. “We can play this all night, guys, until we run out of questions or get too drunk to ask any.” And oh, how I loved how that made them all straighten in their seats a little, ready to please.

I drummed my fingers on the table. “Haru, how’d you know who I was?”

I knew this was taking it beyond a game, but the structure helped me.

Haru edged closer on the bar stool. “I was attracted to you immediately, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. As you might have guessed, every now and again I’d find a girl who I thought had a special something, and when I told the others they’d get excited. But none of them would feel anything. After a while they stopped believing me.” He drooped slightly. “I just wanted it to be true, that’s all,” he murmured.

I passed him another of his fruity drinks. “I understand that,” I reassured him. So they’d had a few false starts. Would I turn out to be one of them?

“M’kay,” Haru said, like he didn’t believe me. What must it be like, waiting years for someone to come back into your lives and start up where you left off? But so far none of them had asked me to dress or act a certain way. They’d all let me be myself. They seemed eager to get to know *me*.

“As for how I knew, it was in how I feel around you.” Haru’s leg jiggled against the bar top. Otto put a steadying hand on his knee, and Haru stopped. “Right, my turn. What do you think is behind your door?”

I winced. “Oh, straight for the jugular.”

Otto held up his hand. “Excuse me for breaking the long-held sacred rules of Truth or Dare, which seems to be simply asking questions anyway.” I shot him a glower. He inclined his head. “Not that I’m complaining, but I digress. I have to ask, what door is this?”

Haru spun on his stool to face Otto. “There’s a door in the house with roses, jasmines, marigolds, and a smattering of buttercups surrounding it.”

“And it’s following me,” I explained further. “I’ve seen it every time I’ve visited the house so far.”

Winter cracked his knuckles. “I’ll turn it to firewood,” he snarled.

That lightened my heart. “Aw, thanks. But if it’s similar to your doors, then really, I need to go through it.”

“You don’t have to,” Otto was quick to say.

Haru scowled at him. “It sucked but it was good. Like purging a garden of an invasive plant.”

Otto and Winter stayed silent. I stirred my drink, the only sound the little taps from my stirrer and the next bright and peppy golden oldies song DJ House put on. “I don’t know what’s behind it, but what with all those flowers, maybe it’s something to do with a past life.”

Winter’s face paled, and he looked away.

“Not necessarily,” Otto said. “Forgive me yet again for another liberty,

but in all your incarnations, you haven't retained memories. I would think it's something to do with your current life."

"That must suck for you, having to . . . I don't know, reteach me each time."

Otto's eyebrows flew up his forehead. "Not at all."

"That's part of the fun," Haru said, voice serious.

Winter stayed silent.

"Okay." I arched an eyebrow at Winter. "You wanted the next question?"

"Yes." He leaned into the bar, gripping the edge. "I've been trying to narrow it down, and I can only find one answer." Shit, he was super intense when he got into it. He was glaring at me like I was a mountain he had to climb. "Is it olive oil you don't like?"

"Huh?" The word left me in a puff.

His brows beetled together. "Olive oil. That's the only ingredient that's common to all the dishes you didn't like. Unless it's—" His mouth dropped open as a realization hit him. "Garlic!" he roared, slapping his thigh. "It's garlic, isn't it? Isn't it?"

I laughed. "Calm down, big guy. Yeah, I hate garlic." But Winter kept feeding it to me, because apparently, Rose had loved the stuff.

Hm. Maybe they were trying to squash me into her mold. I drew back, wiping down the bar to give myself time to think.

"Good," he said to himself, nodding happily. Wait, he was happy about that? Not angry that I wasn't like her? "I knew it was something. From henceforth, all garlic is banned from the kitchens."

I snorted. "That's a bit extreme."

"Perfectly valid response. Seconded," Otto declared, sipping his soda water.

"I'm happy with that too," Haru said, smiling at me.

"Motion carried," Otto said with a slap on the table. "It is decided."

My chest warmed and not just from the buzz of the alcohol. They weren't trying to convince me to love garlic like Rose had, they just accepted it and dealt with it.

"Okay. My turn again." I folded my arms, looking at each of them in turn. Winter was smug, like my admission had given him some kind of boost; Haru sat with his chin in his hand, just waiting for what I would say next.

And Otto was still holding himself upright, long fingers wrapped around his glass.

I came opposite him. "Why did you panic earlier, when Haru's powers went out of control?"

His eyes flared briefly, meeting mine, and he swallowed hard. "I said I would answer anything, and I will. But . . . Please, Marigold." His voice went tight. "I will need time to get the right words together for this."

I searched his face. He was genuinely upset to deny me. *This must be hurting him badly.* "Okay, Otto. I'll take an IOU for now," I said softly. He wasn't hiding it. I knew he'd open up when he was ready, and I shouldn't push him to be ready.

"My turn for a question," Winter boomed.

Otto held up a hand to him, shaking his head. "You have asked multiple food-related questions. No more."

Winter's face darkened into a scowl, but he sat back. "I suppose you can have one."

I put my hand over my mouth to hide my smile. "Go on then, Otto. What's your question?"

He settled his elbows on the mahogany bar top, all sleek dark colors. "Feel free to tell me that this topic is off limits, but I am curious. Tell us about your father."

My stomach dropped. "Ah. Okay." I cradled my drink, taking another sip as complicated knots wove through my chest. "I'll tell. He doesn't have that much impact on my family, or at least, he shouldn't. I won't let him have that power." I moved to sit on the bar stool opposite them, as if I were the customer letting it all hang out. Winter watched, intent, Haru sat with his hands clasped in front of him, eager, and Otto had his hands stretched toward me, ready for me to reach out and take at any time.

"He and Mom met in high school. They got married when they graduated and had me a few years later. I think they were in love once, at least, I'd like to hope so. I guess as they got older, they changed, and so did their priorities. Mom was all about family first, but Dad was always looking for something . . . more. We moved around a lot. I don't remember much of my grandparents, and we haven't been back to their town.

"When Chris was born we moved up here, to Stoke. Dad had ideas about opening a hotel and he spent a lot of money investigating it. Funds kept getting tighter, and Mom had to start working more. Turns out he was investigating the tourism scene, sure: checking out all the gambling dens."

Winter sucked in a breath. "Fuck."

“Yeah. Fuck. ‘One more spin could win,’ I overheard him tell Mom when she confronted him about it. Mom tried to talk him down, but he kept saying it was for us.”

Tears glittered in Haru’s eyes. “Bet you wanted him around more at the time.”

“Yeah, I did.” I took another sip for the little girl waiting at home for Daddy to come home and tell her all about his success at last. Because he was Daddy, and invincible, and of course he would win one day. How could he not? I shook my head but gave myself grace, peace sliding over me like a long exhale. I glanced at Otto who gave me a guilty half smile; he was siphoning off the worst of it for me.

I cleared my throat. “And one day, he did win it big. But instead of spending it paying off the house or the hotel property like he was supposed to, he just . . . left.”

The table creaked as Winter’s fists closed on the edge. “Asshole.”

“Yep,” I said, popping my lips on the ‘p’. “Maybe he didn’t have that wild stage and freedom before settling down. Perhaps he thought parenting was the adventure he wanted, but when it came down to it, he was hardly there for me, let alone Chris. At least I have some memories. Chris has like one or two. It’s been fifteen years.” I braced my arms on the counter, the wood smooth and cool under my hands. “But he left us something to remember him by alright. He’d remortgaged the house to the hilt for money to gamble or ‘invest’ or whatever the fuck, then ran up every credit cards he could apply for, all joint so they were in Mom’s name too. Fucked her credit score right up the ass. What’s more, he took out some shady loans too.” I massaged my knuckles. “The first time we had a ‘debt collector’ round, I nearly knocked him out.”

Winter grunted with approval. “I bet you did.”

I shrugged. “So that’s why my family was on its knees in debt. That’s why I took a job in the army, so I could toughen up and protect them, maybe travel a bit. I didn’t want to go too far, and yet,” I closed my eyes, shocked when warm tears spilled down my cheeks. “Maybe I’m more like my dad than I think, because I wanted to travel and be free.”

Otto’s chair scraped on the floor, and I listened as he came around the bar. His thumb gently brushed away the tears.

I opened my eyes and met his, facing his sadness for me, but also spotting the pride. He cupped my cheek. “You’re nothing like him. Love for your

family runs through you like your heartbeat. You deserve all the freedom you want, because your family knows you will be there for them.”

I hiccupped. “Thank you.” I wrapped my fingers around his hand, the warmth seeming to spread from him to light a fire deep in my belly.

He winked at me. “Another round?”

Chapter Thirteen

“*W*oah there!” Haru caught me as I tumbled out of my chair. It was supposed to be a graceful dismount, but liquor hit hard once you stood up. I’d had, what, six more sips of each cocktail I made, honest. The game of truth or dare had gone on, mostly fielding food questions from Winter.

“I need to go home, but we didn’t do any dares.” My lips were numb, so I have no doubt my words came out a little funny. I burst into a fit of giggles. Who plays truth or dare with no dares? This gal. With Haru’s help, I straightened and came face to face with him.

He smirked at me. “I never thought I’d see Marigold Stewart falling down drunk.”

“Hey.” I poked his chest, frowning. “I’m not drunk. You’re drunk. I’m

just tipsy from all the tastings.”

“I’ll have to agree with Haru on this one.” Otto sidled up on my right. He didn’t look affected at all. Oh, right. He’d stopped drinking. “I have a little added insight.” He gave me a wink.

I don’t know what face I made, but Haru burst into laughter, Otto grinned, and even Winter gave a deep chuckle from where he sat ensconced on the stool, making his way through his tenth cocktail. The sounds were melodious, like the bass and tenors of a symphony. I could listen to them laugh forever.

“You guys are fucking gorgeous,” I said, and I meant it. I pressed myself more firmly into Haru, and his hands on my waist felt so good.

“Marigold.” Otto’s tone was warning, a little dash of sharp air to cool me off.

Right, yes. I was setting ground rules for us all. Even though Haru’s lips were right there, close enough to just stand on my tiptoes and —

“Mari.” Haru’s smile was small.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry. Forget I did anything.” Embarrassment pooled in my stomach and I pulled away. He let me go, and I bumped straight into Otto. He grabbed my shoulders to keep me from tumbling backward and smoothed his hands down my sides.

“I need to go. I’m tired.”

Otto’s thumbs swirled circles into my skin. “I know.”

And, aw, shit, he could probably feel my confusion and how I wanted them with everything I was. Couldn’t we just sort out boundaries in bed? No?

Haru pushed in behind me, his honeysuckle scent mixing with Otto’s fragrance of warm cedar and fresh pine, and my resolve was crumbling like a cookie dipped in hot milk.

Otto whispered, “You are inebriated. A clear head is the only way we would want you to make a decision like this.”

I nodded. How many times had I worn my ‘consent is sexy’ shirt to the bar? They were still looking out for me, always in my corner. My eyes stung.

“There we go,” Otto said with a soft sigh. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Haru and Otto flanked me, like my own personal bubble wrap surrounding me so I didn’t hurt myself.

I bit my lip. “I may be a bit more drunk than I realized,” I admitted. “And I definitely don’t want to go home.” Mom would be distressed and fussing over me, and she wouldn’t get a good night’s sleep. “Can I stay here?”

“Absolutely,” Otto said.

“Your room is still here.” Haru shrugged while talking as nonchalantly as he possibly could.

I know he was doing his best to respect my wishes of distance while giving me options.

“Sure,” I agreed. “That’d be nice.” I pulled out my phone, sending her a quick text to let her know I’d be staying over. Oh, the joys of being an adult and living at home.

The three of them walked me to my room like bodyguards, which had me giggling along the way. When we stopped at a door, my lips pressed together. “What? Already?” I recognized it as my bedroom door, bright blue with a silver handle, but . . . “It’s in the wrong place. Where is your door, Haru?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Same spot.” He cleared his throat. “Upstairs, next to Summer’s.”

My jaw dropped. My door had moved away from theirs. “Rude,” I muttered at the house.

Otto pressed his lips into a thin line like he was trying not to laugh and opened my door for me. “Let’s get you in bed.”

The moment I saw the bed I sprinted across the room—to the boy’s horror—and jumped onto it like a kid. “Oh, how I’ve missed you,” I mumbled into the cloud-like comforter.

Haru laughed. “Alright, let’s get you tucked in.”

“I mean, only if you want,” I grumbled, while putting up no fight whatsoever as I resituated myself under the covers as they tucked me in. I literally couldn’t even remember the last time someone did this for me.

“Sweet dreams,” Otto said, bending down to give me a kiss on the forehead. This was then followed by Haru. I snuggled in deeper, content, and a smile flitted across my face.

Then I was out.

* * *

“MOTHER FUCKER,” I groaned when I came to, along with a throbbing headache. I pulled the fluffy pillow over my face. I couldn’t remember the last time I was this hungover. I never had the luxury of letting go. “Never again,” I swore.

There was a soft chuckle off to the side.

I dragged the pillow away. Through bleary eyes, I saw Otto in a chair near the door.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” he said.

“Argh,” I moaned. How could everything be so loud? And why did everything ache? “Have you been there all night?”

Otto nodded once. “I wanted to be sure you didn’t get into difficulties at night.”

“What a polite way of saying, ‘I wanted to make sure you didn’t choke on your own vomit.’” I pried myself into a sitting position and needed to take a break halfway so I didn’t spill my guts all over the floor. Maybe he had a point.

“Breakfast is ready downstairs. Haru came earlier to tell me, but you were so passed out you didn’t wake up.” He stood from his chair, reminding me how tall he was. He’d put a fresh shirt on, unbuttoned at the throat and open just a little, making him look rakish. Helping me to my feet, his touch somehow centered me, and the feeling of wanting to die lightened a little.

“You don’t need to do that,” I said. There was a small knot between his brows. Was it from staying up all night to watch over me, or trying to take away my hangover? Whichever it was, I hated that I was the reason he wasn’t feeling great. “I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

“And I’m a grown man,” he countered. “I can choose to ensure the people I care about are safe.” Keeping one hand on the small of my back, he led me out of my room and toward the kitchen. “Thank you. For yesterday.”

“Which bit? The drinks?” I winced. Nope, never mentioning alcohol again.

“For not pressing when I wouldn’t answer your question then and there.” His eyes slid shut briefly, as if in pain. “I promise I will, as soon as I’m ready.”

I took his hand briefly. “Of course.” I gave it a squeeze, then let him go.

As soon as we turned the corner, coffee and something beyond delicious hit my nose. My steps quickened to the central island where Haru already perched, looking fresh as a daisy. He beamed at me, the dourness from yesterday washed away with his morning shower, hair still wet. He was sketching idly in a painter’s notebook, and he didn’t try to hide any of the drawings from me when I peered over the edge at them, winking at me. Winter seemed in good spirits too, a huge bulk almost flitting around the

kitchen. Otto pulled out a seat for me.

“Thanks,” I said as I settled into it.

He took the seat beside me. “My pleasure.”

Winter brought over a plate and a mug of coffee. He hadn’t even put the mug down before I snagged it from his hands and gulped down half its contents. I sighed, relaxing into my chair.

“Slow down there,” Winter rumbled. “You won’t have room for breakfast.” He placed the plate in front of me, and on it was a heaping plate of eggs benedict.

My eyes widened. “How did you—” Last night came rushing back to me. Not only the drinks, but the truth and dare game that had gone on well into the night.

Haru smirked. “He narrowed it down based on your answers.”

Otto nodded. “He quite carefully triangulated it.”

Winter leaned over my shoulder, peppermint wafting over me and perking me up even more. “Well?”

“I—” I dipped the fork in the hollandaise and tasted it. “Mmm. Mm! The hollandaise is key. Which brand is it?” Probably something achingly authentic.

His nostrils flared. “The hollandaise is homemade. No out of the can shit.”

He must have stayed up the rest of the night making it. I gaped then managed a red faced, “Thank you,” before diving back in. “Oh my,” I moaned, eyes rolling back into my head from the perfect mix of salt from the meat, crunch from the English muffin, and a mixture of creaminess from the hollandaise and egg yolk. It was perfection.

When I opened my eyes, the three of them watched me intently. I swallowed my mouthful. “What?”

“Nothing. Definitely do not let us stop you.” Haru leaned back in his seat like a contented cat basking in the sun.

Otto whispered in my ear, “Especially when such delectable sounds like that come from you.”

A small shiver ran down my spine, and I had to clamp my thighs together tightly to keep myself simmered down.

Otto gave me a knowing smile. Guess it hadn’t helped much.

“Whatever that smell is, I want two.”

We all turned to the entrance of Summer. He wore nothing but a pair of

sweatpants, the planes of his chest and abs on full display. If I wasn't already drooling from the food, I would be right now. He had cleaned up, including a fresh shave, and the dark circles under his eyes were gone. He looked so much more like the Summer I'd come to know.

They all seemed better, more chipper, and healthier. I doubted they were back to one hundred percent but it was a start.

"What happened yester—" Summer's statement broke off when he saw me. "Mari?"

"Summer." I took another bite and held back my pout when I realized it was the last one.

Winter grinned, *actually grinned*, which had tingles dancing from my head all the way to my toes, as he took my plate. "Seconds?"

"No," I breathed, still caught a little off guard. "I'm full." I was—and feeling a ton better between Otto's powers and Winter's amazing food.

Summer watched the exchange, clear confusion wrinkling his face.

"You went to her yesterday," Haru piped in.

Summer's eyes bulged. "I what?"

Haru nodded, almost taking too much enjoyment in the fact the ever-controlled Summer had lost it a little. "Stalked her at a bookstore and everything. She had to bring you home."

Summer looked toward me as though waiting for me to refute it.

I shrugged. "It's true. Kind of a jerk at one point, but that's okay. It ended up being a productive night." I eyed the others, poorly hiding my amusement which made them all grin at me.

"Fuck, *Mariposa*. I'm so sorry." Summer shook his head at himself, dislodging a strand of hair so it swept across his forehead. My fingers itched to whisk it aside.

"Actually," Summer cleared his throat, "may I talk to you? Outside?" He didn't meet my eyes, staring at my chin as he awaited my answer like a sentence of death.

I rose from my chair. "Sure."

His shoulders relaxed and he waited for me to lead the way before following. Once we were a safe distance down the hall, I stopped and turned. "What's up?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I wanted to thank you. I didn't really get a chance to do that before . . . before you left."

The pain in his voice nearly undid me. "Thank me?" I tilted my head.

“What for?”

He let his arm fall to his side. “For your willingness to go behind my door. I know it led to *las veras*, some hard truths—ones I understand you are still processing—and I promise I will do better with allowing you time to do that.” He sighed, gaze dropping to the floor. “I just . . . I’m tired, and I have a lot of regrets. Ones that I am still processing, one hundred and fifty years later.”

I waited before answering, mulling over his words. There was so much regret not only in his voice, but amongst all of them. They each blamed themselves in their own way, and I had the feeling I was only just seeing the tip of it. “I think I get it,” I said. “You feel like you failed.”

“I did fail.” He bunched his fists. “I couldn’t protect you. Well, Rose.”

He admitted it so nonchalantly and openly that it was almost refreshing after they’d all tried so hard to hide it from me. My chest lightened.

He let out a low breath. “I lost control recently too. I cannot lose control. None of us can or . . . bad things happen.” His eyes screwed shut. “I know most of us didn’t blame *Invierno*, not really, but he hates himself for what happened. Haru distracted himself from the pain, and Otto has shut himself away, his confidence stripped. I couldn’t fix or reverse any of that.” He shook his head. “Now I see the more I tried, the worse it got.”

“You can’t control everything, and trying to only wears you down.” I closed my eyes briefly, amazed and saddened that I could empathize with an immortal about anything. But this was so us, etched into our bones to care about our families. “I don’t know what the answer is on that, Summer.”

“Yes, well.” He slid his hands into his pockets. He had given me such a boost, letting me hand him all the responsibility I carried, just for a while. I had one small part of the answer: I could offer the same to him, taking his cares and making the decisions for him for a while. He ached for it.

“The door was a whole lot to experience all at once.”

Summer nodded slowly. “Of course, *Mariposa*.”

I closed the space between us, and even though Summer went rigid, he didn’t step away. Carefully I wrapped my arms around his firm torso and hugged him. “Thank you for trying,” I whispered.

His arms came around me and tightened, a sob trapped and shaking in his chest.

“*Gracias, mi amor*,” I said. “For finally telling me the truth and for sharing with me how you feel. Thank you for trusting me enough to do so. I

know how hard it is to let your walls down.”

He looked at me, eyebrows all the way into his perfect hair, and that heartening smile spread across his face. A true smile, not his cocky, picture-perfect grin. True joy. “Thank you, *Mariposa*. Thank you for coming back to work this out with us.”

I pulled back, and he released me, but I already felt colder without his warmth. Which thankfully was back to that of a warm bath instead of a fire. “After what I’ve seen with yours and Haru’s doors . . . Do you think Otto and Winter’s are . . .?”

“The same? Yes, I do,” Summer said, eyes flashing. “And whether they like it or not, they are going to have to confront what happened.”

I touched his arm. “Maybe not quite so forcefully,” I said gently.

He inclined his head. “But of course, *Mariposa*. You are in charge.” His eyes crinkled around the edges in a big smile.

I cleared my throat, hoping my cheeks weren’t too red. “Speaking of, I really should get home.”

“Of course. Do you want me to drive you?”

I shook my head. “I think I’ll use a door here.”

“Yes. Otto can tell you where it is.” He hesitated briefly, touching his tongue to his upper lip. “Do you have to go right away?”

I checked my phone. Mom had sent a little kiss in acknowledgment of my message. “I can stay for a bit,” I said, and his smile brightened my whole life.

Haru danced down the hall, his sketchbook in hand. He swallowed his mouthful of breakfast before beaming at me and showing me his drawing. “What do you think?”

I didn’t realize something as simple as a pencil could create something so beautiful. Between the shading, how he used the negative space of the white paper while saturating the dark areas, it was a masterpiece. It was a forest floor covered in marigolds, and every single petal was on display. I could only imagine how long this must’ve taken him. Sliding through the underbrush peaked out small scales. I followed the slithering lines until I found a forked tongue and eye that seemed to follow me.

“You make us sin in the best ways possible.” Haru gave a little chuckle to his reference and dirty innuendo.

Even Summer’s eyes darkened and the air heated a little at the passing comment.

I stared at the snake for a few more seconds, trying to place why this was

niggling at the back of my mind. “Oh, shit!” I reached out and grabbed Summer’s bicep.

His eyebrows shot up as his hand landed over mine. “What is it?”

“I completely blanked. I was going to mention it to Otto, but everything happened so fast with everything with you, I totally forgot!”

Haru’s arm dropped, his notebook hanging at his side, as he took a step forward with an uncommon frown on his face. “Mari, what happened?”

“These men attacked me,” I said.

“Attacked?” Fire erupted on the back of Summer’s arm.

I stared at it, stunned, and he extinguished it a second later.

“*Lo siento*,” he murmured. *Sorry*.

Haru crowded closer to me, his free hand brushing my side. “Buttercup.” There was a warning in his tone, followed by creaks within the walls.

Shit, they were losing it.

“Well, not attacked per se. Rather . . . gave me a stern warning,” I corrected in hopes it would calm them down.

“What’s going on?” Otto traipsed down the hall with Winter right on his heels. “New plants started cropping up in the kitchen again.”

Haru’s tone was flat. “Mari was attacked.”

“What?” Otto’s jaw dropped while Winter growled behind him, and they quickened their pace over to us.

“I mean, not attacked. It was, I mean—” Fuck, this was getting out of hand. I didn’t even know who the men were and all four of *my* men looked ready to commit murder.

Otto stepped in front of me, squeezing his way into the small space Haru and Summer left until they had to step back. His calming energy trickled across my skin, soothing me like a warm bath. The others’ rigid stances loosened as I was sure they felt it too.

“Now,” Otto said, “tell us exactly what happened.”

It didn’t take long for me to recap when I first noticed them when Otto and I met up in town. Explaining what happened in the alley was a little more difficult as their powers kept almost lashing out and Otto was on hyperdrive trying to keep everyone calm.

“I agree,” Summer said as I finished. “It doesn’t sound like CSON.”

Winter swallowed, clenching his fists. “What about Dr. Smith? I don’t think she’s given up whatever the hell she’s up to.”

“They were too backstreet brawlers,” I explained. “I don’t know how else

to explain it. Between my childhood, the bar, and the military, I've come across plenty of people who know how to throw a punch and those who don't. They don't seem like someone Dr. Smith would even know how to get a hold of in the first place."

Otto rubbed his thumb across the stubble on his chin, lost in thought. "Plus I can't recall a single Darius on payroll in CSON or in association with Dr. Smith when I looked into her."

"So, we agree?" Haru ran his hand along my back, and I was fairly certain it was more to soothe him than me. "We think it's a case of mistaken identity like Mari thinks?"

Summer turned, his dark brown eyes snagging my attention and not letting go. "They didn't ask your name?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Or say it?"

"Not that either. They gave no indication they knew anything about me. All they did was give some colorful warnings like I already knew what was happening," I reiterated.

My body was tense, guilt cramping my muscles from not saying something sooner. I had been so worried about Summer that it totally escaped my mind, and with retelling everything I kind of wished I hadn't said anything at all. It just seemed like I was riling their concern for no reason. But that wasn't the relationship I wanted anymore. We promised no more secrets. Even if this turned out to be nothing, I wouldn't keep it from them.

"I don't like it," Winter grunted.

"I don't either, but there's not a lot to go on," Haru added while pressing against my side.

"We don't have a lot to go on," Otto sighed. "And based on the information presented I'm inclined to agree with Mari."

Summer folded his arms over his chest.

Otto placed a hand on his shoulders which visibly relaxed. "Don't worry, *mi amigo*, I will look into it the best I can. But Mari has training and if there was anything else to note, she'd tell us." He reached over and took my hand in his, running his thumb over the back of it. "Aside from the tattoos and the name Darius, is there anything else you can think of?"

I shook my head. "They had no defined accents. Aside from the tattoos, they were dressed as though they purposefully wanted to be difficult to place."

“Well, it’s working,” Summer growled.

I leaned into him, placing my head on his shoulder. “It’s okay. I’m okay. If anything else happens I’ll tell you immediately. *Prometo.*”

I promise.

Chapter Fourteen

Traveling by doors in the house was a priceless privilege I'd never take for granted. With just a few steps I was back in my mom's apartment building. I hadn't even needed a jacket against the chill in the air outside.

I listened intently before stepping out of the door. It was disguised as a cleaning closet and even had a helpful map of the complex to show the fire exits, but that probably helped the boys navigate when they went to a new location.

I patted it. "Smart." My hand fell. "But I'm still mad at you. You moved my room, house." And their rooms were further apart from one another than

ever.

I shook myself. I should focus on *my* life before I would be equipped to help them with theirs, if that's what I decided. I had to sort myself out and determine who I was going to be rather than what I was destined to be. Destiny could go fuck itself; I was the mistress of my future, damn it!

I walked up the several flights to our apartment, pulling out my phone. The battery was dead of course.

"I'm home!" I yelled as I entered.

Mom looked up from the TV. "Oh, good! I texted you this morning with the news!"

I held up my dead phone. "Sorry, needs some juice."

She gave me a knowing look. "So, was it the lawyer?"

"You've lost me. What lawyer?" I grabbed my charger out of my room and took it to the living room. I had zero idea what lawyer she was talking about. "We don't have a lawyer after us, do we?"

She waved at me. "You know. Where you were last night." Despite having had two kids, Mom still blushed when even implying *sex*.

"I didn't get up to anything apart from too much booze." I winced as my head gave a little throb. "And I have a hangover as a memento to commemorate the evening."

She tilted her head. "But you stayed with somebody, unless you were drinking all night?" Her eyebrows raised. "I'm hoping it was tall, dark, and handsome you hustled into your room the other night."

"Oh! He's not a lawyer. He's . . . a librarian." While he gave off Legal Eagle vibes, Otto collated and collected books, treasuring the memories inside, and helped the guys catalog and sort through their emotions. A librarian was the perfect way to describe him.

Mom nodded. "Still a good occupation," she said approvingly.

"Speaking of, I want to get myself sorted today, not talk about guys," I said firmly. "I'll hit the gym and clear my head first, then I'll be scouring the job ads . . . Yes?"

Mom started waving to get my attention as soon as I said 'job.' "It's all over the news and I texted you! There's a big charity coming to Vermont! It's a massive boost in jobs, and you did say you were looking for a charity! It's fate!"

My stomach rolled at her choice of words, like an echo of my bad hangover. "Mm, yeah." My phone finally woke up and pinged with a dozen

notifications. Emails, mostly.

Mom grabbed my arm. "Look! It's back on the news!" She turned the TV up to an ear bashing volume.

I sat and endured the perky newscaster. "And finally, an economic boost is coming to our small city, and good news—it's green and clean!"

It cut to a picture of a big corporate office space with the Ecotics logo being raised above the glass double doors. A chill raced down my spine at the green and blue decal of hands holding a tree.

It cut to an equally perky young man, the subtitles proclaiming him to be *Todd, the new CEO of Life Affirming Satisfaction*. "Ecotics is a new wave of technologies moving us to a brighter future, and best of all, they are hiring. A job fair in Stowe hopes to secure talent across many sectors, so, jobseekers, make sure to get in line."

The lights flickered then, like an ominous omen.

"Life Affirming?" Mom murmured, hardly noticing the electricity surge. "Is that what they are calling human resources these days?"

"I don't know." I shrugged as my intestines coiled with dread. Ecotics was coming here, right to my doorstep?

Was this Summer's doing as a way to see more of me? He seemed overwhelmed with all his different investments and charity giving. I shook my head. No, this was the charity expanding or whatever. Still, that uneasy feeling rocked my stomach like a boat on rough waves.

My phone pinged. Half of me hoped for a text from Otto and was mildly put out at the job alert email. *Great news*. The email announced. Everyone was enthusiastic today—even emails bots. *We found your perfect job*.

I opened the mail. "Tons of Ecotics jobs," I murmured. "Hundreds of matches." The job it showed me proudly at the top of the email was a Public Safety Executive Operative and Technician. What a mouthful.

We think this job ticks all your boxes and uses your experience. The email proclaimed.

"Then let's see if you're right," I said, clicking the link. I was redirected to the Ecotics site, where the job description sat. I read through the wedge of jargon. "'Rewarding work for a ground-breaking charity . . . Solving our biggest issues.' Why can't they just put in simple terms what they do?" I muttered.

Mom shrugged. "Scientists are smart and think everyone else can understand them when they get excited, perhaps?"

"Maybe." I bit my lip. Something in my gut squirmed, and it wasn't the hangover rejecting my favorite breakfast.

"We need you if you have passion and a background in security." Oh, this Public Safety position was actually security related. Well, that wasn't for me anymore, but I kept reading anyway. "Wait. 'Combat experience preferred, but don't worry if not, full training will be given'? What the hell does a charity need combat experienced operatives for?"

"Um," Mom said as she scratched her head. "It would be really proprietary technology, wouldn't it? Stuff that would save the world? So everyone would want it, and they need to protect it."

"Sure, but this is a charity, not a corporation hoping to develop the answer and then grab governments by the balls."

Mom flushed again. "Language, Marigold."

"Yes, sorry." I rubbed my forehead, reading on. "'We proudly support veterans,' Of course they do, that's what they want. 'Generous pay and health benefits. Security clearance required. Come to the jobs fair and see if we are a fit.'" I put the phone down. "Mom, I'm taking a shower and heading down there."

She clapped her hands, making my headache throb. "Oh great! I've got a good feeling about this."

"Good." At least one of us did.

* * *

ONE BUS RIDE later and I was heading to the smooth, manicured grounds of Ecotics' new headquarters. They had even provided a company bus at the bus station; a shiny new electric powered thing. It moved like a regular bus, just without the smell.

Everyone was smiling, wearing suits and clutching their resumes. I leaned back in my slacks and jacket. There were lots of corporate types, and then some more jacked individuals, gazes a bit more steely. They studied me for a while, then each of us nodded, professional to professional.

When we disembarked, the perky guy from the newscast was in the foyer to meet us. "Welcome." He pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead and started warmly shaking hands.

"Todd, Chief of Wellness, right?" I asked.

He laughed. "You've done your groundwork. But it's actually Life Affirming Satisfaction." He said this firmly, as if embedding it for himself. "Now then, where can I direct you all? We have openings interviewing right now in Story Messaging, Furthering Goals, Enabling?"

"Um, care to interpret?" I gave a light laugh to keep a good impression despite having no clue what he was saying.

He deflated a little before supplying, "Marketing, research and development, and operations."

The suits filtered away, but I stayed, along with the heavies. "Security?"

"Oh, yes. Public Safety is that way." Todd pointed and then scuttled off to the next bus.

"Jeez. This place is all worker bees," one of the more tattooed guys muttered. "Guess this environment stuff is finally taking off."

"Job's a job," another said, and that put an end to any discussion. "I don't mind being a number with great pay and benefits."

I walked toward where Todd had pointed and found a signpost for Public Safety interviews. The corridors were clean, people bustling as they moved around, energy high.

There was a queue in the corridor. "Public Safety?" I asked the guy in front of me.

"Yep. Don't worry, they do us in batches."

Sure enough a woman with a clipboard came out of a room. "Next group of forty, please."

We shuffled into an auditorium, where a bunch of guys were exiting the other side, like we were on a Disneyland ride or something. Or a conveyor belt, churning in new starters.

The woman waited until we were settled. She and I were not the only females in the room, but it was definitely skewed toward guys, as was usual in the security field. I sat back, noting the exits.

The woman cleared her throat. "Thank you for your interest in a career in Ecotics today. As one of the fastest growing ecotech companies, we are proud to develop our solutions to create a better world. People are at the heart of everything we do, especially our employees. We are an equal opportunity employer encouraging everyone with the right skills to join as we build a better world for all."

Jeez. Maybe it was my hangover, but I wished they would cut the corporate speak already. I was rapidly losing patience with it.

She pressed a remote and the lights dimmed. "Movie night," someone joked, and I chuckled politely.

The Ecotics tree cradled by massive hands spun for a moment before more corporate bullshit images flashed on the screen. "Ecotics is for everyone. Our biggest challenges need our best effort." Images of flooding, raging forest fires, and ice sheets sliding into the sea swirled on screen.

The voiceover murmured in a phone-sex voice, "Solving our biggest problems needs the right people. The world needs you, and all your unique capabilities, to make the world a safer place for everyone."

"Imagine solving some of our biggest environmental challenges. No more flash floods. No more fires. No more displacement or heartache. No more death and devastation caused by natural events. Our projects will take care of the Earth, and make it a happier, safer world."

Pictures of arms hugging planet Earth made someone snicker, and I stifled a giggle. This was way over the top.

The world spun on the screen, our little blue dot in the cosmos. "Ecotics won't stop there. We are challenging climate change, and, in time, earthquakes and volcanoes can be tamed. It's certainly on our to-do list. You can be a part of this movement. We need people exactly like you: motivated, dedicated, and up for the challenge."

It cut to a video interview with a guy in full uniform: padded vest, helmet, and semi-automatic rifle in his lap. He looked pleased as punch. "This job is honestly the best I've ever had," he boasted. "Vacation days are twice what I had before, free hot meals at the on-site restaurant, plenty of socials to, you know," he winked at the camera. "Meet and mingle. Scientists love a guy in armor, you know?"

Urgh. I rolled my eyes. A *guy* in armor. Apparently they were forward thinking about the environment but not equality.

He hefted the gun in his lap. "The ancillaries are great, but it's also how, like, you can really tell the company cares. The pay is incredible, and the gear? So many cool things to play with, and the best personal safety gear. They really do care about my safety, while I'm safeguarding theirs." He flashed a smile at the camera, eyes going distant for a moment. "And, of course, knowing it's all for a good cause helps me sleep at night."

. . . That was a weird phrase. And why the fuck would these guys need semis? What kind of security were they doing exactly?

The camera panned to the sun setting. "We hope you've seen the benefits

of becoming part of our family. Join us today and receive a sign-on bonus: 25% of your annual pay."

My jaw dropped.

"Holy fuck balls," someone said, summarizing my feelings on the matter. They really, really wanted people to join.

Then I straightened, stomach plummeting and breath catching as my lungs constricted painfully when a terrifying visage filled the screen.

Dr. Smith stood from hugging a kid. I wouldn't have let her anywhere near children. She turned to the camera, that smug look the same as always. I wanted to slap it off her face.

"The solutions are in our grasp," she said serenely. "We just have to reach out and take them. For the betterment of mankind. Join us."

The lights flashed back on, and I jumped. "There you go," the woman chirped. "Exit to the right if you'd like to progress your job opportunity to a brighter, better future."

I curled my hands into fists. *Fuck me*, but I had to find out what the hell Ecotics was up to. I followed the rest of the candidates out, straight to a desk behind which sat Todd and a lot of other flunkies taking our details.

"Name?" Todd asked me.

"M—Mary. Stevens," I supplied. There was no way in fucking hell I was going to give my real name, let alone truly work here, with Dr. Smith connected to this.

Todd nodded, typed that in, and gave me a badge. "The interviews are being held in rooms 9, 11, and 15 down the hallway. Your ticket to a bright new future is inside," he said, only a slight twitch of his lips for the bullshit he knew he was spurring.

"Cool." I lowered my voice. "Any tips to interview well?"

His smile didn't falter. "Just be yourself. We love employees who bring their whole selves to work for us."

I waved that back. "Yeah, yeah, I know, but . . . Any particular buzz words? Key phrases?"

He nodded eagerly. "We are all about stopping climate change here. Our science division will cool the planet with never-before-seen technology to reverse the damage already done, while our tech department will come up with solutions to ween us from the fossil fuel crisis."

"Uh huh." Sounded benign enough. I didn't want to go through with an interview though. It was hard enough for me to come up with a fake name on

the spot, let alone a whole identity. I wasn't ready for deep work like this.

I fished out my phone, like it had been buzzing. "I'm sorry, I have to go. Family emergency," I announced.

Todd's face blanked with surprise. "Oh, I'm sorry," he demurred, sincere for once. He fumbled in his jacket pocket. "Take this for later. I'll help rearrange your interview. Good luck with everything."

I grabbed his business card. "Thanks," I replied with a smile and power walked to the shuttle bus shelter.

I had to tell the boys what I'd learnt so far.

Chapter Fifteen

“Well.” Summer smirked from where he leaned on the doorframe. “Out of all the doors and windows I would expect you to come through, the front is definitely the last one.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. The shuttle had dropped me off in town, but I didn’t know where the doors were. I could have walked home, but the air would do me good, clearing the fuzz from getting blindsided by Dr Smith’s visage.

“Summer, move so she can get inside. It’s freezing out there.” Haru’s voice came from inside.

“Freezing for you, maybe,” Winter grunted from somewhere.

“Stop bickering,” Otto added.

I couldn’t repress the smile creeping onto my face. “Seems I’m getting

quite the greeting as well.” I met Summer’s stare, and with amusement passing between us, he stepped aside.

“*Por favor*, come inside, *Mariposa*. I agree with Haru. It is quite cold.”

I shrugged. “I have enough cushion to keep me warm.”

His eyes darkened as they wandered over my form. “That you do.” He rumbled with appreciation as I entered, and I had no doubt he watched my ass as I passed him. I gave a little extra swing to my hips just to really mess with him if he was going to eye fuck me like that.

The other three stood in the foyer in a line—Haru practically bouncing on the balls of his feet, Otto watching me as though trying to discern my intentions, and Winter with his hands shoved in his pockets.

Otto stepped forward. “Marigold, to what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Um, well,” I shifted on my feet, “I wouldn’t say this is an entirely happy visit.”

“I knew it.” The words from Winter’s mouth were so light I almost didn’t hear them, and Haru’s giddiness deflated like a bouncy castle with a hole.

“I have some information,” I began.

Winter’s hands fisted, a layer of flurries coating them. “It was them, wasn’t it?”

Haru perked up at that. “The two men came back?” He rushed over to me, his hands and eyes scouring my body as he looked for wounds.

Summer stepped forward until he was looming over me, his heat like a tidal wave when it hit me. “I’ll kill them.”

“No, no, no.” I shook my head, taking Haru’s hand in one and Summer’s in the other to help calm them down. “It wasn’t those men. I haven’t seen them once since the interaction.”

They released a united breath, the air cooling and Haru’s rampant searching calming down.

Otto gestured to a sitting room to the left. “Shall we take this into the drawing room, then?”

“So formal.” I laughed lightly. “Sure, I think that’s a good idea.” I headed into the room, trying to ignore the way small vines slithered across the walls from larger ones, briefly blooming before moving into dormancy. Summer passed by me, the warmth heating me instantly even though he didn’t look at me. Winter glanced up, focusing on Summer, and a wash of cool quickly followed.

Yes, they all looked better. Looked fine even. For a split second, when I’d

first entered it had almost felt normal, but it was clear they were still fighting their powers. I couldn't help but feel I was partially to blame.

The fire in the drawing room roared to life, and the flashback of Summer losing control made me not sit close to it. Winter took the single chair near it, instantly subduing the raging flames to a small flicker. There was a knot between his brows, one I recognized. His face was hard, almost cruel as he watched me. I understood it now to be concentration. He was trying to control his powers, and in this instance had used them to calm down the outpouring from Summer, who stood against the far wall from me.

They all waited for me to take my seat, part of the loveseat in front of a bookshelf. Haru came to sit beside me. He was careful not to touch me, but he still released a sigh like being close to me helped relieve some kind of pain.

Otto took the couch across from me on the other side of the coffee table, almost like a barrier between Summer and me. His face was passive, calculating, and even though I didn't feel the effects of his powers, I wondered if he was using them on the others to help them stay in control. Maybe I should have called them, because me being here seemed to set them all to simmering, not just Summer.

I chewed on my lip, unable to relax in the tension swirling around me. I wanted to go to each of them, but which one first? I wanted to hug them, feel their pulse under my own, and let their individual strengths envelop me.

Otto's calm voice broke my thoughts, distracting me from the yearning I felt for each of them. "Marigold."

"Yes?" I took three deep breaths, trying to calm my emotions because I didn't want to affect Otto any more than he already was.

"You came here for a reason," he reminded me gently.

"Oh, yeah, right. I came to tell you Ecotics is building a facility in town," I said.

Otto leaned forward, interest piqued. "Really?"

Haru sat up a little. "What's that?"

"The charity you looked into." Summer frowned, putting two and two together.

I nodded. "There have been all these targeted ads and campaigns, and it was really weird. I—" I cut myself off before telling them I applied for a position to check it out. They didn't need to know I'd been to the facility. They were already all trying so hard to keep their powers under control. I

didn't want the thought of me being in potential danger to send them over the edge. "I did some research," I said, and I mean, it wasn't a lie. Just not the full truth. "I ended up watching this promo video," also technically not a lie, "and at the very end of it . . . Dr. Smith was in it."

I didn't know what I expected, a torrent of snow or heat, for vines to erupt everywhere or things to start withering. Yet nothing happened.

Everything went mute.

It was like the air had been sucked from the room. The sounds, the smells, the heat, the cold, all switched off. The four of them all looked stricken in their own way. Summer's fists clenched at his sides. Otto's eyes were wide. Haru breathed quickly beside me, and Winter's nostrils flared.

None of them moved. It barely felt like reality, more like I'd pushed pause. The fire had gone out in the grate, the ashes flaring red against a creeping blue on the logs. As if Summer and Winter were —

They were all canceling each other out. Winter and Summer in opposition, facing one another, as were Haru and Otto. It wasn't that they were all controlling their powers from erupting, but rather they were all losing control at the same time and canceling one another out.

This couldn't last forever. They were all caught up in their own worlds, and if one person moved . . . I didn't dare move. I didn't even breathe. It felt like a tornado was about to land at any moment.

They needed help. They needed balance. Anytime they lost control, it was because something was happening with *me*.

Otto's words came back to me. '*You are the beat, the conductor we harmonize with.*'

That was it. They were looking better because *I* was around. I was the solution.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to test the theory, reaching out and placing my hand on Haru's leg. Instantly, his shoulders relaxed and his eyes met mine. "Mari," he whispered. It was helping.

I rubbed my thumb on his jeans, giving him the reassurance he had always given me. "You with me?"

He nodded, placing his hand over mine. With the skin to skin contact his eyes closed as he released a sigh. The room shifted, or it felt like it did. Suddenly, rising hot anger, panic, and fear smacked into my chest so hard my lungs could have collapsed.

"Shit," I choked out. My head whipped to Otto. I had calmed Haru down,

which meant the balance was off.

Haru's eyes snapped open, and the intense emotions subdued a little but not enough. "Go to him."

I pulled my hand from under his and walked over to Otto. I sat beside him and reached up to touch his cheek. His eyes fluttered before he leaned into my touch. The intensity of the maelstrom of emotions died off until I only felt my own, which were confusing in their own way, but at least I knew they were mine.

He turned to me and kissed the inside of my wrist. "Thank you, Marigold."

I swallowed. "You good?"

He reached up, pushing his hand against mine to hold it there tighter for a second longer before pulling it off. "I'm good," he affirmed.

I rose, heading to Summer next. Sweat beaded his face, shirt soaking through, and once I was a few feet away I understood why. It was like a sauna around him, and not in a fun way. I paused, looking over my shoulder to where Winter sat, caught in his war with himself as he stared into the middle distance, fists clenched on the armrests.

Haru and Otto's eyes were on me, wide. "Once I settle Summer," I pointed out, "there'll be nothing to cancel out Winter."

The two of them glanced at one another. Understanding what was behind the doors and the way Winter fought his powers, I could guess what might happen. The memory behind their locked doors was something they were all still actively working through, learning to trust one another again, and if Winter lost it the moment I subdued Summer, all the progress would be for nothing.

I backed away from Summer and headed to Winter, kneeling on the ground before him. "Winter," I repeated softly until finally he managed to focus on me, actually seeing me instead of glaring at nothing. "Listen. Can you do that?" I waited.

He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"I'm going to go help Summer, but when that happens, there'll be nothing to block your powers. You need to be ready. You need to fight it. Hold it until I can get to you. Can you do that?"

The fear in his face was clear. He didn't respond, but he didn't need to.

"You can do it. I know you can." I swirled around to face Otto. "Otto, you'll be able to help him."

His face dropped, fear flashing in his eyes like I was a charging elephant. “N—No, I . . . I can’t . . .”

Otto was rarely lost for words, except in the moments he had frozen before: Haru’s vines and Summer setting fire to the garage. I stepped to him. “I know you’re scared, but you’ve done it before. I believe in you.” I threaded my fingers through his. “Remember when Summer and Haru were arguing about trusting me when I first met you? Just do that.”

He shook his head as if denying reality. “That was different. That was two of them fighting, not—not this.” He struggled to stay still, sweat tracking down his forehead. He would bolt any second now.

I gave his hand a squeeze. “Hey. You can do this.” I lowered my voice. “In my opinion, it might just be the most powerful gift of them all.”

Otto closed his eyes briefly, his hand shaking in mine. I gave him time to ground himself on me, heart soaring when his fingers stilled. He swallowed, raising his chin. “I’ll help him,” he confirmed.

“Good. I’m right here, and it’s going to be okay.”

He stood up, shaking out his arms as if he were about to enter a boxing bout with Winter. Maybe it was the magical equivalent. “Don’t tarry, but be safe, Marigold.”

I grinned at him, beckoning Haru to his side. He came up to the other side of Otto and reached out. Vines searched from the mouth of the fireplace, uncoiling and shivering like something out of a nightmare. “Winter, focus on releasing your power on the plants. Obliterate them, turn them to ice, frost them. Whatever you have to do.”

I smiled my thanks before refocusing on Winter. “You got this.” I gave him a reassuring nod before rising and heading back to Summer.

The blast of heat ramped up as I took each step closer. I didn’t pause as I walked right through it and wrapped my arms around his waist. I hugged him tightly, squeezing my eyes shut.

The heat died off first, then his hands banded around me.

Summer kissed the top of my head and squeezed me briefly. “Hurry,” he said.

The vines were iced over, and frost was already spreading across the floor from Winter, like a horrific flower with Winter in the center.

I turned and sprinted across the room to Winter. Meeting his hard blue gaze, I launched myself and flew through the air at him.

My eyes widened when he stood. Arms out, he caught me. Together we

fell, but not a single part of me slammed into the ground, Winter taking the entire brunt as his limbs encircled me to protect me.

I laid there, against his chest, breathing as hard as him. Finally, I lifted my head to see him staring at me. His cool eyes were clear, and the cold was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Winter's heart thundered in my ears. All I could smell was him, clean crisp pine mixed with pure man, as heady as the view from the highest mountain tops.

His hands trailed over my arms, leaving a pleasant shiver in his wake that tingled across my skin.

"Are you alright?" Otto asked.

"She's fine," Winter grunted underneath me.

"And are you fine?" Otto took a step toward us.

"Yes," Winter breathed, an exhalation of pure happiness.

We didn't need to fight our need for each other or deny that they needed me. "We will figure things out, but right now you need me to help you."

I sat up slowly on Winter's stomach. He grabbed my hips. To steady me,

or stop me from leaving? His hands did not close or tighten. Perhaps it was just to touch me.

He dropped his hands, eyes apologetic as he looked away from me. "Thanks. All sorted now."

I looked around at them, unwilling to move off Winter. He was so warm close up. Just a wall of muscle and hard edges, and a man, only a man, skin a glowing heat like hot cocoa.

I realized I was stroking his muscled forearm. He lay still, like he might accidentally startle me. The others didn't move either as I inspected them all. Haru panted, plants curled behind him. Summer slumped in the leather armchair like an exhausted king, eyes dark and questioning. Otto's hand hovered near my shoulder.

Otto swallowed hard, and I watched his Adam's apple bob. He had to be feeling what I was feeling, how I wanted us all to be fine and happy now.

His smile deepened. "Marigold," he said, closing his eyes. "Words cannot convey what we feel about you, how each iteration of you shines in new and different ways. We get to fall in love with new parts of your personality, new strengths that come to the fore."

"Not just new parts. You," Winter said, voice rough.

Haru said, "Think of it like we met at high school. We graduate, go to college, we change. We get jobs and shift focus. Do we lose who we were, or are other aspects just developed and highlighted?"

My head swum. "I don't know."

Summer added, "And as we age, as we change, as we evolve together, *Mariposa*, we choose one another."

"Again and again," Otto affirmed.

"Always," Haru whispered.

"*Siempre*," Summer repeated Haru.

"Forever." Winter's hands clutched me close, tightening just a touch.

My chest felt like it would explode with all the warmth crammed inside. My eyes swam with tears. "Guys. Whoa." I rubbed my face, refusing to let them fall. "Let's sort out your powers. That seems to be the priority, and I won't take any bullshit from you. What can I do?"

Otto tensed, and I knew from his reaction there was an answer.

"Well?" I demanded.

"Yes, well, there is." He scrubbed a hand through his hair as he looked away, suddenly embarrassed.

He didn't need to say it. I knew what I had to do. Grasping Winter's tank top, I leaned onto his chest and pressed my lips against his.

He was shocked still for only a moment, then his mouth moved, devouring me. He pulled me hard against him, trapped, his prisoner and only able to endure his kiss.

I rose to the challenge, lips locked with his to meet his stormy passion with my own. He tasted salty, spicy, clean like everything had been swept away, as bare and wild as a jagged cliff edge.

He pulled away first, gasping for breath. "Mari." He panted.

"Winter." I stroked his hair back from his face with a soft smile. "Feeling better?"

"Some." Grabbing my waist firmly, he flipped me over, protecting the back of my head to lay me on the carpeted floor. His intense gaze studied every inch of me. "Those jeans look nice. They'd look better tossed on the floor though."

"Winter," Summer admonished. He had curled his hands around the arms of the chair.

I lifted myself onto my elbows. "Is this what you all need from me?"

Summer's fiery stare flickered.

"No, Marigold," Otto said, voice low with his own arousal. Compounded by everyone else's, probably. "We want you to love your time with us as well."

The idea of all four men, utterly entranced by me, Marigold Stewart, soaked my panties instantly. Haru knew, nostrils flaring, and that sent a chain reaction through the rest of them.

Summer leaned back, shifting his hand to rest under the waistband of his pants. "Winter, take her jeans off."

"Fuck off, Summer," Winter grumbled. His shoulders trembled as if he was holding himself back. "Well, Mari?"

"What do you want?" I asked him.

He shuddered. "You." He looked down at his bulging thighs, balling his fists. "You, feeling like you can choose. That's all I've ever wanted."

"Yeah. Me too," I said, perhaps with a little sourness in my voice.

"We . . . didn't exactly get a say in whether we received our powers, Marigold," Otto said delicately.

Winter glared up at him. "No, we fucking well didn't. So I get to choose now." He leaned over me, blocking out my view of anything but him. His ice

blue eyes cut through me. "If seeing you again means I have to have this curse . . . Then so be it." He lifted his chin as if challenging me.

I cupped his jaw in my hands, bringing his face down to mine. "I don't know about that, Winter. That's heavy. A burden." I brought my lips to his ear. "Lean on me for a little while."

A shudder raced through his body. "I won't be able to stop if you keep touching me, Mari," he warned.

"But is it helping?"

He said something guttural that sounded absolutely filthy. My spine shivered.

"Yes," Otto translated wryly. "It's helping."

Winter put his huge hand between my legs, cupping my sex in his palm. He was so big all over; I'd seen his massive cock engorged and stiff as a battering ram, and the thought sent an icy tingle through my stomach. His tongue slid over my cheek and chin and down my throat. "Mari," he murmured with each taste, each little nip.

I opened my eyes to find the others. I needed more.

Haru bent down by my head, and I lifted my head to the sweet taste of his mouth. Playful and daring, Haru's tongue darted across my lips.

"Open up for us, *Mariposa*," Summer said. He'd wriggled his jeans down a little, stroking his cock as he watched Haru kiss me and Winter work his way down my body.

A ripping filled the air as Winter grabbed and tore my shirt. I started, and Haru chuckled. I grabbed the back of his head to press him closer for comfort as I quivered.

Winter's hands explored my bare skin, tracing over my stomach, fingers firm and demanding.

"Her jeans, *Invierno*," Summer said again, more insistent.

"And I said fuck off telling me what to do." Winter's palms moved toward my breasts, still cupped in my bra. A hard tug, and the left strap snapped.

I squeaked against Haru's mouth. This was so fucking hot. I reached out, touching Winter's shoulder and Otto's arm. I needed them close. I needed all of them close.

Otto's warm hand snaked under my jeans as Winter's went up my bra. Otto's quick fingers searched out my pussy. "Oh, so wet," Otto mused.

Winter's thick fingers stroked my nipple, peaked rigid with my arousal. He bent his head and swirled his tongue around it, taking it into his mouth. It

cooled quickly, then even more, and I gasped at the pinch of pain, ripping my mouth from Haru's captivating kiss to see.

A tiny little ice block had formed around my nipple, an effective clamp and cold, yet not as bitingly cold as real ice.

Winter's eyes met mine, devouring how I panted, how I shifted my legs as the pain transmuted to pleasure. How it was the perfect counterpoint to Otto gently strumming along and into my core, fingers crooked.

"Swap," Otto said, his eyes on my face as he gauged my reactions and my breathless pants.

"Why?" Winter grumbled.

"Because I have an idea I know she will love."

Winter growled. "You aren't the only subject matter expert here."

Haru smiled, leaning back down. "While they're distracted," He pinched my other nipple, sliding his legs under my head so I could rest in his lap.

"I've had enough." Summer came forward, shucking off his pants and shirt. Naked, he strode up to us, eyes ablaze.

I lifted my arms to him. "There's plenty of me to go around," I said.

He gave me a crooked smile and moved to my cold nipple, taking it in his hands. He watched me as he stroked his power, gently, gently, like a brush of candle wax against my skin.

"*Invierno*, the jeans," he murmured.

Winter's face flushed, and I put a hand on his wrist. He took a deep breath, calming himself. Finally, he rumbled, "The only feedback I'm interested in is hers. Now watch and learn." He locked eyes with me. "What first, sweetheart."

I bucked my hips. "The jeans. I like that idea."

"Very well," he said, tugging at my jeans and pulling them down in rough strokes. *Oh my*. The wild energy in his movements made me feel released, at his mercy and yet safe. I lay in Haru's lap with Summer on one side and Otto the other, the latter scooping my other breast from my bra to stroke the hard bud of my nipple.

Winter was uncaged, pulling my jeans off and throwing them to the floor. "There." He moved on his knees between my thighs, and I had to open very wide to accommodate his brutish shoulders.

Now cold dropped down my back. Winter was so big, I doubted he'd fit. I had a Bad Dragon dildo half the width of him, and it was a stretch. Unless maybe I was misremembering how huge he was?

Winter unbuckled his jeans, and his throbbing cock pushed its way out. Uh, no, I remembered correctly.

"Hey," Winter said, voice quiet and calm as he gently stroked my thigh. "It's alright, baby girl. You've never had a dick like mine, right? We've got to work up to it, that's all."

He talked like it was just the two of us. I nodded, nerves settling. Winter wouldn't hurt me. None of them would. And with a strong connection to me, they would have control of their powers for at least a little while.

The mood built as Otto stoked it, my arousal affecting them all. Haru held my hands, not to confine me, but damn it was sexy to imagine he was holding me open to Winter's ravaging beast. Summer continued to heat my nipple with precise strokes, the cold and the flame equal and both burning so good that I writhed.

Winter hooked his thumbs into my panties, then grabbed the top with his teeth. I hadn't been planning on having sex, so these were my lazy day underwear, and yet he handled them like golden lace.

No, it was me he was staring at with reverence, gaze hungry as he undressed me. "Oh, baby girl," he said, voice shaking. "I'm going to have a feast."

He was there, beard scratching my inner thighs and mouth clamped on my pussy. His tongue lashed around, his hard gaze never leaving my face. He was going to watch every single reaction and effect he had on me.

A ripple of pleasure made me arch my back, then another, as his tongue fondled my clit. Fuck me, but he must work his tongue out too. Imagining a little tongue barbell made me laugh, bubbling out of me with the intensity of pure pleasure.

"Too much?" Otto asked me, concerned.

Winter pulled back to say, "She can take it," before diving back in. His mouth enveloped my sex, tongue tracing my entrance then replaced by his fingers. He pulled back a little, watching me as he eased his fingers inside.

"Relax," Summer said, a thrum of command in his voice.

"You can take him," Haru encouraged, a little daring.

I arched my back again, Winter's tongue latching onto my clitoris.

"Oho," Otto said. "She loves it."

I did. *Who wouldn't?* Three guys surrounding me with hands that seemed to know exactly what I wanted where before I could vocalize it, and Winter finger-and-tongue fucking me into oblivion. I bucked but he grabbed my

hips, keeping me held inexorably open to him, not letting me get away and pouring on so much pleasure.

I came with an involuntary jerk of my stomach muscles, half sitting up as waves rocked through me. When I came back down to Earth, I had Summer and Otto as well as Haru supporting me, and Winter wiped his mouth with a satisfied grin.

"There. Good feedback." He rested on his forearms. "Another?"

"I . . . wow." I blinked slowly.

Otto looked at me critically. "Perhaps we will build up to that, as well."

I panted, not wanting to say anything but kind of agreeing. Another orgasm like the one Winter had given me would blow my mind, and what if he wanted another after that? The idea sent a fizzle through me at the same time as an icy hand of dread stalked the edges of my heart. A perfect combo.

I sat up. The ice on my nipple had melted, leaving a small trail of water that Summer swept up with his finger, evaporating it with a sizzle.

Otto took off his jacket and draped it around my shoulders, and Haru jumped up to grab a glass of water. I drank greedily before putting it down on the table. "So . . . How are you all feeling?"

"Good," Summer said with a smile.

"How are *you* feeling?" Winter asked, folding his arms.

"Pretty good. Thank you."

He inclined his head. "Anytime, Mari."

I looked at them all. "What about you guys? Don't you want to —"

"Don't worry about us," Otto said, smiling. "You helped a great deal."

"If you're sure."

"Unless you want more," Summer said, a simmering growl to his voice.

I grinned, turning my head to the side to face him, and froze. The door to the corridor stood open and through it I saw a flash of flowers. Red and white roses, tiny little white jasmine curling around them. A flood of marigolds nodding from all around the lintel, and yes, little yellow buttercups growing like a doormat. The door itself was more visible through the foliage, shaded from dark ocean blue at the bottom, through sapphire and cobalt up to teal and turquoise, to a baby blue so pale it was almost white.

"Shit," I said, pointing.

They reacted, Summer and Winter darting between me and what I was looking at. "What is it?" Summer asked, casting around like he expected someone there.

Winter looked over his shoulder at me. “That’s the fucking door, isn’t it?”

I nodded, pulling my shirt closed. Haru took my hand and Otto put his arm around my shoulders. The thrum of fear lessened, and I looked at Otto through my lashes. He was chewing his lip, eyes round behind his glasses.

“We really can’t make it go away?” I asked Otto.

He met my eyes. “No, I’m sorry. They won’t.”

I squared my shoulders. “Then I’m going in.”

Chapter Seventeen

I grabbed my CSON slacks and strapped on my security jacket. I wanted to be prepared and armored against whatever that door was hiding.

I ran a brush through my sex-tousled hair and left my room with pounding steps. The guys waited outside my room like we were all going on some kind of mission together. Haru was stretching, Summer was rolling his shoulders, and Winter shadow boxed a bit down the corridor. Only Otto was still.

“Ready,” I said, buckling my pants.

“You don’t have to do this—” Otto began, and Summer and Haru shot him glares. “Now,” Otto amended quickly. “You don’t have to do this right

now. Perhaps we can have some tea first.”

“I do have to do this.” I marched back to the drawing room, now overlaid with happy memories. I held onto them as I squared up to my door.

I could do this. Whatever was behind that door, I would face it. Would it be a deluge of memories from Rose or the others? What would that do to me—change me into someone else or take on their mannerisms? My stomach trembled. There was so much that could happen to swallow up Mari, *me*, forever.

I’d have to fight to stay me and keep my own mind.

“We’re right here,” Haru said.

“We won’t let anything happen to you,” Summer promised.

“Sure you don’t want me to smash it?” Winter rumbled next to me, causing me to huff a laugh.

Otto was quiet, but he held out his hand for me to take.

I curled my fingers around Otto’s, squeezing. “Ready?” His dark brown eyes searched mine.

Holding onto him, I thrust the handle down and shoved the door open.

It opened to an electricity cupboard on the side of someone’s nicely decorated beach house, complete with a grass-lined garden overflowing with flowers and a mini putting green next to a grill that was bigger than Mom’s entire kitchen. Warm sunlight spilled across my skin, the sun here stronger than in Vermont. Ocean waves crashed nearby, and I stared over perfect white sandy beaches and the iconic lifeguard huts to my left and a steep hill to my right.

Otto peered in. “Los Angeles, California.”

The most expensive place in the US. “But why? I’ve never been here.”

Otto waved his hand in. “This is a real door. This is actually here. This isn’t a memory.”

My stomach unwound. “Still, that’s weird. I mean, it is my door.”

Otto put his hand on my shoulder. “Shall we go through?”

“Yes. Although . . .” I turned to face the others. “You don’t all have to stand here. Haru, you’re needed in the southern hemisphere. You shouldn’t neglect your work for me.”

He sighed. “You’re probably right.” He ran a hand through his paint-smeared hair. “In fact you *are* right, as usual. I only want you to know I have your back.”

“I know.” I hugged him, smiling.

Summer's jaw twitched. "And what do I do?"

"Rub down your car again. Think of a few things we can do in your playroom. I might need to blow off some steam when I get back."

That had Summer's eyes smoldering. "Of course, *Mariposa*."

Winter turn and stalked off. "I'm going to stress bake," he declared, thumping through the corridors.

Right. I cracked my knuckles. "Follow my lead," I said to Otto.

"I would be delighted." Otto inclined his head for me to pass through. The tingle over my skin was exacerbated by the warmth from the sun.

I scanned in place. "This is only one block from the sea, in the most expensive city in the US, if not the world." This house was incredible, and I had no idea why the door had brought me here of all places.

"I know." Otto shaded his eyes. He looked out of place in his dark green tweed. "My old office was inland. I didn't come out here as often."

I nudged him gently, the thump of my heart kicking up as we walked the steps to the house. "Why don't you have the office there anymore? Decided to move somewhere else?"

His pace never slackened. "I . . . think we should focus on this mission, *Marigold*."

"You're right," I allowed.

He glanced at me. "I will tell you, I will. I just am not quite ready."

My heart gave another type of thump, this one nothing to do with the climb. "I don't want to push you, and you're absolutely correct, we need to focus on what we came for, but," I bit my lip, "I'm here when you're ready."

His hand touched my shoulder lightly. "I know." His hand curled into a fist. "Let's trust the door, shall we?"

We rounded the side of the house, my heartbeat in my throat as we drew a path across the small, manicured lawn. My forefinger pressed the doorbell and we waited.

No one came.

Trust the door, Mari.

I rang it again.

Finally a man in a gray janitor jumpsuit and a mop in hand popped into view.

My stomach soured as a sharp inhale filled my lungs.

Otto raised an eyebrow at me but said nothing.

Dad crossed the open plan living and dining room. He was as tanned as

I'd expect from a beach bum, but he had a bigger potbelly than I remembered and his nose had red lines weaving all over it, looking like a map of a train network.

He opened the door, peering around. "Sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Hansen aren't here."

"We aren't looking for them," I said with a stone-cold voice. Of course he didn't live here. I frowned at his uniform. When he wasn't drinking or gambling, I remember him promising me and my mom 'more', and even though he'd left us with rags instead of riches, it seemed it wasn't much different for himself.

The house had brought me here. All their doors have been somehow giving them closure to something that had tormented them for years. Within this lifetime, that was my father. It was giving me a chance to do...what?

His eyes widened and he took a step back. "Who the fuck are you? Are you a Viper? Did Darius send you?" He licked his lips, eyes stealing around. "I can pay him. Just give me a few days."

The mention of the name Darius was like a lightbulb going off for me, while Otto stiffened at my side. I should've fucking known it was connected to my dad, and I felt like a complete idiot for not realizing sooner.

His gaze finally settled on me for longer than a second. He frowned at us, watching Otto fold his arms and lean on the lintel before slowly turning his attention back to me. "M—Marigold?"

"The very same." I straightened and barged past him into the fancy house that wasn't even his. I wouldn't be surprised if he lived in some hole in the wall. I headed into the dining room with Otto by my side and my father scurrying after us. "I found your note, Dad," I said as I turned and leaned my hip on the extravagant mahogany table. "Or rather your begging letter."

"What are you doing here, like this? You can't just barge in here." He blinked slowly, as if his eyes were full of sand. "Am I dreaming?"

"Us coming here is real. Your problems creeping up on our family are real." I stepped forward. "I am real, and I'm telling you now: back off."

"Marigold." He chuckled nervously. "Is that any way to speak to your father? I haven't seen you in ages. You're all grown up. What are you doing these days —"

I ground my teeth. "You left of your own free will. You don't get to know things like that."

"But you've tracked me down. Seems you grew up to be quite clever. I bet

you're curious." He offered me a tremulous smile. "I know I am about you."

I slammed my hand on the wide dining room table, my chest heaving. "You don't get to know anything about me. About us. You don't get to know how awesome and intelligent Chris is. You don't get to know what I'm doing with my life. You don't get to know how *any* of us feel about anything, let alone you."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. You sound like your mother."

"Good." Was there any morsel of regret in this man? He only seemed interested now because I was here, fully grown in front of him and blazing with anger. No; righteous fury. "I'm glad I do. She made us a better life than the one you left us to deal with." I grabbed Otto's hand. He squeezed, lending me extra strength as I faced the man who was the root of my family's problems. But I didn't need it.

"You are nothing," I told him with a sneer. "I'm glad you left."

My shoulders loosened as if I'd put down a weight I'd carried for fifteen years. And rather like training weights, this one had made me stronger. "You may have helped give me life, but my life is my own. And it's better without you in it. We are all better. And if Darius or any of his men bother me, mom, or Chris, there will be hell to pay." I leaned forward, my eyes narrowing. "And I'm not talking about them. Tell them to back the fuck off. This is your problem, not ours." I took one last, cleansing breath, looking at him directly in his scornful eyes. "Goodbye and good luck."

I spun on my heel, heading for the door.

"Wait, Marigold."

Nope. I jerked my head at Otto to leave, and he nodded once, watching my back.

Dad snapped, "I'm talking to you! Stop!"

"No, you stop," I said over my shoulder. "Leave us alone, and that's final."

The thudding of feet warned me. I turned, ready to fight, but I didn't want to have to punch my dad. I would to protect Mom and Chris, but I shouldn't have to. He was an adult for heaven's sake.

Otto spared me, stepping forward and catching Dad's forearm as Dad tried to elbow him out of the way. Otto was immovable, and suddenly Dad was rooted in place, as if Otto had the spring powers and had turned him into a tree.

Dad's face paled under his tan. His lips parted, jaw jerking in the air, and

his pupils dilated.

"What the heck?" I hissed at Otto.

"Just giving him a little taste of the pain he has caused your family," he murmured. He cocked his head. "And perhaps pulling out some of this crushing anxiety over debts will curb his vices somewhat."

"Wow." I couldn't help but think of what the others would be doing here. Haru would whip out with vines to stop Dad in his tracks, and Winter would freeze cuffs over his ankles and feet. Summer would seize his neck perhaps, wanting to get close so he could see the pain and fear. But Haru's vines could hurt him. Winter might cause frostbite. And right now Summer ran a little hot and could singe his neck.

I should feel bad, should care. He was my dad after all. But as I stared at the man who had ruined my mother's life—my life—I didn't feel anything. No. That wasn't true. I felt pity.

Otto let my dad go and Dad folded to the ground, sobbing. Otto watched, face hardened and jaw ticking, massaging his knuckles like he'd punched him.

"Don't let Summer pay his debts," I told Otto. "Let those collectors catch up to him."

Otto nodded once, still glaring at the man at his feet. "Are we finished here, Marigold?"

Something clicked inside of me, a piece I hadn't realized had been missing until now. The house knew what I needed. Closure from the abandonment I'd felt my entire life. It had hung over me, making my life decisions for me more than any fated love did. Filling my lungs with a full breath, I released it all. My resentment, my anger, my pain. My life was no longer dictated by his decisions, but my own. And for the first time in my entire life, I understood that. Life was what *I* made of it, not based on the cards I was dealt. And that was fucking beautiful.

"Yes. Yes, we are." I walked out the door, still mentally processing as we walked into the midday heat, only cars rolling by breaking the silence.

Otto's quiet nature lent a sense of peace as I finally faced a ghost of my past, but I couldn't help but want the others here. Haru would be behind my back, his light presence pressing on me like a fresh breeze. Winter with his chilly demeanor would be crisp air renewing my spirit, and Summer's burning passion would be a brazen fire, consuming the rest of the hatred I held for my father so I could be free from him forever.

The only people I needed in my life were these four, my mom, and Chris. I had finally let go of the choices my Dad had made, and I was no longer held down. I stopped in my tracks as the realization hit me.

"Marigold?" Otto touched my shoulder.

"I—" My phone's vibrations drew my attention. Mom, perhaps. I glanced at it.

A missed call from Ecotics Recruiting. *Shit*. I still had them to work out.

"Is everything alright?" Otto clearly wanted to know, but he held back from snooping. I wanted to tell him about possibly going through to the next stage of interviews so I could find out what they were doing.

Whatever it was, it was clear they had big aspirations. It went beyond saving the rainforest or limiting the release of fossil fuels into the atmosphere. It wasn't simply some initiative to go green. I just couldn't quite place my finger on it. But I knew one thing, they were missing a key ingredient and it wasn't me. Remembering the disappointment in Dr. Smith's face when she'd told me my blood sample held nothing special had my stomach squirming. What happened was traumatizing, but my guys had saved me and she'd never truly wanted me in the first place. I was second place because —

My phone rang again, and I frowned at the caller ID. I held it up to Otto, confused. "It's . . . you?"

Otto frowned, then doubled over in agony.

Chapter Eighteen

“**W**hoa, Otto, what happened?” Shit, had he been shot? I hadn’t heard a thing. I dropped the phone to grab his shoulders before he hit the ground.

He sucked in a pained breath. “Oh no. No.”

“What is it?” I demanded, but he was in too much agony to tell me. I snatched up the phone and answered it.

“Mari, say something, are you alright?” Came Haru’s panicked voice.

“I’m alright, but Otto’s hurt. What’s happening?”

“Where are you? We need you safe, right now.”

“What’s going on?” I helped Otto up, pulling his arm over my shoulders as he grimaced, clutching his chest.

“We—argh, Summer, calm down. She’s on the phone. She’s fine!”

"I need to hear her," Summer's voice called, close to the phone like he was wrestling it off Haru.

"I'm finding out! Stop it and calm down—" Haru sounded overwhelmed, panicking. I could almost imagine Summer wrestling the phone from Haru. Scuffles sounded, a rasp of clothes and panting.

"Both of you, I'm fine, but Otto's hurt," I shouted.

Summer's protests halted, and Haru breathed heavily. "It's an emergency. Come home from that door."

I glanced over at Otto, who was frowning. He probably couldn't feel what they were going through because he was so far away, but he could hear their terror. And the way he'd nearly collapsed . . .

"We're on our way."

"Not good enough," Summer's angry voice mumbled. Was he setting fire to shit? I needed to get there ASAP.

"Come on, Otto." I helped him limp toward the door we had popped out from.

"Stay on the line, Buttercup," Haru said, voice trembling. He swallowed, his voice firmer as he said, "We need your voice."

"Of course."

"What can you see? I'll put you on speaker phone." There was silence for a moment before the line got a little echoey. "Go ahead," Haru said, further away and quieter.

I squeezed Otto's hand as I imagined them huddled together, Haru with vines sprouting everywhere and Summer's heat oppressive. Winter hadn't said anything yet, but he was most likely glowering in the back. They needed something calming for now. "There's all these different kinds of houses: apartments and beach houses. I don't know how they manage to get enough water for these plants in the garden, but there are little cactus-like things —"

"Succulents," Haru supplied.

"Of course you knew that. Also, that name sounds rude."

Haru snorted.

"Now I see the signs for downtown and all the busy work going on down there. People moving and meeting, and probably money flowing around after them. Deals and stuff I barely understand except it's all growing, like crops in summertime."

Summer gave an appreciative grunt.

I breathed in deeper, calmer myself. "I'm nearly there, okay?" I looked

into Otto's face. No doubt he felt my worry.

"We will be there, Marigold," Otto said, voice gruff. "We are approaching the right door. The call will break connection as we go through, and we will call them back."

Otto's calm explanation washed around me, soothing my nerves. "Alright. Did you guys hear that?"

"Yeah."

"We don't like it though," Summer growled.

I swallowed hard. "How are you feeling?" I asked Otto.

Otto sucked in a breath, keeping his hand to his chest. "Scared," he admitted. "Something big has happened."

My heart twisted to hear him say that and for the others not to refute it.

"I'm coming," I promised them, tugging Otto with me. "I am stepping through."

Otto's steps hastened, hustling me into the door. As we passed over the threshold, I was hit with a wave of heat.

Haru had backed away to the wall, eyes closed and plants spiraling out behind him, prying over the back wall like they were looking for an escape. Summer was on all fours, the wood of the floor scorched black and smoking in circles all around his hands and knees. Sweat rolled off his forehead.

"Help," he croaked, but I was already moving, immediately getting to my knees beside him to touch his shoulder.

Summer exhaled with relief. "*Gracias, Mariposa.*"

"Okay? All better?" I kept my hand on him, looking critically at Haru.

Otto nodded. "I can balance Haru if I'm not having to battle Summer. Well done."

But he shouldn't have to. "I'm here now. What do you need, Haru?"

Haru raced to my side. "I'm glad you're okay at least," he said, voice quiet and deadly serious. He was pale with shock. "I'm already feeling better."

I stroked Summer's face. "What happened to set you off? And where's Winter? Couldn't he help you?" Unless there was some kind of baking emergency.

Summer shuddered, eyes flashing.

"Winter has been taken," Haru said, voice cracking. "We don't know by whom or how, but he disappeared and we can't find him. Then we felt the thin bonds between us snap." Tears traced down his cheeks. "He might be dead."

My heart thundered in my chest. *No. No!*

Was this what Ecotics and the splinter group from CSON wanted? It made sense: asking me to slide a key under the door and, when that failed, Dr. Smith's new company conveniently in Stoke.

It was never me they wanted.

It had always been Winter.

Chapter Nineteen

Haru had his arm banded around my waist, keeping me in his lap while he scrolled the computer looking at CSON locations and comparing them with a list Summer had. I had been pinned to him for the last five hours while I frantically searched Ecotics facility locations using a laptop Summer had brought to me. They were a global outfit, with offices all over the world. We'd compare both to get our hit list, but really, they wouldn't put "high security lock-up" on a website, would they?

That was why Otto and Summer were working on weather reports. Otto had a huge global forecast up, comparing it to the list Haru and I created and checking for any cold weather events in the last five hours since Winter had been abducted.

Summer paced, clacking away at his phone as he made phone calls and

sent messages. Like clockwork, every ten minutes he moved closer and ran his hand along my cheek before bending over to kiss the top of my head. The gesture was simple, sweet, and not only did it seem to soothe him, but me too.

Truly the person I was most worried about was Otto.

I peered up from my searching to find him in the corner of the library, watching as he switched between books, his phone, and two computers as he continued his weather research, sleeves rolled up. He had barely left his seat since we'd come here to begin our search for Winter. He hadn't spoken to any of us, hyper focused, with his leg bouncing.

I leaned back into Haru, whose free hand came away from the computer to embrace me more fully. "Buttercup." He nestled his nose into my neck, breathing deeply.

I sighed, relaxing further into him. "This is no use. We need to be out there."

Summer paused and frowned at me. "We will find him, *Mariposa*. That is, if he's still —"

He couldn't even finish the words. The ones we all feared. That Winter was gone, a lab rat or being cut up into tiny pieces to be used for whatever fucked up purpose Dr. Smith had dreamed up.

I hated that bitch.

Tears stung my eyes. The lights flickered, this time with a weird reverb as if the house was groaning. My chest grew tight. Otto's face contorted across the room, and instead of the feeling dissipating it strengthened. My heart began to beat faster, my breaths getting shorter. I was on the verge of having a full-blown panic attack.

"Mari." Haru's voice was strained behind me. "Go to him." Wood creaked from the threat of vines. He gave my hand one last squeeze before letting me go.

I crossed the room. Otto didn't even look up at me. Reaching out, I pushed him back against his chair and straddled him, lifting his chin to meet his eyes.

They were tormented, bloodshot. Leaning down, I brought my lips to his. The kiss was rigid. I weaved my hands around his neck and waited, willing him to come back to me. To feel what we were feeling together. A newly rising hope, determination, and something deeper.

Finally, after what felt like forever, his hands landed on my hips and his

body relaxed. His full lips molded against mine as he demanded more. Soon, it became bruising as he fervently sought my presence. Our tongues clashed, lips trying to find more purchase to deepen the kiss as far as it would go.

Otto pulled back abruptly, gulping down air. His eyes now had a clarity they hadn't had before, like he was seeing me for the first time.

"Otto," I breathed, "there you are."

His gaze bore into me, and I realized he had melted away all the panic, fear, and anger from my bones. "Thank you, Marigold." His voice still had an edge to it, but nothing as haunted as I'd felt.

"That's what I'm here for," I said with a smile and a shrug.

He reached up and cupped my cheek, eyes flashing. "Never. You are here to not only balance us, but to be the light we seek to experience in this world. As everything else changes, you help us through our challenges as we help you through yours. You are here to live fully while giving us the chance to be a part of your life. Never sell yourself short, Marigold. You are our world. Even more so than the one we influence with our powers."

His words left me speechless. It was almost like I had been waiting all my life for them but hadn't realized it until now. They needed me as much as I needed them. We all had a choice, and their choice was clearly me. *Current me*. I wanted to protect them, cherish and relish in all that they offered me.

First, that meant finding Winter.

"Anything?" I asked him.

He raked a hand through his short-cropped hair. "Nothing. This doesn't make sense. There should be a freak snowstorm where he is; he'll be angry and trying to escape if he's awake. But even if he's not, his powers will be causing temperatures to plummet." He gestured at the weather reports in little windows across his many screens, benign weather forecasters smiling cheerily. "Nothing."

The unsaid hung in the room.

A ping sounded on my phone.

Otto and I stared at one another, frozen by the sound. *Fuck, we were so on edge.*

"It's probably just my mom or Chris." I swallowed as I pulled out my phone, frowning at the Blocked Caller ID.

"What is it?" Otto leaned forward to peer at the screen.

My fingers fumbled to unlock my phone, pulling up the text message they left.

Meet us at the abandoned mill at the old tree farm just outside of town.

That farm wasn't even twenty minutes from here.

My heart hammered in my chest as I showed what it said to Otto. "Do you think?" My chest tightened with a glimmer of hope, which I stamped down as tears sprang to my eyes.

"If it is, they must have a way to contain his powers. Otherwise we'd be seeing the effects. We need to be ready," Otto said, reading the message over again like something more would be revealed.

"Let's get our guy back." I stood, ready for war.

Chapter Twenty

“Drive faster,” I urged from the backseat.

Summer’s grip tightened on the sleek steering wheel as the car sped up, taking the curve hard, while Haru drummed his fingers on his knees in the passenger seat.

Otto wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled me into his side. “It’ll be okay.”

“Can you feel him?” I peered up at Otto with a pleading look. He somehow had felt when Winter was taken. Perhaps there was a chance that same connection would let us know if we were close.

Summer’s hard eyes shot up to the rearview mirror as though hoping for

the same.

Otto smoothed down my hair. “Just stay focused, Marigold. If he’s there, we will get him.”

We didn’t care what ramifications would happen with all of them out of the house at once, not when it came to one of us. This debilitating fear, as though I was missing a piece of my soul, gnawed at me until my nerves were completely raw. I now understood how they must’ve felt when I was taken, and just like them I’d do whatever it took to get my Winter back.

“I love you all,” I whispered, needing to make sure they understood how much they meant to me before we arrived.

Haru whipped around, face and voice stern. “None of that talk. You will show us, *and Winter*, how much you love us when we all get home. Got it?”

I nodded at him, even though the anxiety tightening my chest didn’t diminish.

Summer turned off the main highway onto a rocky road with a steep incline. His speed barely changed as we charged down the path.

I sat up straight as I pushed my worries aside and went into mission mode. I was trained to not let my feelings get in the way. I let my mind wander on the way here while there was nothing to do but wait, but now we were close to their turf. There was no way in hell I would make any mistakes getting Winter back because I was distracted.

“We’re almost there,” Summer said as he jutted his chin at the GPS that said we were a quarter mile away.

“Should we pull over and try to sneak up?” Haru looked out the window through the trees like there might be something lurking there.

“No,” I said, the weight of our massive disadvantage pressing on my shoulders. “They already know we’re coming.”

Already the temperature outside was reading ten degrees warmer than it should be for autumn, and the trees closest to the car produced buds as we drove past.

“If CSON is somehow involved, they were probably monitoring us from the moment we left the house,” I added.

We rounded the bend, dirt flying behind the car, and the dilapidated mill sat in front of us. It was weathered with peeling paint, broken windows from kids in town, and even some tagging. It wasn’t so rundown it would collapse with us inside, but it sure wasn’t worth saving any more. What few factory machines I saw were rusted and well past the point of return.

Summer parked the car and we all stared at the building in silence. None of us moved. There were no other cars. No other signs of life aside from nature reclaiming the area; which now was a bit on overdrive as the grass grew longer and flowers sprouted.

Otto leaned forward and gripped Haru's shoulders. "Calm yourself, brother."

Haru took a deep breath, and the growth slowed even though it didn't completely subside.

I checked the temperature outside on the dashboard; it was now sitting at just below 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Shit. We needed Winter back ASAP. The balance of us being together was finally coming back, and now inside I felt worse than ever.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door handle and slid out with the others following a step behind. The warmth of the air was already making me sweat in my cardigan. I side-eyed Summer who stood glaring at the mill, his hands flexing at his sides. Stepping forward, I wrapped both of my hands around one of his.

"We need to get him back," Summer said in a determined voice, but anyone who knew him would be able to hear how pain laced it too.

"We will," I replied. We had to.

"Let's do this." Haru moved to my other side and rested his hand on my lower back.

Together, we all headed toward the unknown.

Vines slithered up the side of the building, while Haru's quick breaths came beside me.

I shot a look at Otto over my shoulder, raising my eyebrows at him in concern. A silent question between us.

He mouthed, *I'm trying.*

I had no doubt he was, which only made me worry more.

Summer released my hand to pull open the barn style door, which creaked as it slid open.

Clearly no electricity existed on the property anymore, but there was still enough light to see due to the broken windows and the cracks between the boarded-up ones. It still left plenty of shadows.

Naturally my gaze swept the area, and a trickle of unease ran along my spine, causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end.

"I don't like this," I whispered.

We edged forward, going slow to take in our surroundings in case there was an ambush, but not hiding our entrance either.

The place seemed empty but it was huge, and there were tons of nooks and crannies. Winter could be anywhere.

I leaned over to Otto as we slowed to a stop. “Are you picking up on anyone?”

If Winter was angry or scared, he should at least be able to pick up on that.

Otto furrowed his brows, gaze flitting between Haru and Summer. “I’m a little busy with present company. I’m having trouble splitting my focus.”

Damnit.

“Should we split up? Cover more ground?” Nervous energy had me shifting from one foot to the next.

“Absolutely not,” Summer said.

“We’d cover more ground,” Haru retorted.

“We could go in pairs,” Otto offered.

I squared at Summer. “That’s three against one. You and Otto go together, and I’ll go with Haru. Let’s get this over with and get our boy back.”

Summer gaze bored into me, clearly not liking this plan. I could see the refutation on the tip of his tongue, which made me all the more surprised when he grumbled, “Fine.”

“We’ll go left. You go right. We’ll meet up on the far side,” Haru said.

Summer frowned at us but nodded. “Be safe.”

“Let’s go,” I said as I peeled away with Haru hot on my tail. We moved soundlessly against the southern wall, keeping one area clear of danger, and Haru watched our backs. That meant I only needed to pay attention to what was in front of me and the right.

I weaved through tractors and other lumber machinery, and when I rounded around a skidder, I saw him.

Not thirty feet away, a large, shadowed frame was tied to a chair.

“Winter!” I cried, racing forward.

“Wait!” Haru’s hand grabbed nothing but air.

There was no one else here. Now was our chance.

I skidded to a stop on the dusty concrete ground.

His head shot up at my sudden presence, and I froze.

A nose that matched mine on a haggard face stared at me with wide eyes.

“Marigold! Hurry and untie me before they come back!” My father wrestled with his arms and legs tied to the rusty metal chair.

I stared at him, mouth hanging open.

No. No. No, no! This wasn’t right. How was he here? In Vermont. I—He—Where was Winter?

“Marigold!” My father snapped in a panicked voice, pulling me from my stupor.

I dropped to my knees and started to undo the knot holding his ankle in place.

Another set of hands joined mine on his other leg.

I looked over to find Haru with a furrowed brow, mouth set as he helped me free my father.

“I—I . . .” I had no words. How was I going to explain this to the guys? I felt like a fucking idiot right now. My throat tightened as the reality that we weren’t saving Winter set in.

“Don’t worry about it, Buttercup,” Haru said in a hushed tone. “Let’s just get your father and get out of here.”

A metallic click sounded behind us before a cool, circular tip was pressed against the back of my head.

“No one will be leaving anytime soon,” a gravelly male voice accompanied the gun pointed at my head.

My father visibly shook in his seat as his eyes trailed behind us.

“Stand up. Slowly.” The man behind Haru growled.

Haru and I released the ropes, and with raised hands we rose to a stand position. In unison, we both turned around, our eyes hooking on one another before we faced the barrels held inches from us.

Viper tattoos winded up their arms and following them I found Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum sneering at us.

A slow clap sounded from my right. “Well, I must say, I’m impressed. I wasn’t sure you’d show after your little visit to your father. And yet here you are.” A man stepped from the shadows with razored blonde hair. He wore a suit, but dark, muddled tattoos sneaked out onto his hands and neck. His face was sharp, and his strong chin gave it a triangular look.

This guy looked like a fucking viper even though he didn’t seem to have any tatted on himself.

“Let me guess,” I drawled. “Darius, is it?”

A smirk turned the corner of his mouth, and it radiated danger. “The one

and only.”

“Let us go.” Haru took a step so he was closer to Darius than me, which earned him a grunt of warning from the bozo pointing a gun at his head. “You can have this bastard. We want nothing to do with him.”

My father gasped behind us, clearly in shock we’d leave him to his fate.

I had warned him, but even so, he was my father. I had every reason to hate him. I never wanted to see his face again, but I couldn’t say I wanted him dead.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Darius pulled a gun out and wagged it at us like a stern finger. “Not until I get what I’m due.”

A pit formed in my stomach. “How much?”

He used the gun to scratch his chin in thought, the psycho. “With interest, and if you want you all to walk away from this? I think 2.8 would suffice.”

“Two hundred and eighty thousand?” My eyes bulged at my dad. He really had no self-control.

Darius laughed darkly. “Thousand? No, *bella*. Million.”

Holy fucking hell. I actually couldn’t fathom how my dad had reached that point, but now I understood why Darius had his men hunt us down. At least I could be thankful they had come after me instead of mom or Chris.

The building creaked, similar to the sound the house made when Haru’s vines were slithering through the walls.

I smiled.

“What’s so funny, *bella*?” Darius cooed. “Does death excite you as much as me?”

“No,” I said with a shrug, “but power does.”

As if on cue, and to my surprise, the gun handles glowed red.

Darius’s eyes widened before he wailed and dropped the gun.

To my left, the other men cried out in pain. One of their guns clattered to the ground, setting it off.

I flinched at the sound then immediately searched Haru for stray bullet injuries, sighing in relief when he seemed fine.

He stared slack-jawed at the other man as he wildly waved his hand around, gun stuck to the skin as it continued to melt into his hand.

“Ah!” The man dropped to his knees.

A burst of flame erupted on his arm. I jumped, and it continued to work its way up his arm until it encased him.

His screams echoed through the abandoned building and all anyone could

do was gape with a mixture of horror and shock.

When he collapsed on the ground, the scent of burnt flesh causing bile to rise in the back of my throat, Darius turned to us with a murderous glare.

“What the fuck was that?” He whipped out a second gun in one hand and a knife in the other as he ran at us shooting. “You think you can fuck with me? The leader of the Vipers?”

“Haru!” Summer called in panic.

As if Summer had given him a command, Haru swirled and wrapped his arms around me to protect me from the bullets.

“No!” I screamed, fear striking through my body until it burned every inch.

Vines erupted from the walls, the ceiling, everywhere.

“Fuck!” Haru grunted against my ear.

My heart clenched as my hands searched him for a bullet wound. It didn’t last long because a moment later the building groaned before collapsing around us.

Haru and I crouched together at the loud bang. My stomach was in my throat as wood and cinder crashed around us. I pried my eyes open to find Haru’s vines in a wave-like formation over us and my dad, barely protecting us from the debris that barreled into it.

My breath came fast, and the fear I felt grew tenfold until I was shaking and crying in Haru’s arms. I could barely breathe from what I was feeling; it was incapacitating.

As silence grew around us, I didn’t withdraw from Haru.

Rough hands grabbed me and spun me around until I faced Otto. His eyes were wild, his glasses cracked and coated in dust. They fell from his face as he held me. “Are you okay? Bloody hell, please tell me you’re okay. Please be okay.”

I melted into him, realizing he’d lost control of his powers the same as Summer and Haru, and the debilitating fear I felt was more his than my own.

“I’m fine. Haru protected me.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him as tightly as he held me until his breathing evened and the constriction in my chest lessened and the gripping fear released my muscles until I was a puddle of Jello from the heightened emotion.

“Well, that was a shitshow,” Haru said from behind me.

“Could’ve been worse,” Summer added nearby.

“Could it have?” Otto’s throat bobbed against my forehead.

I released him, pulling away to look over my other men. They had seen better days. Summer had some cuts and bruises, but nothing fatal, and Haru looked ready to pass out.

All around us was rubble, and beneath it was Darius and his men. I prayed that with how abandoned this place seemed, no one would come to clean up. With the forest surrounding us, setting it ablaze to get rid of any trace didn't seem smart either.

I walked over to where Darius's knife laid on the ground and snagged it. Stepping behind my father's chair where he sat in a stupor, eyes glazed with shock, I cut his bindings then pressed the knife into one of his free hands.

"I don't think Darius will be looking for you anymore," I told him.

He blinked at me, jaw moving but no sound escaping.

"Leave mom alone. Go live your life. Continue to make bad decisions, or try to do better. I don't care which. But I don't want to see or hear from you again," I said. My body was drained, tired, and when I walked I felt like I was floating even as I had to climb over rubble to get back to my men. "Let's go home." I grabbed Otto's hand in one and Haru's in the other and pulled them back to the car. My stomach dropped and tears threatened to overtake me as the adrenaline wore off.

We still needed to find Winter, and I felt further from finding him now than before.

"Thank you." My father's hoarse voice followed me.

And that was the last thing I planned to ever hear from him again.

Chapter Twenty-One

“*W*e aren’t getting anywhere with our search and sitting here on our laptops and phones isn’t helping.” I collapsed with a huff on the couch in the library.

We had been drowning ourselves in coffee and searches for days. Honestly, I didn’t even know how many anymore. Time had no meaning with Winter gone. All I knew was we needed to find him soon. Every day that had passed, a worse sinking filled my stomach until I could no longer eat.

My fingers ran through my tangled hair. “I need to go back to Ecotics, right here in Vermont.” With Dr. Smith associated with the place and Winter gone, it was our best bet of finding answers. I just knew it.

Otto’s arms tightened around my waist. “No. Too dangerous.”

“No, it’s perfect. I have a way in. I still have the badge they gave me, and

I'm nobody to them. If they saw you, they might recognize who you are."

"You're not nobody to us," Summer growled, the sound ringing around Otto's library.

I leaned back into him from where I sat at the hard oak desk next to him. "I know, but I'm the most inconspicuous out of all of you. That's my plan, guys, and we need to do it before we run out of time." My military brain didn't see them as assets in that situation. Rather they were liabilities.

Still, I pried myself out of Otto's lap a little reluctantly. "You'll have to stay here, Otto, to help them control their powers."

He clenched his fists. "I don't like it at all, but I can see your reasoning. I will respect your expertise in the matter." He bowed his head briefly, and at that moment my chest expanded, an upswell of pure light. He glanced at me, having felt it too. He took my hand in his, bringing it to his lips for a kiss. "Be safe, Marigold."

"We'll be fine here," Haru assured me, but I could hear the wobble in his voice.

"Speak for yourself," Summer said, folding his arms. The room was hotter already, closed and humid with his thrumming anger.

I stood taller, reached high, and took his chin. "You will keep it all held back," I told him, a sultry edge to my voice. "Because you're my *buen chico*, aren't you?"

His nostrils flared, his stubble scratchy against my fingers as he gave a small, tight nod. "Yes, *Mariposa*. For you, I will do this."

I awarded him a smile. "Good. I know you can do it."

This time something like contentment flitted across his face. "*Si. Gracias.*"

I winked at Haru. "Hold him down with vines for me if you need to. Mm, that's an image I definitely need in real life. And in a painting."

A genuine grin crossed his face. "Will do, Buttercup. I'll truss him up nice and neat for you."

I turned back to see Otto rolling his eyes but with a soft smile tugging at his lips. "And you're in charge," I told him.

"Me?" His eyes went wide, just as the house gave a shake, like a horse ridding itself of a fly.

I planted my stance. "Earthquake?"

Haru snatched my hand. "The house is moving." He scrambled out of the door, Summer and I hot on his heels. Otto brought up the rear, hanging back.

Ten doors down from the library was a very familiar door. “Oh, hey. My room is over here now.” I patted it affectionately.

“And mine.” Haru nodded to his door. “And look. The other side is Summer’s room.”

I peered in through a door, light from behind me flashing on the long windows with the St. Andrew’s cross on full display. *Oh my*. My cheeks burned. “The playroom, you mean.”

“And my actual room.” Summer nodded to the next door along, scorch marks still marring the lintel. “Haru and I are even closer to you than we were.”

“Hm.” I looked back at the library. “Is this your bedroom, Otto?”

“Sometimes.” He rocked on the balls of his feet, shirt shifting and straining as he shoved his hands deep into his pockets, looking away from me.

I paced over to him, tipping his chin up to look into his eyes. “I’m just asking to get closer.”

“I—I know.” He took a deep breath and raised his gaze to meet mine. “I . . . I will get there.”

I smiled, but my stomach rolled. I hadn’t seen where he slept yet, and I hadn’t come across his memory door. He was apart from us, despite all our work to get closer.

We walked to the door for my Mom’s apartment building, and I took a deep breath before stepping through.

Time to focus.

* * *

THE ELECTRIC DOORS spread open for me as I entered Ecotics, the crisp white corporate office blinding in the glare of the sun outside through the towering windows.

“How may I help you?” The front desk person asked.

“Earlier this week I had an interview but had to leave early for a family emergency. We rescheduled for this evening.” The lies came easily as they tracked from the ones I had told earlier. Consistency was key.

“May I see your badge?”

I held it out, and the attendant scanned it.

“I don’t see you —”

I cut in. “Oh, it was last minute. Todd called a half hour ago to see if I was free, and I was. I really want this job, so I headed straight over.” I let the desperation in my voice seep through. Hopefully she’d think it was for a job.

“Alright, let me go ahead and call —”

Again, I cut her off, this time with a smile. “I know where I’m going, and I really don’t want to keep them waiting. Timeliness and all that to help make a good impression.” As always, a good lie was littered with truths.

Her forehead scrunched, but she shrugged and turned back to her computer. “Very well.”

I rushed away to the elevators before they could second guess anything. Once inside the elevators, my fingers hovered over the buttons. It was all easy to access with this badge. Now where would be the perfect place to hide, experiment, control, and even possibly kill one of the Seasons?

The basement.

I pressed the “B.” Gripping my badge, I waited for some kind of secret scanner or something to indicate I needed special access.

The elevator buzzed alive and moved the moment the doors finished sliding shut. I released my tight breath. Seconds later, there was a ding and the metal doors glided open.

As expected, it was bare halls with laminate flooring and zero windows. It was quiet, probably because most people had left for the day. I walked quickly, keeping my head down any time I saw the blinking red light of a security camera. I continued to walk with purpose, like I belonged there, as though I had already been hired. Nothing like some person sneaking by on film to grab security’s attention. I didn’t want them to see my face, but I didn’t want to send out any red flags to draw their scrutiny.

To my surprise, most doors were unlocked: rooms filled with boxes, cleaning supplies, or were only half finished. Duh. This place was still hiring. Still being created. On the floors above everything was put together, mostly. The basement was the equivalent to a kid shoving their toys under their bed to make their room look clean.

My stomach sank. Even still, I kept looking. Room after room. I even passed by some custodians, who didn’t give me a second glance. No one was on guard here. Hell, it had been easy to convince the person upstairs to let me through without verifying anything. If Winter was being held here, the security would be tighter, that I was sure about. There were no white coats.

Nothing that seemed out of the ordinary outside of a new business being created outside a small town.

Shit.

Dejected, I entered the final hallway. I twisted a metal handle to find it locked. I stopped. I tried it again. My heart picked up. There was a badge panel on the wall.

That was new and exactly the kind of security I would expect if they were hiding something they didn't want anyone to see.

I grabbed my lanyard. The card on it was tied to me, and even if no alarms went off, I would be logged into the system as accessing this room. I never planned on returning here ever again, so it didn't matter. What if he was here?

My mind went to a dark place. Envisioning a freezer behind the door, one created by Winter in his rage. Or instead of finding my vibrant Viking prince, I would find a lifeless body strung from the ceiling like some pig carcass in a butcher shop.

My throat clogged as my stomach threatened to revolt. It was traumatizing, just the thought, but I needed to know. And if that's what I found, I would let Summer burn this fucking place to the ground. In fact, I would be right there beside him with a lighter and Molotov cocktail.

My hand shook as I raised my badge. I hadn't even been hired yet, so it may not even work. I slid it across the pad.

Beep. Green light.

Holy fuck. Thank goodness for a system still being set up.

I tried the handle, and it clicked with ease. The door opened. No creak, no sound. It was too new . . . and no blast of frigid air.

The overhead lights flickered on to no Winter.

Tears threatened to spill as an ache filled my chest with nowhere to go. A fucking dead end. Just a room with . . . A big upright wardrobe-like object on the far side being worked on by a technician.

He glanced over at me. "Oh, hey, are you busy right now?"

Fuck fuck fuck. "Kind of. What do you need?"

The tech lifted a panel with a grunt. "Some upper body strength." He lowered it back to the floor with a red face. "I need this to go over here, up on the wall by the Asset Container."

I hefted the panel, the size and weight of a decent flat-screen television. "Asset Container?"

He gestured to the upright box, all sleek steel merged with the inky coal of Kevlar and thick glass with a blue sheen. Which meant it was reinforced too. Up close, it looked like a futuristic coffin. “This baby here. Whatever the scientists are developing will be about this size. You wouldn’t believe the amount of electricity it needs too.” With a grin, he pressed a button. The door slid shut with a hiss, and I jolted when it gave several large bangs in succession: bolts sliding home.

The technician whooped as the room lights dimmed and then flickered. “Look at that. Nearly topples the local grid every time.”

My heart banged against my chest. This thing was what was causing the wild energy dips in town. “What the hell is supposed to go in it?”

“No idea,” the tech said cheerfully. “Now, can I have the panel over there?”

I lifted it where he indicated, and he got a pencil to mark where the holes should be. As he drilled, whistling, my mind whirred, mainly to unhelpful places.

The CSON splinter group had taken me to fucking Belarus. Who the fuck knows where they would’ve taken Winter? I wanted to cry, scream, and throttle the wall, and smash this expensive bit of tech.

What if he really was dead? A small sob trickled out of me. I reached up to cover my mouth to muffle myself as more came. I couldn’t lose him. I had just found him. I had been stupid before, taking my space. If they were right, I only had this lifetime with them, as I was at least. And I’d fucking wasted precious moments of experiences and adventure with them. I might never have Winter’s cooking again, feel his icy gaze rake over me, his surly presence as he helped me with workouts, or hear the way he barked at Summer to assert his own dominance. There was so much more of him to explore—of all of them. I could spend my entire lifetime unraveling them and never get bored. And now . . .

Another suppressed sob.

No. I couldn’t give up yet. On the off chance he was still alive, he needed me. I would find him or die trying, and I knew the others would agree with me.

“Hey, you okay?” the technician said, setting down his drill as he took me in.

“Yeah, just dust from the drilling.” I wiped my eyes furiously. I couldn’t lose focus.

I lifted the guy's panel and he screwed it in place. "Great," he said, connecting the wires. "And bingo." He grinned as the screen came to life, showing an empty graph chart on the right and a set of stats on the left. All blank for now.

I stepped closer to get a better look. My brain was firing on overdrive. I had seen this before. Somewhere. I wracked my brain. Where had I seen this display? It must hold data of some kind like . . . A panel code or a name or temperature.

That was it. Temperature. Every single siren was going off in my head as a memory burst back into place—Summer and I leaving the CSON office in DC. I had been so pissed at the secretary thing, the room I had passed hadn't fully registered. Inside the room had been a wall of blue glass, the same glass as this coffin, monitors beeping above with the temperature on it as well as a slew of other numbers I didn't understand. Wires had dangled from the top near a long vent, pumping cloudy gas inside the chamber.

It hadn't made sense to me then, but it did now. It was a fucking room to hold Winter. It had to be. And what better place to hold a Season than the headquarters of CSON where security would be the highest? Hell, the building didn't even look like anything special. Most people didn't even realize what was inside.

Another problem hit me. It wasn't a CSON splinter group. It was CSON themselves. He was being held at their fucking *headquarters*. The place had top-notch security and would be swarming with people to protect whatever the hell they were doing. Before we stormed the place, we all needed to be operating at peak performance. *Everyone* needed to be in full control and as fully connected as they could be. Not just to one another, but to their powers as well.

Otto was key. He could take people out safely at a distance, but if he froze, we would fall.

He couldn't freeze again. We needed to fix that.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Me?” Otto said, wide-eyed. He still looked rough when I got back to the house. They all did. Haru drooped on the couch. Summer simmered in the corner of the library next to the laptops—probably put over there by Otto so he wouldn’t set any of the older books on fire. I finished giving them my intel, and Otto quickly pulled up a live reading on the electricity grid across the US. Sure enough, the grid was going wild in D.C., pulling serious amounts of power.

“Yes. The facility in CSON headquarters has serious security, and you just confirmed yourself. There’s no door that leads directly to the room I think Winter is in.” I gestured to his meticulous records of the location of the

doors. “It’s either that or Summer goes in like some kind of flaming seraphim angel of death.”

“Fine with me,” Summer growled.

Otto shuddered. “We don’t want that.”

Summer slammed his hand on the table. “We need to make an example. They can’t get away with this shit.”

I turned to Summer, arms folded across my chest. “I know you’re angry, but you’re talking about killing people just doing a job. People who work in security. Who think they’re making a difference. People like me.”

I knew it was bringing out the big guns, and my heart ached when Summer flinched. I went to him, prying his hands from the top of the desk before he burned through it with a whiff of melted varnish.

“Okay?” I asked him.

He swallowed hard. “Okay,” he murmured. “Thank you, *Mariposa*.” He closed his eyes and leaned his weight against me. I leaned right back so we were holding each other up.

Otto was still shaking his head. “I . . . I can’t.”

“You can,” I asserted, keeping my voice low. Enticing. I awarded him a little smile as I moved back toward him. “Earlier you four needed physical closeness. Maybe something like that again?” I deliberately left the offer hanging.

Otto’s ghost of a smile died on his lips. “What you’re asking me is to deliberately use my powers on a large scale. I don’t know if I have that kind of control.”

“You do. You’re really good at touching my emotions and, while you shouldn’t have to do it all the time, you’re definitely the best at helping the others manage their powers.” I gave a sly look to Haru and Summer behind me, then went on tiptoe to whisper in Otto’s ear. “You’re the most powerful one out of all of them.”

His nostrils flared, the compliment having the desired effect. Still, fear floated in his beautiful brown eyes.

“I heard that,” Summer grouched.

Haru had enough self-confidence not to be fazed by my statement and winked at me.

Otto gathered my hands, swallowing hard, and my stomach dropped. His look, the way he was acting . . . It was like he was about to deliver bad news.

“I can’t,” Otto croaked. “I—I freeze too easily. I get overwhelmed, and I

can't think."

I cocked my head. For him to admit that was huge, and brave. Otto was brilliant. Of course he was ashamed that in some key moments he panicked, when in others he'd rise up from a place of logic, ready to break down whatever the problem was.

"You didn't when we got Mari from Belarus," Haru pointed out gently.

He shook his head with force. "That was a one off. You can't rely on me. I'm not consistent."

Summer folded his arms across his chest. "There's only one way to tackle that, *mi querido*," he said, voice sad but firm.

Otto's grip on my hands turned tighter. "I—I can't."

I surged forward, pressing my lips to his forehead as if I could press my confidence into him. "We can," I reassured him.

Otto's eyes cracked open, swimming with tears. He took a deep breath and nodded once. "Yes." The single, simple word filled my heart to fullness. He bowed his head. "I need your help, Marigold."

"Anytime."

"Come." His hand dropped so he could turn and lead me to the back of the library.

I caught up to him so we were walking side by side. His steps slowed with dread, so I tried to distract him. "You really sleep in the library?"

"Recently, certainly." He wrinkled his nose as he turned into the room in question. "And by recently, I mean the last fifty years or so. I'll fall asleep at the desk, reading, or just walk all night taking notes when it's my turn to cross the world."

"Well." I looked at the space anew. It was welcoming and cozy but definitely a read and relax or research and work space. Otto had buried himself in work to escape whatever haunted him. "We'll have to fix that."

He smiled sadly at me, squeezing my hand. "I'm pleased you're here by my side for this, Marigold, but if it's too much, I will do it alone. For you."

I squared my shoulders. "No, I'm in. Let's take this slow."

"Winter needs us." His hand clenched mine. His past had a firm hold on him. One I was going to have to help him work through. I took a breath, scanning the balcony ringing around the library, looking for something out of place. A memory door like the others had. Haru's door was hidden behind choking foliage; Summer's was down a corridor protected by a shimmering mirage of perfection. "Do you know where your memory door is?"

Otto pointed straight ahead at a set of shelves before us and I blinked with surprise. All I saw was a collection of leather-bound books, all lovingly kept pristine and dusted. No, not dusted. They were handled with so much love and care, every single day, that dust had no time to settle on those books.

“Is it really the shelf with the diaries on it?” I took a step toward it.

“Yes.” Otto lifted the books out, one at a time, starting from the very top left. I helped, shifting them carefully and putting them on the desk. As we worked, tears tracked down Otto’s cheeks. The sheer burden of all this, the time spent together, how it passed for them but differently for me, how they had to go through multiple devastating losses and carry all this with them . . . I started sniffing too.

“I’m so sorry for you guys,” I said.

Otto put the journals down, stroking my back. “Yes. But we get to start again, Marigold. That’s the beauty of this. Don’t look at all this weight of memory; these are mere one-dimensional records. My greatest frustration is that I can’t record perfectly how you make us feel.”

Warm tears washed from my eyes.

He held out a handkerchief. “Here.”

I blew my nose. “Thanks.” The shelves were empty at last. “Now what?”

Otto gently tapped an empty shelf, and it swung down, knocking the one below it down like a domino with a light click. *Click, click, click.*

Once the shelves were out of the way, it revealed a brass ring. We could twist that to lift the latch on the other side.

Otto put his hand on it. “Now. We are starting a new chapter together. But I need you to know how this one ended.”

My stomach tensed. Finally, it was here. The answer to what made Otto freeze. The next part of the story with Rose.

I faltered. “Wait, how it *ended*?”

His gaze haunted, he took my hand, and we stepped through together.

Ahead of us was Winter’s back bristling with ice spikes. Snow sparkled in the light, devastatingly beautiful. Summer had backed up against the wall, arms frozen up to his shoulders and the ice making its way up his throat. Beyond him was a humped shape, Haru’s plants covered in snow, and on the mantelpiece the clock.

3:15. Forever 3:15.

Otto, my Otto, crumpled shirt and eyes ringed with strain, stepped back, out of the way as another version, crisp and sharp in a Victorian business suit,

walked in. He took in Winter's back, saw Summer's predicament, and chuckled.

"I did say he was powerful, Summer," past Otto said.

Summer's teeth chattered, eyes wide.

My Otto's head dropped. "Observe, the know-it-all who knew nothing when it truly mattered," he said, glaring at his younger self.

Of course, they couldn't see or hear us, but neither could we see the other side of the room from here. I craned my neck to see, but the edges were blurry. Walking closer, the far wall got further away. "What's happening? Why can't we move around?"

Otto stayed by my side, studying the scene. "The memories are just from our angles. What we saw and experienced."

"So because you couldn't see past Winter, this bit is incomplete." That seemed important to me.

Otto opened his mouth to respond, but the past Otto said, "Well, we are at least learning, are we not? Force will only work up to a point." He shook his head at Summer.

Summer's lips moved, mouthing something rapidly, unable to speak as the cold robbed him of breath. The memory Otto waved him down. "You'll be fine. This is important. Now, then, Winter, you need to identify and categorize your emotion —"

"Stop!" Winter roared.

Past Otto raised an eyebrow at him. My Otto screwed his fists into his shirt cuffs. The difference was stark: the previous Otto, still neat, but with chest thrust out and an authoritative, lecturing tone, compared with my Otto, so tense and drawn in beside me.

"I can't." My Otto spoke into his hands. "I can't watch."

"Shh, it's okay," I said in an empty platitude. My heart drummed in my throat.

Past Otto tutted. "What are you feeling, Winter? You need to be able to harness your emotions —"

"Down him!" Summer finally managed to scream, strangled, ice tracking over his mouth as if to encase him completely.

Past Otto glared at him. "You, be quiet. This is an opportunity to learn in a safe environment." He refocused on Winter. "Now then. Breathe in with me. Hold it for —"

Winter screamed, and ice shards lanced outward around Winter.

“No.” My Otto threw himself in between me and the memory as spikes of ice shattered the mirror into glittering shards, thudded into the ceiling, blew the door off its hinges with several heavy thuds, and cracked into the windows.

I put my arms around Otto’s waist. He trembled next to me. “It’s alright,” I whispered. “It’s in the past.”

He collapsed over me. “No more. I can’t see any more.”

I patted his shoulder, settling under his weight. “I can, Otto, and I know you can too. You can learn from this.”

He gave a self-deprecating sneer. “Learn that I’m a self-absorbed braggart? That I took one look and thought I knew what was going on and exactly what to do? I know that already, and I’ve loathed myself for it.” He thumped his temple.

I wrapped my fingers around his hand, pulling it back from hurting himself again. Over his shoulder, I watched as the Otto from the past picked himself up, holding out his hands to Winter. Winter was shuddering, but the ice was retreating. Otto was dampening his emotions and shutting off the fuel behind his powers.

The ice shucked off Summer, half melted into slush to slop to the floor, and Summer scrambled over to the mound of foliage.

The Otto in the memory rolled his eyes. “He’s fine, you know.”

“Rose,” Summer shouted at him, and my Otto flinched, turning his head into my shoulder to get away from the accusing cry.

Just beyond the tangle of briars lay a figure, blond hair strewn on the floor, eyes staring and frozen into pale blue.

Past Otto gaped, took a step forward, then halted. Shock paled his face but his eyes . . . They were haunted, shattering before me as he realized what he had done. What he had failed to prevent. “No. No!”

Summer lifted a limp Rose up as Haru dug his way out of the briars, struggling. Summer bent over her, keening, and Haru pressed his hands to her stomach. An icicle stood proud from Rose’s stomach. There was no blood, none at all. She was too cold for that.

My Otto wrapped his arms around me, holding tight. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I could have done something. I *should* have done something. If I had stopped Winter, if I had seen, if I had spent just one second longer looking instead of assuming I knew what was going on . . .”

His words washed over me in a wave of regret, and I was stock still like

the body of the woman they loved. Winter had killed her. Killed . . . me.

I tore my gaze away from her. I couldn't do anything for her, and right now Otto needed me. I focused on him, taking his hands in mine. "You didn't see her there, Otto. That's what this memory is. You didn't see Rose, so you couldn't have known. You were trying to help him learn to control his powers."

"But it wasn't a teachable moment. It was your *life*."

I squeezed his hands. "It's easy to know what to do after the fact, once you have all the information and context, right?"

He nodded, head lowered.

"But that's easy. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, Otto. It's easy for you to blame yourself. Harder to find the lessons." I pointed at the still memory, at the players all devastated around Rose. "You didn't know what was going on."

"I acted as though I did."

"All we can do is act on the information we have." I tipped his chin up to meet my eyes.

His brown depths searched mine. Yes, they were saddened, but a flicker of hope lay there too. My heart thrilled to see it.

I held his chin in place, making sure he took in what I was about to say. "You have learned to get the full picture, but that can lead to analysis paralysis. Is that what happens when you freeze, when one of the others is losing control?"

He shuddered. "Yes. That, and the panic they are feeling puts me right back there and I can't act. It's so stupid."

"I think it's trauma, not stupidity." I smoothed his cheek, feeling his jaw move. I was closer to the answers inside him than ever before. "You're human," I said, with a smile.

His eyes widened slightly. "I'm not exactly human."

"No, but you're not godlike and infallible and all-knowing. Although you do know a lot."

He chuckled. "Ah, that kind of only human."

I squeezed his hand. "You make mistakes, all of you. You feel regret and anger and hatred. The full spectrum of the bad stuff. But you also get to feel love and laughter. You get to not only experience your own joy but others. If anything, you understand what it means to be human more than anyone, because you know what they experience too."

He nodded slowly. "I suppose I do."

I warmed to the subject. "You see it all the time. Do you judge people for it? Do you secretly hate that the guys feel regret and remorse, that they make mistakes?"

His nose wrinkled. "No, of course not."

"So. You're allowed mistakes, Otto."

"Certainly. When I put the coffee on the wrong shelf in the kitchen. Not when it involves your life."

I weaved my fingers with his. "That same situation won't happen again, Otto. Everyone has learned from it. Don't let it hold you back. It wasn't wholly your fault. The same as it wasn't Summer's for not being strong enough to defeat Winter. Or Haru's for not realizing what was happening soon enough."

"Is that what they think? That they are responsible?" He bristled. "They shouldn't bear that full burden alone."

"Exactly." I linked arms with him as if we were strolling down the street.

He closed his eyes briefly, exhaling. With it, the room began to shimmer, small cracks breaking through the powerful memory.

"None of you are to blame for what happened to Rose." As the colors faded, draining from the scene, Otto stood taller.

Meanwhile, I looked back to where Rose had fallen. This was the place and time where Rose had died; she hadn't lived a full and happy life with the guys. My gut wrenched at that. This was what happened 150 years ago, and what Dr. Smith had taunted me to find out.

Winter had killed her. Me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“This way.” Otto strode forward, into the decaying memory. The colors paled, blues leaking into icy white, the browns and blacks vanishing like shadows in the light. The memory faded underneath his sure footsteps.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.” He stopped, gesturing across the white space. “Look what’s happening.”

I didn’t see anything at first, then noticed the edges sharpening. Otto came up to my back and put his arms around me, holding me as the room solidified. Color came rushing back as stately browns, deep rich crimson,

burnt amber, and umber draping the walls. It firmed up into solid shapes, wooden panels that became bookshelves, the oranges tapestries along the walls. A four-poster bed appeared, dressed in red.

“What do you think the bathroom should be?” Otto murmured to me.

“A deep tub with little golden feet and a bookshelf right next to it.”

“Mm, yes. And a massage table next to it.” He glanced to the side and I followed his gaze. In an adjoining room a blur sharpened into a spacious bathroom, complete with porcelain tub just as I’d said. Next to it was a shelf big enough for me to lay on, and smaller shelves dotted within easy reach of the tub.

“It’s changing. The house. It’s changing this memory room.”

“Yes. I hate to say it, but Summer was right. We do need to work through these things.” He hugged me close. “Thank you for being you.”

I finally felt I had the answers. I was no longer held back or tied down; I chose who I loved. My family, and them, always them. They didn’t just love me because they were required to. They just loved me.

“Easiest thing in the world.” I turned in his arms and lifted onto my toes for a kiss. His lips were warm under mine and parted eagerly, filling my senses with his cedar scent.

When I eased back onto my heels, sliding down his hard chest, we surveyed the room around us. It seemed to be settled for now, the bed flanked by reading lights but also satin ropes keeping the four-poster curtains contained. A deep pile rug kept the room feeling cozy despite all the severe dark woods of the walls, and the tapestries were all of leaves dancing as they fell to the ground.

“This is beautiful.”

“Yes. Much better. A proper room, with two doors.” Otto gestured behind us where we’d come in. The door to the library stood open.

“Where does this one go?” I opened the other one—straight into my room.

Sitting on the edge of my bed was Summer, head in his hands, and on the floor was Haru in a yoga pose. He wobbled out of it as we came in. “New door. Hey, nice. Is this your room, Otto?”

“It is now,” he said, patting the lintel.

“Is it done?” Summer asked, voice rough, as if he’d been screaming.

“Yes. And I want to tell you all, what happened was an accident.” It had to be. Winter would never hurt me.

Summer nodded slowly, and Haru's smile dropped.

Otto put his arm around my shoulders. "You don't have to keep punishing yourselves," he told the others. "You are, like me, human. Ish. Human-adjacent."

Haru snorted with laughter. Summer looked skeptical, saying, "If I had been able to —"

I held up my hand. "Ifs, should haves, and maybes are one thing, but you all have to let it go. And right now, we need to focus on Winter." Immediately the mood shifted, as I'd expected and wanted. I tipped my head back. "Let's do everything we can to balance you all out."

Summer's eyes flashed. "The best way to do that, *Mariposa*, is with your . . . *participación*."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." My nerves buzzed with energy as the three of them stood before me in my bedroom. All of our doors were now side by side. Not only that, but three doors had appeared on the wall to my left that took us directly into one another's rooms as well.

We couldn't have what happened at the mill happen again when we went to save Winter. They knew it. I knew it. We needed to be on our A game. I connected them all. Me, at their center. And there was one way to help make that happen.

Their heated gazes pinned onto me in the best way. I knew what we had to do to enhance our connection and their powers to the point of precision. There was one of us missing, an ache in my heart which would not be salved until he was there, surrounding me like my other guys were.

I peeled my shirt off and undid my bra. Their attention snapped to my freed breasts, to my stomach and hips, and I didn't cover a single inch. Instead, I relished in their gazes as I undid my pants and shimmied out of my pants and panties, baring myself completely to them.

"Fucking stunning," Haru murmured.

"*Como una flor abriéndose*." Summer's deep voice radiated with a heat to match his powers as he'd said *like a flower opening*.

Otto met my eyes. "Beautiful," he said, and the fact he was lost for other words said it all. I wanted them as badly as they wanted me, and Winter too. I needed the connection as badly as they did. I wouldn't just choose them in this life. I chose these four in all my other lives, and I would continue to choose them in all my futures the same way they chose me. Over and over again.

“Strip,” I demanded, and they jumped to obey. I ran my hands over Otto’s broad shoulders and down to his slender hips. His breath caught from my touch. Moving to Summer, I trailed my fingers across his broad frame, spending time memorizing the grooves of his abs. His eyes fluttered shut with a groan. With Haru, I bit my lip playfully, sparking a small smirk from him, as I dipped my hand to admire the cut V of his hips and the area around his bulging cock.

There would be no time for teasing. We needed each other, but we all needed Winter there as well.

Otto took my hand, and I brought it to the curve of my hip. I wrapped my other hand around his neck to pull him down for our lips to meet in a bruising kiss. It softened as he mapped me, like we were learning one another for the first time, and the thrill in my belly traveled between my legs, making me wet. His other hand moved to my breast, kneading it as softly as he kissed me. My nipples peaked under his touch. He broke off the kiss, lips traveling down my neck and over my collarbone.

I moaned, arching into his touch. Opening my eyes, Haru’s throbbing cock caught my eye. Summer noticed it too, sitting back on a leather chair. I smiled. “*Verano*,” I said, rolling my ‘r’.

“*Mariposa*.” Haru’s bulging cock jutted, and Summer wrapped his hand around it.

I waved my finger. “*Ven aquí*.” Come here, I said to Haru.

He glanced down at Summer, who still held tight onto him, and Summer smirked up at him, jaw working. “You want to go to her, *mi amor*?”

Haru nodded, and Summer let go. The distance was closed half a heartbeat later. He grasped the back of my neck, digging his hands into my hair and pulling in such an un-Haru way. We had no time for games. I gasped as he bent my head to take my mouth. His tongue slid along my lips, kissing me with more passion than I knew possible. My clit throbbed with need. Otto took the moment to take my nipple between his teeth, and I groaned into Summer.

Haru devoured the sound before pulling back. “Get ready.”

“I am ready.” Ready to get Winter back. Ready to fight for him. Fight for us. Fight for this. I needed them, now.

Haru lined up the velvet head of his cock with my soaking pussy, grabbed my hips, pulled back, and slammed in.

I grabbed the bed to stop myself from tumbling backward from the

impact. He slammed into me again. And again. Wet slaps of impact rang around us as he moved in and out of me. His thumb found its way to my clit and began those sweet, delicate circles that already had me keening.

Otto bent over and took my ear in my mouth. “Marigold,” he crooned. As though I weighed nothing, Otto lifted me.

Summer reached forward from where he sat, swiping his hand across my dripping pussy to gather my juices before moving it between my cheeks and over Otto’s hard cock.

“Ready?” Otto’s grip tightened on my hips.

“Yes.” I was more than fucking ready.

He spread my ass cheeks, squeezing them. Haru paused as Otto pushed gently in, then more firmly. I relaxed, breathing out through the initial pain as I was stretched to the full limit, and bit my lip to keep from crying out once he was fully inside. It felt fucking amazing. The two of them filled me so completely, so perfectly, that I could’ve died a very happy woman in that moment.

“Make her feel good,” Summer ordered them, his eyes running over the three of us as he palmed himself.

“I plan to make her feel great,” Otto retorted, causing a burst of laughter to puff from my chest.

Together, Haru and Otto moved. At first the movements were a little off, but soon, Otto shifted so he moved in time with Haru.

“Relax, Marigold. I’ve got you. I’ve always got you.” Otto’s tenor rumbled through his chest.

I allowed my body to fully release into him. He didn’t complain about the additional weight. Instead, he moved more freely, bringing the pleasure to a new level. My head fell against his shoulder with a moan.

“I won’t fail you,” he said.

My hand naturally worked its way down my stomach to find my clit. “Allow me.” Haru interrupted my movement and once again his fingers worked magic on my clit. It was so much, I was reaching my bliss at a faster rate than ever before. We moved at a punishing pace and I was so stretched. So full. My pussy clenched, tightening everything in my lower region around Haru and Otto’s hard cocks. This only made them feel bigger and brought me closer to the precipice.

“Fuck, Mari.” Haru’s fingers and hips moved faster. Otto sped up too, matching the rhythm to keep all the pleasure building through my body.

“I’m gonna—” My words cut off with a pant. I was so fucking close I could barely talk.

“Come for us, *Mariposa*.” Summer’s command was all I needed.

I came hard with a cry, and seconds later I felt the bulge of cock widen before Haru spilled his own heat into me. He groaned, leaning forward and finding my mouth. Together we came, Otto not far behind, kisses muffling each other’s cries as we rode the waves of our orgasms.

But there was a gap. As they withdrew, the emptiness, the cold, had my eyes flying open. No, I needed . . . We needed Winter.

Summer clicked his fingers, and flame danced on the tips of his fingernails. Haru breathed out and twigs sprung from the floorboards, quivering with greenery. Otto opened his eyes and all of us were flooded with determination.

“We’re ready,” I said.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Pulling on thick trousers with lightweight armor composite embedded in the fabric, I tried not to panic over how much time we'd already lost getting Otto connected properly and then the group activities to get us tuned.

"Where's your armored kit?" I asked them as I returned to the library from my room.

Summer waved my question away. "They won't hurt us, but they might try to threaten you to get us to comply. I want you to stay here, *Mariposa*."

I shook my head, counting on my fingers. "I have combat experience and training, I've seen the plans for the place, and I can help balance you guys

out. This is literally my job."

Haru's lips twisted, lavender sprouting from the walls behind him. "I don't like this."

I kissed him, a quick press of my lips to his, the smell of the anxiety-soothing lavender mingling with his honeysuckle and unwinding the tension in my stomach.

Haru sighed, eyes closing. "Thanks," he murmured against my lips.

"Of course." I pulled back, fighting not to say *See?* but Summer scowled, seeing my impact and knowing I was right.

I touched his arm. "Hey, it's going to be okay. We're going to get him back, and then we are going to hit them where it hurts."

His brow twitched. "I thought we weren't going in as the flaming angel of death?"

I grinned. "We are going to cut off their funding."

"And I will help restructure CSON," Otto said. "It's time I re-engaged." At my look, Otto explained, "I used to manage the relationship between CSON and us. I helped set it up. After . . . After what happened with Rose, I retreated into myself. Summer had to take charge." Otto nodded to him. "Thank you, but I'll take over now."

Summer grunted. "I wonder if this CSON-Ecotics mess would have happened if you had been in charge."

I shook my head and touched his arm. "We can't think shoulda, woulda, coulda. Hindsight is useful to learn from, but not beat ourselves up with."

"Right," Otto said. He took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

Using his powers would take a lot out of Otto. "I'm here, and so are Haru and Summer. Lean on us as much as you need. I'm not going anywhere."

Otto drew himself up, sure and strong. "Good. Let's get Winter back."

As we marched to the correct door where Summer and I had had a meeting with CSON, I breathed through my rising trepidation. Not only for confronting the CSON-Ecotics rotten mess and probably Dr. Smith, but seeing Winter again with the knowledge I had now about how my life had ended last go around.

The Winter I knew was gruff and grumbly but ultimately caring, though he'd die before he would admit it. I'd thought it was an image thing. What was he really hiding? I'd have to tease it out of him. I refused to believe he was dead. Why would Ecotics go to all the trouble of a containment facility just to kill him? My stomach revolted at the idea of him dead, declining to

contemplate it further.

Calm settled over my nerves like a weighted blanket, soothing and firm. I glanced at Otto. "Better save your ammo, sweetheart."

"This I can broadcast easily, especially with you nearby," he reassured me.

Summer led the way. He looked over his shoulder as he stepped down the corridor. "We will be in the lead. No, *Mariposa*, I will accept no argument on that." He stopped at a bland corporate door halfway down. "This is it. We will be entering our private apartment in DC I've called ahead so we will have a car waiting for us. I'll drive." He glanced at me to check my reaction to that. I nodded, because I didn't know where I'd be heading once we got through the door to DC.

Summer went on, "CSON won't be expecting us, whereas last time Mari and I attended, they were. We will encounter security."

Otto said, "I'll be sure to relax everyone."

"And I will talk our way through. *Suavemente*." Summer nodded once. "From there, I am unsure what we will encounter."

"So we all need to look out for each other. Follow my orders and my lead," I said.

Haru gave me a 100% genuine salute. "Of course, Buttercup."

I let out a low breath. "Let's get him back."

We stepped inside a well-appointed but dark apartment, the sun hanging low outside the floor-to-ceiling windows. We went to the elevator in silence, tension thrumming through us. I took a deep breath and let it out, relaxing my shoulders with an effort, imagining Haru kneading the muscles there. Everyone else sighed as Otto broadcast the emotion.

Once downstairs, the bellhop inclined his head and handed Summer some keys. He breezed straight by him with a curt, "Thank you," and opened the sleek black car. Summer and I got in the front, Haru and Otto in the back.

The fifteen-minute drive to the building was filled with building heat from Summer and a chill fall breeze behind me. Outside the clouds above scattered from a brisk wind, the heat from the sun intensifying.

"DC is going to get something like a tropical storm," Otto diagnosed.

"If we get *Invierno* out, that'll upgrade to a snowstorm," Summer said.

"When," I emphasized.

As we neared and the buildings started to jog my memory, I turned in my seat and pointed at Haru. "No risks." At Summer. "No settling scores." Lastly

I pointed at Otto. "Don't second guess yourself. And don't think you have to do it all alone, any of you. I'm right here."

"Thank you," Otto said, voice shaking.

I took a deep breath. "Let's go."

Summer pulled up to a curb, throwing the parking break with a creak. "We're here."

"Everyone out." We all moved, my instincts and training kicking in. Breathe, survey, make quick decisions, act, and stick to it. No hesitation, no prevarication. Otto nodded to me as if he could hear my thoughts as well as feel my resolve. I led the way up the marble steps to the gray, boring-looking building that held the fourth guy I loved. I pushed through the white door straight into security.

And oh my, had they brought out the welcome wagon. Ten guys, all with jacket shoulders and buzzcuts, waited for us.

"Stop right there. Identify yourselves," the closest one barked. He put his hand on his weapon in his holster.

"We don't need to. We own you," Summer snarled, continuing to walk forward. They must be under orders, because no one drew a gun on him.

"Wait, you need to go through the metal detector," one said, waving to the plastic frame. He swore and stumbled back as it was throttled with briars, red and white roses blooming and filling the room with a sickly-sweet scent.

"Fuck that," Haru said, flipping him off.

"This is highly irregular," an older man blustered, their sergeant according to the bars on his jacket.

"Yes, but we are your lords and masters," Otto said, voice reasonable. The guy nodded along to him.

"Nice Jedi mind trick," I murmured.

"Think of it as emotional reassurance." Sweat trickled down Otto's face. "But we do need to keep going."

"Right." I held my hand out to the nearest guy. "Badge, please."

He frowned then yelped, pulling at his jacket. His face went beetroot red and he tugged at his zip and buckles, wincing whenever he touched something metal with his bare fingers.

"Did you know the melting point of Kevlar is higher than 930 degrees?" Summer said in a conversational tone.

"Here." The guy thrust his badge at me with shaking fingers.

"Thank you. You're too kind." I swiped it on the first thick door. Behind

us the sergeant was talking rapidly into his radio. But I was a Shield too, so I knew what the little cryptic phrases meant. “They are going to barricade the next door. Is there a way around it, Summer?”

He looked to Otto. “I never pay attention to these things. Do you remember?”

“Of course.” Instead of taking us straight along the corridor, Otto pointed to an unobtrusive door. “Cleaning has an elevator to all floors.”

“Great.” We crowded into the bare metal elevator, me in the middle, Haru next to the myriad of grimy buttons. “The room I saw was on the same level as the board room we terrified, Summer.”

“Ah. Floor 6.”

We rose, and as we gained height Otto sucked in a breath. “I can sense a lot of people up here. We’re coming level with them.”

“Isolate individuals and tell me where they are,” Haru said quickly.

Otto closed his eyes and pointed in directions over my shoulder. “Five feet that way. Four feet that way. Two very close together, ten feet that way.”

“That’ll do to start.” Haru handed me a packet of seeds. “Throw that in the corridor, Buttercup, then get the fuck back here.”

The elevator didn’t ding being the janitor’s service shaft, so I stole into the cleaning cupboard and to the door. It was unlocked, and I let it open slowly so I could scope the corridor out. Otto’s directions were right. There were Shields standing with heavy duty automatic weapons in the corridor, standing where he said.

I opened the packet and tossed it in before shutting the door. I heard a shout, then a whoosh, and the floor trembled.

Haru stumbled, going to his knees. “Fuck,” he breathed. “Did I do it?”

I opened the door cautiously. “Oh man. It’s Jumanji in here.” I let the door open fully so the guys could see the perfect forest glade, thick bushes pressed to either side and a perfect circle in the middle for us to walk through. As we paced over twisting roots and rustling bushes, I spotted terrified wide eyes from men pressed back against the corridor walls, pinned in place by the thick branches filled to bursting with red berries.

“*Mierda*,” Summer breathed. “What the hell were those plants?”

“*Pyracantha*, holly, and *berberis*,” Haru chirped happily.

I pretended I knew more than one of those and patted his shoulder. “Great job.” Sweat drenched his shirt, making it cling to him. He wouldn’t be able to make a forest like that very often.

We walked out of the magical forest of containment and back into gray corporate blandness. Otto whispered, "Two more," gesturing to the turn ahead. I jogged forward, peering around the corner at the two Shields on either side of a steel-blue corridor, both with guns in hand.

"Allow me," Summer said, coming up right behind me. He leaned over my shoulder, wrapping one arm around me—not to keep me in place, but just to touch me. He squinted at the guns, and they grew red.

"Fuck," a Shield said, letting go out of reflex, and then I was moving out of Summer's arms. I punched him in the gut so he folded over, then smacked him down to the floor. The other moved back and I did a roundhouse kick, catching his face with my boot. He smashed into the wall beside him, scrambling to get up.

By then Summer was there, grabbing him and lifting him to the wall. "Haru."

"On it." Haru threw more seeds and two vines swarmed over the agents, writhing over and over them in a hogtie, pinning their arms and legs and gagging them.

"Next," I said, moving to the metal door. This had to be it. We were really close.

Summer opened the door and barged in, Haru and Otto at his heels. I ran in after them and smacked into Haru's back. He hadn't gone far at all, and I nearly bowled him over, tripping him forward. I grabbed his arm, yanking him back to me.

Just in time. At eye level, chest, hip, and knee height was a set of thick red beams, horizontally across the corridor.

"The fuck?" Summer growled.

Otto spun around. "They've activated behind us as well."

Sure enough, a set had turned on blocking us from the corridor where we'd left the tied operatives.

"Is it just light?" Haru hovered his hand over the beam closest to him. A seed germinated and threaded toward the red, wilting as it got close. With a hiss, the plant blackened and died.

"No, it's not just light," Otto said drily.

"And we are trapped," Summer snarled, bunching his fists.

From around the corner of the corridor came the clipped sound of high heels, the echo ringing like gunshots. My skin crawled. "That bitch."

The guys reacted to my anger, closing around me, but I pushed to the

front. Like Otto, I wasn't going to let fear stop me from acting.

Dr. Smith came around the corner, along with two Ecotics branded security staff, both with semi-automatic weapons. Only two? I nearly laughed, except seeing Dr. Smith again dried my mouth to a crisp similar to Haru's poor plant.

"Well, hello," Dr. Smith said brightly. "We have an unauthorized visit from our patrons, although not exactly unexpected ones, as you can see."

"Talk about brazen. You kidnapped Winter, and you're using the guys' money to fund this shithole." I shot back. I met the eyes of the security staff. Were they aware?

They didn't seem uncomfortable, weapons trained directly at my face. *Wonderful*. Summer made a noise in the back of his throat, glaring at the guns as if trying to make them heat. His breathing turned labored. Were they faltering? They were worried about me, and that obviously had an effect, splintering them apart and making them lose their control. Haru's breath came faster as plants writhed close to me.

I glanced at Otto at my side, but he gave me a shake of his head. Damn, but the security staff were ready for us.

Dr. Smith smiled slowly, grin feral. "Winter? You mean the latest specimen." Her voice slid on the word, like a toxic oil slick.

"He's not a specimen!" I snapped back, louder, as if I could hammer it into her.

She smirked at getting a rise from me and riling up the guys. "These beings aren't humans, Marigold Stewart. They are something beyond that. They are wonderful gifts for us ingenious humans to use to solve the biggest challenges of our time."

The words of the promo video smacked me in the face. Stomach rolling with nausea, I nearly took a step into the lasers, catching myself at the last moment. "You don't give a flying fuck about the environment. This isn't about climate change for you. You're just trying to get your hands on their powers."

Dr. Smith's small pink tongue darted out to lick her lips. "And how is it, having your fat little hands around all that power?"

"I've had enough," Summer said, raising his hand. "Drop those weapons, or suffer some *realmente desagradable* metal burns."

"Ah ah," Dr. Smith said, waving her finger back and forth like a ticking clock. "Should my dear associates feel threatened, they will not hesitate to

shoot.”

“You wouldn’t,” Summer growled.

“Not you, no. Her.” Dr. Smith clasped her hands in front of her.

The guys all shifted in front of me, and Dr. Smith laughed. My pulse raced in my ears. “Why are you doing this? What happened to you that made you like this?”

Dr. Smith’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Like what? Driven, ambitious, willing to do anything for the ultimate goal?”

“Which is?”

She tilted her head. “Perhaps I’ll show you.” She was silent for a moment before nodding. “Yes, why not? Maybe you’ll start to see sense at last.”

The floor felt unsteady underneath me. What was she talking about?

She clicked her fingers at her lackeys. “Marigold, put your hands between the lasers. My colleagues will restrain you for all our safety.”

“You won’t put a finger on her,” Haru shouted.

“I’m afraid there’s no other option. Either we put a bullet in her head now, or we use some handcuffs. Your choice.” She looked directly at Summer, the bitch.

Summer glanced at me.

“I’ll be fine,” I whispered. “Otto, when they get close, get ready to —”

“Any use of power will result in her death,” Dr. Smith commented loudly.

Otto’s eyes were wide, sweat beading on his forehead.

“Otto, you can do it,” I urged. Whatever he tried, I supported one hundred percent.

“I can’t,” he murmured between his tight lips. “I don’t dare, not with our powers sliding out of our control again. One stray thought about my worst fears, and they will become reality.”

It must be hard not to think of the pink elephant once that idea was in your head. Stomach falling, I put my hands out, and a security guard cuffed me. “Shit.”

The lasers turned off, and Dr. Smith hooked her arm through mine. “How lovely. Let’s take a walk.”

“I swear, I will kill you,” Summer said hotly.

“We’ll see.” Dr. Smith surged forward, unstoppable, and I was forced to trot next to her. The guys had to trail behind, all their focus on the guns pointing at me. Was Summer right? Should I have come at all? All I’d done was get them immediately captured. I was their one weakness and fully

expendable, as far as Dr. Smith was concerned.

As we walked, Dr. Smith hummed. She was singing snatches of “Tell me lies,” by Fleetwood Mac. “So, then,” she said. “Have you finally learned everything there is to learn about your . . . What do I even call you? Polyfamily?”

I just gave her my most withering look, given I had two gun muzzles in close proximity and pointed directly at me. We walked toward the room where we had met the CSON officials, the strange room I’d seen in passing coming up on the left. Each step brought us closer to Winter.

Dr. Smith tittered. “In any case, I suspect that, by now, you’ve been told an interesting, convoluted tale of love and loss.”

Told, and experienced it, but I didn’t want to let her have any part of that. I kept silent, chin raised high, focusing on the door getting closer. Dr. Smith jiggled my arm. “Have you found out how it all ended?” She studied my eyes and saw the truth there. She chuckled. “You have, and yet you’re still charging in here after him?”

“It’s nothing to do with you,” I snarled, unable to contain myself.

“As an ex-employee-slash-retired asset, of course your welfare is top of my mind.” She patted me on the head. “Here, then, is the specimen I’ve made sure is safe for the entire human race, not only one silly little bitch who can’t keep her legs closed.”

“Fuck you,” all of us said, in unison.

“What have you done to Winter?” I demanded.

She smiled. “I’ve set him free.” She flourished with her arm, her gesture opening the door that slid up with a hiss.

Cold hit me immediately. A vise that squeezed, robbing me of my breath. I gasped, lungs stinging, and the shaky exhale came out like a puff of thick fog.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The room was dominated by banks of electronics, the hum of machines at work vibrating the floor under my boots. Metal shone with newness, all glistening curves to fit with a cylinder of gleaming glass in the center.

Inside stood Winter. Or hung, rather, arms raised to either side and locked in thicker cuffs than mine. He was stripped bare apart from his briefs, thick tubes jutting out of his arms and legs, torso stretched taunt. His eyes were shut; was he unconscious or just too hurt to hold himself up? Ice had formed on the outside of the glass, frosting some of the monitors showing charts and graphs and creeping across a display of the world map.

“Winter,” I whispered in shock.

His head lifted, eyes glazed. My snowy Viking was a shell of himself. There was no happiness or relief, no anger or resentment. There wasn't even recognition.

My breath caught as I took a step forward, and the tip of a gun pressed between my shoulder blades. Summer growled from behind, but it was nothing but a background noise to my thundering heart.

"What did you do to him?" I glared at Dr. Smith. It was too cold in the room, the tears in my eyes turning to frost.

Dr. Smith's gaze roamed across the monitors, a cruel smile forming on her lips. "Fascinating," she mused. "He's more powerful than I realized."

"What the fuck is going on?" Haru piped up from behind.

"Stay back," a male guard warned him.

I knew without looking that the guys were trying to shift closer to me, because I wanted to do the same. My soul felt as cold as this room, seeing Winter in this state. I desired their closeness as much as I presumed they needed mine. Their feet shuffled behind me, and I turned in time to see them moving forward as one, faces contorted into fury and fear.

I didn't have time to react, too caught up with my men, wanting to reach for them as they came toward me. The guard to the right twisted his gun and the butt of it slammed into my temple.

Summer roared, heating the room and melting some of the ice Winter had formed. Otto shot his hand out and stopped Summer from moving forward any farther.

I stepped backward, regaining my balance with my hand pressed against my head.

"Consider that a warning," Dr. Smith said, with so little emotion I wondered how human *she* was.

"There was no need for that." Haru fisted his hands at his side, vines lashing and contorting around his arms as he tried to control himself.

Dr. Smith watched him with intense interest. "Maybe not, but the aftermath will likely have plenty of interesting observations. Now," she clapped her hands together, making me jump, "let us continue."

She stepped into the room, the guards pushing their guns into me to make me follow, the guys helpless to do anything except tag along behind.

I stumbled onward, still dizzy from the blow. I focused on Winter, willing him to see me. When his crystal blue eyes finally met mine, there was a flicker for a second. *Yes, we're here, Winter. We came for you.* I knew he

couldn't hear me, but maybe he'd see it somehow.

Dr. Smith's attention was firmly on the world map. The ice Summer had melted with his brief flare of power crawled back across the screen. She clucked her tongue. "We will have to invest in more internal shielding," she murmured. "On top of the budget for this room, the chief execs of Ecotics will be most displeased about their new building needing refurbishment, but . . ." Again a cruel smile formed across her lips. "At least this specimen has proved my hypothesis."

My teeth ground together. "What hypothesis?"

Winter's stomach rippled as he tried to stand inside the housing. He slumped almost immediately, dangling by his arms, every muscle thrown into stark relief.

"Most interesting," Dr. Smith said to herself. "However, this won't do." She brought her wrist to her face, poking the screen of the watch on her wrist.

The room grew orange as lights in the ceiling warmed, and the room dripped as the ice melted. Winter flinched as if he was feeling the ice melt and it hurt him. My breath caught in my chest. Haru's plants didn't seem to hurt him when they died. What was going on? What had she done to him?

Dr. Smith's eyes blazed. "Perhaps I misjudged thinking Winter was my only asset."

Fiery heat blossomed inside of me, and I didn't have to look at Otto to know it wasn't solely my own anger. "Just shut the fuck up!" I finally broke, tired of this hag.

Dr. Smith narrowed her eyes at me. "Definitely not my only asset." She nodded to the guards.

The female guard went to a panel and tapped a button. All of a sudden a metal plate buzzed to life in the wall, and my wrists swung to it. My raised cuffed hands slapped onto the plate, and some kind of magnetic force took hold, fixing my arms in place. Now I was to one side of Winter's cylinder, on the opposite wall to the world map with melted ice dribbling down from it.

"Let her go," Summer said in a tone I'd never heard before. Panicked. "Let her go and we'll do what you want."

Dr. Smith barked out a laugh. "You work for me now. If you don't continue to do what I want . . ." She pressed at her watch again.

A shock zapped into me from the cuffs as the plate turned on some kind of electric field. I screamed, back arching as I lost control of my body.

There was a commotion of some kind. But with my eyes squeezed so

tightly from the pain, I couldn't see what was happening. There was a grunt and cursing. My men were pissed.

The voltage ramped up. My jaw locked from the pain, and my lungs constricted. I couldn't breathe, couldn't move. There was nothing but raw agony as electricity traveled through every nerve of my body. When it finally stopped, seconds or minutes later—I had no concept of time—my muscles gave out. I dangled from my wrists, the cuffs digging into my skin.

Even though I was free of the shock, it took a few seconds for my throat to reopen. I sucked in air, sweat crawling down my forehead. I raised my hanging head.

The guys were on their knees in a line. Their faces mirrored my distress, not from being electrocuted themselves but from watching it happen to me. Summer, Otto, and Haru looked so helpless. Not as much as Winter, but it was obvious by the shaking of their hands that they were barely keeping themselves under control.

“You're a fucking bitch,” I wheezed at Dr. Smith.

She hadn't moved, and she watched, completely unfazed by any of us. She had us all right where she wanted. We had come in, planning to save Winter, and instead ended up right in the palm of her hand.

Fuck. I should've seen this coming. The fact I believed we could walk into the headquarters of CSON, now apparently Ecotics, to save Winter felt stupid. My eyes shifted to Winter, whose eyes were closed, jaw set against pain. How could I not have come for him? He needed us, and I would've never forgiven myself if we hadn't tried. He needed to know we cared. He needed to know I didn't blame him for what happened. That I chose him.

I sucked in another breath. There had to be some clues. Some reason why CSON, Ecotics, and Dr Smith were doing this.

The water on the map drew my attention, dripping down lines of blues and reds that shimmered on the display. Blues were more prominent in the northern hemisphere, reds in the southern. Temperatures?

Lights flared inside the cylinder, and Winter's back arched, jaw clenched and muscles trembling. Blue lines started to drift to the extreme north and down south, past the equator, being to tangle with the red lines.

A counter above the world map moved, a decimal point ten rows long shifting.

What was happening? Were they . . .

I panted. “Are you . . . cooling the earth?”

“Isn’t it wonderful? Hundreds of years of negative impacts on this planet, and I have now solved it. I will be able to reverse global warming within years. Maybe even months.” She gave me a sly look. “Next, I’d like to be able to heat it on command.”

My eyes widened. *No.*

Summer looked at me then at her. “Let her go, and you’ll have me.”

“No!” I shouted.

Dr. Smith smiled at him. “Just you? I want to solve world hunger and deforestation.” Her eyes swung to Haru.

Haru swallowed hard. “Just don’t hurt Mari anymore.”

I shook against the manacles, raging against them. “Stop! No!” They couldn’t do this for me. My life span didn’t matter against theirs.

Dr. Smith gave Otto a disparaging look. “And I suppose I’d better have you for completeness, if nothing else. A full set.”

Otto clenched his fists. She knew nothing if she thought Otto’s powers were worthless. He was strong, managing all their grief and trying to balance them when I wasn’t there and facing up to his mistakes boldly.

Dr. Smith walked over to a drawer with a keypad and typed in some numbers before opening the top drawer. From it she withdrew three syringes filled with a golden liquid. “Now that we’re all agreed, let’s begin.” She headed back to the guys and met each of their angry stares as she stood above them. “I was hoping to modify this before your arrival, but a smaller dose should be enough to achieve the desired effect. Without the same extreme side effects your, ah, colleague suffered.”

Extreme side effects? I could see he was out of it, seeming to be in a dream state and in pain inside that wretched tube.

“What is it?” Otto frowned at the needles.

“We are not taking that until you tell us what it is,” Summer said through gritted teeth.

Dr. Smith’s eyes flicked to me. “It’s cute you think you have a choice. I have no problem telling you, but not until *after* you take it. However, what happens before you take it is up to you.”

My stomach roiled. I didn’t trust her, trust that. She was fucking nutso and there was no way I was going to let them take anything from this crazed bitch. “Don’t do it,” I seethed. I met Otto’s gaze, and relished in my anger so he knew how serious I was. “Don’t you fucking take that.”

Dr. Smith *tsked*. “You’re not in charge. Plus,” she lifted her watch again

in warning, “this decision is not up to you.” She looked at the three of them. “What will your decision be? You have ten seconds before I make the decision myself.” She watched her wrist intently.

I met Haru’s brown eyes, tears streaming from my own. “Please, don’t. There has to be another way.”

Haru’s bottom lip crumpled before pulling his gaze away in shame.

I found Summer’s gaze. “We can work it out. In the grand scheme of things, this particular life doesn’t matter.”

His lip rose in a sneer. “Don’t say that.”

“We’ll find each other again,” I choked out. I didn’t want my life to end. I didn’t want to lose time with this version of myself. But I had to believe this wasn’t the end of ‘us.’ Yet it would be if anything happened to *them*. When they reached death, it would be their final death. But that wasn’t the case for me. My soul would continue.

Finally, through blurred vision, a calculating face came into view. “You need to live,” I implored Otto.

Otto didn’t respond at first, weighing the pros and cons, understanding what I was saying without needing any more explanation. Letting me die was the smartest option. Finally, he broke our eye contact to look at Dr. Smith. “Give us the syringes.”

“No!” I yelled, yanking against the cuffs that held me. It was no use. I watched, helpless and in horror, as she gave them each a syringe filled with the goopy liquid. I stood there and could do nothing as they each brought it to their arms and one by one injected themselves with whatever the hell it was. My heart shattered as their faces contorted before doubling over. “No!” I cried again, unable to form any other words. I rattled my cuffs, hot trickles of blood oozing down my arm, but I didn’t care. I needed to get to them. “What did you do? What was that?” I screamed at Dr. Smith.

She watched them, noting every single reaction, every single breath they took. After what felt like an eternity, they straightened.

Otto’s eyes were wild as he looked at the others. “I can’t—I can’t feel any of you.”

“Feel?” Dr. Smith quirked an eyebrow. To her this was nothing but an experiment with them as nothing more than her lab rats. “Interesting.”

Summer’s arms shook and the air around him wavered from the heat he emitted. Haru flinched away from it, vines crawling out around his legs to protect him.

“Are you all okay?” My heart beat so quickly I was worried it would give out. “Otto?”

He looked at me and blinked. It was the same stare as Winter’s with no light of recognition in his face. “Where am I?”

My stomach dropped. “H—haru?” I gulped.

His brows scrunched as he looked over my face. “How do you know my name?”

My jaw worked up and down as I lost all my words. They didn’t recognize me.

“What did you give us?” Summer growled at Dr. Smith. He seemed a bit more himself, his heat intensifying as Haru’s vines curled and died.

Inside I felt a sudden lack, as if I’d been expecting a step and one wasn’t there, or as if I had been hearing music and it was muted now. “You’ve done something to our connections. Their connections,” I accused her.

“Yes. I’ve freed them,” Dr Smith said. “Using a serum I developed from your blood, Marigold. Oh, you might be human, normal and boring, but there was a gene there. Something new. After synthesizing it and some genetic modification, I was able to disengage the protein to break the connection.”

Oh shit. The guys weren’t as bad off as Winter yet. Was that because they hadn’t been tortured by having their powers stripped from them? Or had they had a lower dose?

She shifted a worried glance at the other three. “Hopefully there’ll be less . . . feral . . . side effects this time around with the lower dose. Although it seems not all side effects were avoided.”

I swallowed. My throat was dry. That’s what they had felt. Not Winter dying but the breaking of the connection, and she’d used me and my blood to make it. And the memory problems . . .

This was all *my* fault. What would this do? If we were no longer connected, would I find them in the future? Was this the last lifetime I would get to share with them?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

Chapter Twenty-Six

Flat against the back wall, I tried again to yank the restraints off the magnets behind me. They were stuck solid, and the cold unyielding metal hummed in warning. Shit, I didn't want to get shocked again, but I also couldn't just stand here and watch her manipulate and hurt my guys.

Summer's attention was on Haru and Otto. They remembered each other at least, but Otto had said he couldn't feel them. She'd broken the connections between them. The element that needed balancing.

Think, Mari. I had to appeal to the guys somehow, when they didn't know who I was and that they could trust me, and I didn't have our shared history to rely on.

Or did I?

I cast my mind back, breathing deeply, thinking of Otto's fingers turning the prized pages of my journals from other lives and times. "I found the last of them," I recited. "He is already losing memories of his human life. Like the others, it grows foggy. I called him Winter, since their name seems to be the first thing they forget. He's powerful, strong, and has a brutal nature I don't want to tame. And yet, there's a softness to him, like cozying up beside a fire as snow gently falls from the sky to cover the land in a soft blanket. He's quiet, but there's a lot to him."

"What are you blabbering?" Dr. Smith said, too curious to shock me.

Otto's eyes widened. Did he recognize it?

I continued quickly, "I feel bringing them together is the right thing, not just for me but for them. They feel as unbalanced as this world, but somehow, when we're all together it makes sense."

"We make sense," Otto finished softly.

Yes. Hopefully I'd brought him onside, and although he didn't know me right now, he'd guessed who I was to them.

Otto glanced at the others, then at Dr. Smith. "So what happens now?"

"Now you can help me save the world, of course. Starting with taming the heat that's strangling our world." She faced Summer. "You will stop going out into the world and making things worse."

Summer frowned. "Making things worse? What?"

They didn't even remember what they could do. If that was a low dose, what had Winter been subjected to? My eyes burned with tears. He hardly moved, breathing erratically, muscles stark under his blue-gray skin.

I eyed the security guards. One male, one female, faces hard and emotionless. The woman stood next to the panel controls, while the guy had his gun trained on me. "Is this saving the world?" I asked them. "Oh, wait, it's just a job, right? Either way, did you ever imagine you were getting into this kind of shit? Torturing people —"

"You aren't human," the woman said, but her cheeks were paler than before.

"I am. I have a mom and a brother. A little brother. You have siblings?"

Her eyebrow twitched. "Stop talking."

I met Otto's gaze and flicked my eyes to her. Otto looked away, back at Dr. Smith, but gave a small nod. Hopefully that was meant for me.

Dr. Smith gestured to Summer. "As agreed, Summer, you will now work

for us.”

He sneered at her, looking at the chamber where Winter was held. “The hell I will. Do you know how unethical this is? I’m calling the authorities.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Dr. Smith said, holding up her watch, but I started laughing. Granted, it was a strangled chuckle, but this was funny as shit.

“You’ve lost your leverage,” I said, tears running down my cheeks. “All of you, get out of here.”

Otto breathed, long and low.

Unfair. Unethical. Abhorrent. Tight, hot disgust cascaded over me, the edges of what was no doubt lapping on the edges of the guard's minds, pulling on threads of their doubt. The guy shifted his weight, the gun lowering.

Otto was doing it.

An overwhelming feeling that I could do something, act, seized my limbs. Empowering urges made me want to pull against the manacles again. I have the ability to change this.

I can stop her.

Tears running down her cheeks, the female guard slammed a button to release the magnets on my manacles as the guy swiveled around. But his gun was trained on Haru, not Dr. Smith.

I dropped to the ground and ran, tackling the male guard around the waist. We tumbled, the safety on, and I rolled to stand with the weapon in hand.

"What are you doing?" Dr. Smith shrieked.

I pointed the gun at her. "Stop this right now. Haru, let Summer go."

Haru took a step back, clearly confused.

Dr. Smith raised her hands slowly. She didn't know guns: sweat trickled down her forehead in the firing line.

She said loudly, "If you shoot me, these men will never get the answers they need to find true freedom."

I glared at her. She was trying to claw her way in with their lost memories.

Dr. Smith continued, "Why be chained to a never-ending cycle of grief, interspersed with fleeting moments of happiness? That's what she wants for you," she said scathingly.

Haru gave me a wounded look. *No, Haru.*

Her eyes flicking to the side was all the warning I got, before Otto slammed into me. The sharp bang of a gun blasted my ears as we fell to the

ground. Warmth spread across my shoulder. I jerked my head around to Otto.

He had his eyes closed, teeth gritted. Red seeped from his arm. Behind him was the female, smoking pistol in hand. She'd tried to shoot me, and now stared at Otto lying over me.

"Otto," I said frantically. "Say something, you're hit."

"Something," he grunted. His eyes cracked open. "Rose?"

I nodded. "Mari, but yes."

He frowned. "That doesn't seem right."

"Marigold, then."

His warm brown eyes flickered with recognition. "Ah, yes."

My eyes swam with tears. He had saved me even though it really was a cycle of grief but also happiness. I squeezed his hand.

"Rose?" Haru darted to my side. "It is you." He grinned.

Frustrated, Dr. Smith tapped away at her damnable watch. The lights flared brightly in Winter's chamber, and he screamed.

His cry of agony shattered my heart. "Stop. Whatever you're doing, stop it!" I yelled.

Haru reacted to my anger, leaping up and sending a swirl of vines at her. Ivy yanked her hand away from her watch controls and suspended her, wide-eyed, a foot into the air.

But that didn't help. Winter twisted with anguish, the light getting brighter and brighter. Blues flared across the map, the counter ticking down, *tick, tick, tick*. As world temperatures plummeted, Winter suffered in unbearable torment, the veins popping from his forehead, throat, and arms.

"Summer. Get him out of there."

Otto's face hitched with pain as I pressed on his bullet-pierced shoulder, and so did the guards' faces. He had to be broadcasting to them. I smoothed his face. "Can you get them to help us?"

"I—I don't know."

I kissed his forehead. "I know you can."

He grimaced. "I'll try, for you."

The guards' faces went slack and they slumped over, but I didn't have time to celebrate. "All public safety staff to room two nineteen," suddenly blared over the PA system. "Critical energy readings. Area must be contained. Lockdown in three, two —"

A shearing shatter of glass filled my senses. I threw my arms over Otto's head as a wave of sound ruffled my jacket, a shower of shards thereafter.

Cold billowed out around us, instantly sending shooting pain up my fingers.

I looked behind me, afraid of what I would see.

Dr. Smith lay limp in Haru's frozen plants. Small puffs of air told me she was breathing. I staggered upright, head ringing, and tried to pry her horrible watch off her bony wrist. The metal bands snapped in my hand. Shit, it was cold.

Inside the cylinder was a mess of tubes, sparking electronics, torn plastics, and twisted metal. Winter was curled in a ball, skin blue with the cold.

"Winter," I called gently, my words a cloud.

Summer dipped and grabbed Otto, hefting him upright. Otto's face creased with agony, but he stood, peering into the icy clouds circling the man curled in agony at the bottom of the tube they'd held him in.

I waved to Haru. "Help me with Winter."

He nodded, going along with me easily. Either his memories were coming back or his instincts were working in my favor.

Red lights started flashing as the organization went into lockdown, highlighting Winter's grey pallor. In such a short time, they'd turned him into this shell.

"Winter, I'm here." I touched his shoulder.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Winter shuddered under my touch.
“Winter,” I said.

His eyes snapped to me. No longer attached to the machine, the vacancy was gone. In its place was unadulterated anger.

“Winter?” I frowned. “It’s me, Mari.”

I wish I could say there was a warning. A sign of some kind. But I wasn’t so lucky.

Frost burst from him, a hailstorm against my bare skin. My arms shot up to protect myself, but I still felt ice tear into my face as I flew backward.

“Mari!”

I slammed into a warm body. Arms banded around me as we fell together, grunts exploding from both of us as we smacked onto the ground. Everything

hurt, not just from the impact but the biting cold of the room. My eyes peeled open, a plume of fog spiraling from my shaky breathing.

“Mari,” Haru groaned from below me. “Are you okay?”

I shivered against his hard chest. It was so cold it was difficult not to curl into him and instead push myself up. “Yeah.”

Winter stood from his crouch, head bowed with his hair hanging in his face. Each breath shook his broad shoulders.

Otto and Summer hustled to either side of me. “Are you okay?” Summer’s gaze traced over every inch of me, noting all the cuts.

“They’re minor,” I said, brushing off his concern and looking to Winter.

“It could’ve been a lot worse.” Otto nodded at Haru in thanks, wincing as he held his arm.

I stood and the three of them followed, Otto limping next to me. All of them were ready to help if I needed. I took a step toward Winter.

“Don’t.” Summer stopped me with a touch on my shoulder.

I glared at him. “It’s Winter.”

“Exactly,” Haru added. “He’s strong. Too strong.”

I shook my head. “I can get him back. Just like I did for all of you.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Otto concluded.

“You have to let me try. It’s Winter. Our Winter.”

The three of them shared a look, one I couldn’t fully decipher. “Fine,” Otto said. “But if he does anything, I’m going to put him out.”

I nodded. “That’s fair.” Knowing Otto would have my back, that he wouldn’t hesitate and make the same mistake he’d made with Rose, helped stave off my nerves and gave me the last bit of courage I needed.

The three of them let me go, keeping their distance even though I felt three sets of eyes burning into my back.

Please let this work. This had to work. He couldn’t be gone. I could bring him back the way I’d brought back the others. I just knew it. This wasn’t like before. I wasn’t Rose. I was Mari. I loved eggs benedict. I hated garlic. I knew I wanted to help the world through charities. I would do anything for my mother and brother. And, most importantly, I loved and had chosen these four men. I chose them as Mari, as me, and I knew deep down that all my prior selves had chosen them for themselves as well. Not because we were destined, but because they brought out the best in me the same way I did in them. If anyone could help Winter . . . It was me.

With each step closer, Winter shuddered. And with each inch closer, the

air grew colder.

“Winter,” I said, the moisture evaporating from my mouth so fast. It hurt to swallow. I took another careful step. “I’m right here. It’s me. Dahlia, Rose, Yasmin, Lily. All of them. It’s me, and it’s going to be okay now. You’re safe. We’re here for you.”

His icy eyes peered through his thick eyebrows, fist clenching at his sides. He said nothing, just continued his harsh breathing.

I held my hands up to show I meant no harm as I continued forward slowly. “You’re safe now,” I repeated. “We can go home. Together.” He hadn’t known I had chosen him yet, that I loved him, and it broke my heart because he looked so angry and betrayed.

Why had it taken me so fucking long to realize my feelings?

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “For everything. I don’t blame you. You need to forgive yourself. To trust yourself. I trust you.” The last sentence was so quiet that only he could have heard.

There was a minor flinch from him. Just a tick.

“I trust you,” I repeated, now less than ten feet from him.

His lips pressed into a thin line.

“I. Trust. You.”

He was so close. I was almost there. I just needed to reach him. I needed to —

He roared, and with his roar came a blizzard. My feet skidded, but I didn’t fly backward. Instead, I pressed into his storm, hair whipping around me. My limbs threatened to shake from the brutal cold, but I’d be damned if I was going to give up.

“Winter,” I cried. “Let me through. Let me in! I let you in. I let you all in, and you are all there to stay. I know deep in my soul it’s the same for you. We are all a part of one another, and I need for you to find that connection.”

I held out my hand, taking a step forward.

“Mari!” Summer hollered through the onslaught. “Get away.”

“No.” The wind ate up my voice. I took another step, away from Summer and closer to Winter. “It’s me. Mari. I love your cooking. I mix a mean cocktail, and you’re the only one who can keep up with me in the gym.” I took another shuddering breath in the freezing cold air. “I love that you used all your truth or dare questions to explore my favorite foods. I love that you make me coffee and hot chocolate, and always make some little pastry to go with it no matter how busy you are. I love that you love doing the catering

and the cleaning for us, but you have to maintain your bad boy attitude by acting like we'll die of malnutrition without you. I always wanted to travel and now I can. I can't wait to see some winter landscapes with you."

His lips curled back from his teeth.

"Otto. Do it." Haru's worried voice seemed so far away.

"I'm trying. It's not working." Otto's voice sounded grated with strain.

My heart rate picked up.

"Summer!" Otto called.

"It's too cold. My heat can't reach her."

I paused and turned my back on Winter to face the three of them. They pushed into the storm after me, trying to reach me at the same slow speed I moved toward Winter.

"Come back to us." Haru held out his hand to me.

I bit my lip, looking over my shoulder at Winter. The wind howled as it picked up. He stood there, a giant silhouette in a deadly storm, unmoving as he stared at us.

"Do you feel anything?" I cried out to Otto.

Otto narrowed his eyes at Winter. "I just feel anger." He shook his head.

"And that's all."

My breath shook in my tightening lungs. We were losing him.

"We need to regroup!" Summer hollered.

I hated to admit it, but they were right. Winter wasn't himself and putting myself at risk like this was stupid. We needed a plan. I squeezed my eyes shut, hating what I was about to do. I took a step away from him and toward the others.

Relief swept across their faces. I made it three steps before a crackling ripped through the air.

Otto met my eyes, his widening a split second before a wall of ice formed between us, cutting me off from them. I ran to the wall, the wind making it easy. I lost my footing on the icy floor and slammed into it. The others slammed their fists into it, nothing but blurry mirages, their cries and demands muffled.

"Summer! Otto! Haru!" I screamed into the ice. The wind picked up, plastering me against the frozen wall. It burned into my skin, hurting worse than the lick of Summer's fire.

Orange bloomed on the far side as Summer brought his powers to life. Greenery struck into the ice, slashing at it over and over as Haru tried to use

his vines to break through. Meanwhile, Otto found me and stood opposite me. He pressed his hand against the ice. Reaching up, I placed my palm against his, like somehow our connection would crack apart what separated us.

My body convulsed from the cold. I couldn't move. I couldn't cry. I couldn't speak. I was so cold, and no matter what they did on the other side, they couldn't break through. Through all the commotion they repeated a word fervently. Mari.

I pressed my forehead against the wall and closed my eyes. "I love you," I tried to say, wanted to scream. "*Please don't blame him. Please don't blame yourselves.*" My heart was breaking inside my chest, but not for me. Not for how my skin was now blue or the fact I was past the point of feeling cold. Nor how my heart slowed, as what I knew was coming stalked me.

It broke for them.

They had come so close to healing from the past, and I had come so close to living the life I wanted. I guess a few months was better than nothing. I knew I would find them again, but would this break them beyond repair? If they broke, if this was what finally made them lose it all together, would they even be here for me to find?

"Please." I prayed they could hear me. I poured everything into my emotions as I stared through the blurred wall at Otto. I pushed out my love, my forgiveness, my hope. Everything I felt for them, everything they had given me, and everything I hoped they would provide one another after I was gone. "Please, tell the others," I whispered.

I couldn't pull my hand away from Otto's. It was frozen in place. I would've collapsed, but ice had frozen around my legs. And with one last breath the world went dark.

* * *

MY LUNGS FILLED.

I coughed against the sensation, something I didn't expect. As I came to, so did my memories.

The charisma of Haru, the protectiveness of Summer, the meticulous nature of Otto, and the intensity of Winter. I remembered all of them. I remembered Dr. Smith getting them to take that injection of serum, electrocuting me, her getting knocked out as we tried to save Winter. Then I

remembered being unable to reach him. I remembered the wall of ice. I remembered dying as the others tried and failed to reach me in time.

Holy shit. I remembered them. I remembered everything. I remembered *me*. Mari had been my fourth lifetime, and I remembered her.

My eyes flew open and I shot up.

A muffled cry escaped me as my limbs protested the movement. A blanket pooled at my hips on the barren bed I was in. It was chilly.

I looked down at my hands, at my clothes. I recognized them. I reached up to feel the strands of my hair. I didn't just remember Mari. *I was Mari. I hadn't died.*

My training set in as I took in the room. Stripped logs made up the walls, the bed basic but warm.

Thundering steps echoed on the far side of the door, heading closer to me. Despite how fiercely my muscles ached, I jumped out of bed and grabbed the lamp from the bedside table. I rushed to the far side of the door and waited.

The door swung open and someone stepped inside. From the back they were like a fucking bear, all thick fur. *Fuck.* I reacted, swinging the metal lamp to slam it into the back of their head. They stumbled. I put my whole body into it with a second blow.

The bear collapsed onto the ground.

I dropped the lamp. It landed with a thud as I stared at the person lying on the ground. Even with his blond hair partially covering his face, it was unmistakable who lay there with blood oozing from a wound on his head.

Winter.

[CONTINUE READING Mari's adventures with her four seasons in book 4, The War With Winter, here!](#)

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MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHORS

Oh man, this book was a labor of love! Neither of us had an easy 2023 when it came time to finish up Autumn. We know this book was a little ‘slower’ than the others, but we truly felt it was a necessary part of their journey and hope you loved it nonetheless. We can NOT wait for you to read Winter, the final thrilling instalment. There are some amazing things coming with that book and can’t wait to hear your thoughts on how this series wraps up! As always, thank you for everything.

Kacey & Becky

Xxx

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From Kacey:

My biggest thank you is to Becky. You have been by my side day 1 from this author journey, always rooting for me from afar (literally since we live in different countries). I have adored your books over the years, and am so happy my dream-come-true of writing something with my author-bestie happened. You are remarkable and despite all the ups and downs and curveballs of life, you never cease to inspire and amaze me. Thank you for being you and all that you do.

And thank you to all my readers. Your word of mouth, your preorders, your excitement over releases, your reviews, you reaching out to me directly to tell me your thoughts as you read through the series brings me so much joy. So thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As always, happy reading!

Kacey

From Becky:

Thank you so much to our wonderful ARC readers, particularly KM and G - thank you so much for reaching out with errata. It really helps upstart

little indie authors like Kacey and I.

Thanks to Kacey for always being ready to listen when it all seems too much. We are all stronger than we realize.

Thank you xxx

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHORS

If you enjoyed this novel, please check out our other works!



When the humans and angels left, they forgot one thing... me.

A supernatural's touch is like a stun gun for me. I avoid it at all costs.

Doing what I do best, spying and getting information, a supernatural dies at my feet. Lo and behold, I'm the one blamed by none other than the Demon Lord himself.

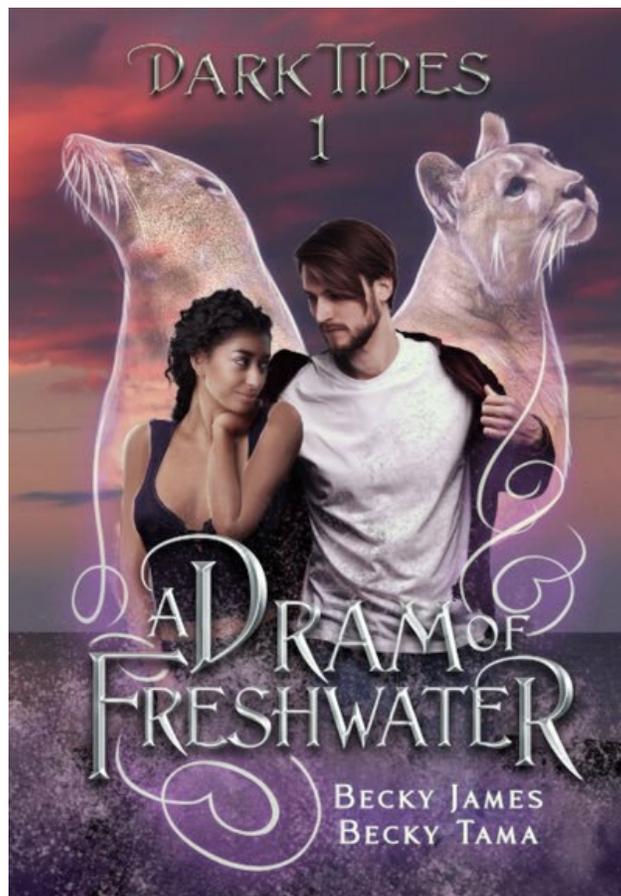
He gave me two choices: die or help solve the murder. I'm not an idiot, so

I made a pact with him to clear my name. Wait... maybe I am an idiot because I just made a deal with the son of Lucifer.

There's one caveat, when I shook his hand it felt good, really freaking good, and now I can't stop thinking about him. Working with the Demon Lord is the last place I should be because if he finds out what I truly am, I'm as good as dead.

Perfect for fans of Jaymin Eve, Kelly St. Clare, Leia Stone, Linsey Hall, and other PNR Indie Author Goddesses. If you enjoy sexy, dominant men and a headstrong heroine, with humor, steam, and action, this is for you! Recommended for 18+ due to explicit scenes and language.

Grab Deal With The Demon Lord [HERE](#)



Fae fantasy romance, with rare Scottish fae struggling to save their dying world. Co-authored with USA Today Bestselling Author Becky James!

The world is ending. Rory can't wait.

Stealing souls from under the noses of the guardians of the underworld is hard work, but for immortal Cat Sidhe Rory, it's all he has ever known. Hiding behind humour, he masks the dark waters closing overhead, but the longer he puts a smile on his face, the more real the threat becomes.

The world is beginning. Darla can't wait.

Darla is an explorer, endlessly fascinated by the land above. As a selkie, she remains trapped under the waves except for once every seven years. But, as luck would have it, now is her time to escape the waves. Desperate to sate her hunger for adventure, she finds her way to the surface, ready to experience all of the wonders of existence, including love, for the very first time.

But the fae world is ending. What will they risk to save it... and each other?

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Translation of what Summer says

CHAPTER 8

1 I made a mistake. I'm very sorry. I need you to forgive me. Please come home, you belong next to me. You belong to us. I don't know how much more I can take this.