



Where
Fate
Leads

FIGHTING FATE

REINA TORRES

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WHERE FATE LEADS

We're taught fate knows all. That it leads you down a certain path because that's where you're meant to be. But what if whoever is waiting for you at the end of it chooses not to accept your combined destiny and instead fights it? The authors in this series have decided to find out.

Where Fate Leads

Brought to an exclusive Brazilian Resort for her wedding, Rosalicia finds her fiancé in bed with another woman. Heartbroken and rejected, she finds herself on a walk through the wild gardens surrounding the resort. Blinded by tears, she walks straight into the arms of an aroused shapeshifter.

His soul is split in two. Half man, half jaguar, he has lived his entire life searching for the one who can merge his soul into one.

Drawn to a resort carved into the jungle of his people, he hears the soul rending tears of a woman moving through the exotic gardens and when he finds her she stumbles into his arms.

He knows, deep in his soul that she is the one for him. Rosalicia is his mate. His future lover. Mother of his heirs. He vows that if she lets him love her... worship her... she'll never have a reason to cry again.

He'll do whatever it takes to make her blissfully happy for the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER ONE

ROSALICIA

In two days, Rosalicia Estrada would be married.
Married.

Looking out of the limousine window at the passing scenery, she found herself dreaming.

What would her life be like after the wedding?

She hoped that she would find out what it would be like to be in love.

Tony said he loved her.

He proclaimed it every day. Several times a day. Loud and proud, he called it.

It just made her a little wary and weary at the same time.

Her mother just said she was getting cold feet, but her feet were fine. She just didn't like flowery speeches. She didn't like grand gestures.

She just wanted to be loved.

And she felt that.

It was just a bit... overwhelming at times and her warm feet? They were thinking of running.

"Can you believe it?"

Rosalicia turned to look at her mother, who sat in the rear-facing bench seat of the classic limousine.

"This is all so grand!" She turned and looked out of each window in turn, her elegantly coiffed hair holding together admirably. "The lush green of nature and the elegance of an exclusive resort crafted from marble and sandstone. I've seen the pictures," she gushed. "It looks like a castle!"

A castle.

Even more of a reason for Rosalicia to hesitate.
She'd hoped for a wedding in a garden. Or on a beach.
Something simple and beautiful.
Surrounded by nature.

"The florist is costing your father a fortune."

Seated at the far side of the seat from Rosalicia, her father grumbled and turned the page in his newspaper, flicking it once he had his hands on both sides. "Don't remind me."

He was lost in the news a moment later and Rosalicia wondered if he kept reading the newspaper instead of viewing it on his phone because it gave him a convenient physical barrier to hide behind.

She wouldn't blame him. Her mother was quite adept at carrying on a whole conversation in a room full of silent people.

She loved talking.

"And your dress, Rose. It's magnificent. I know you didn't care about the style or the embellishments, so I had them fit me instead. We are almost the same size after all.

Rosalicia stiffened a little at her mother's words.

Yes, they were close in size but so was her sister.

A shudder rolled through her body at the thought. No, it was better that her mother had stood in for the fittings instead of Jessenia.

As long as Rosalicia could remember, her elder sister Jessenia had hated her.

If she'd done the fittings for Rosalicia's dress, she would have done something to ruin it.

"When," Rosalicia swallowed at the sudden tightness in her throat, "when is Jessenia coming to the resort for the wedding?"

Her mother froze for a moment, looking as if she was caught in the sudden flare of headlights.

When she began to speak it sounded like a mix of odd syllables strung together punctuated with laughs and the fluttering of her hands.

"Mother?"

"Now, don't you worry about that, Rose. It's neither here nor there, you see?"

Her father lowered the newspaper with a huff of sound that curled the top edge of the paper. "Answer her!"

Her mother's instantaneous reaction was to press her lips together in a line

that ate all of her carefully applied color.

Then, when she turned to look at Rosalicia, she managed a pleasant smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Rosalicia's stomach clenched and threatened to turn over.

"She's already here. She arrived a few days ago to see to the final preparations for the wedding. It will be fine." Her mother turned her head to look out of the window. She kept her gaze fixed at the lush greenery passing by. "It will be fine." She said the words as if she needed to reassure herself. "You'll see, Rose. It will all be fine."

Beside her on the bench seat, Rosalicia's father grumbled under his breath and went back to reading his paper. "Too much bother, if you ask me."

Rosalicia bit into her bottom lip to keep it from shaking.

A moment later, she lowered her chin and stared at her hands in her lap.

It was impossible to imagine how everything was going to be okay when her sister was probably doing everything she could to ruin the wedding plans.

How her mother continued to ignore the bad blood between her two daughters, Rosalicia would never know.

There had been a time, so very long ago, when she remembered loving her sister.

Well, she *still* loved her sister.

She just didn't like how she was treated.

Growing up people had encouraged her to not give up trying to bridge the distance with her older sister, but every effort was flung back at her.

Sometimes with physical force.

"Rose?"

It was a few moments before she realized that someone was saying her name.

"Rose, dear."

Rosalicia turned on the leather seat and looked at her mother.

"Hmm?"

Her mother shook her head and sighed. "Really, dear? Don't slouch."

Instead of straightening on the seat, she sighed. What could her mother do to her now?

"Don't make this difficult."



EDUARDO

Eduardo glared down at the resort from his perch in a sumaumeira tree overlooking the Fausto Resort. For days he'd watched delivery trucks come and go and the first round of luxury cars had arrived a few hours before.

He hadn't paid much attention to them after he saw the men who exited the cars.

They were men of wealth. Their clothes and baggage said as much. They were also ostentatious. He'd seen their ilk before.

Seen them and dismissed them.

He didn't waste time on men who were beneath him.

They could not fight him with any technique or strength. They may have made something of themselves in the world of humans, but Eduardo didn't have those constraints on his life.

He was master of all that he surveyed and he held onto his kingdom with fists and claws.

Fancy clothes like the men were wearing cost a pretty penny, but he had little need for garments like the ones they clothed themselves in.

He was happier in his own skin than they ever would be no matter how wealthy they became, because if you based your worth on your clothes or on your possessions, you had nothing of any value as far as his people were concerned.

They were the last of the jaguar shifters in the country.

The last of their noble breed.

There were a little less than a hundred of his kind left in the world. Most of them still lived here, in the heavily canopied world of the jungle.

"What are you doing, El Rey?"

Eduardo's lip curled up to show his fangs to Cruz, his oldest friend, as he settled himself on a nearby branch a good seventy feet from the ground. Normally, his teeth were just that, but when he was riled... when any of the shifters in his prowl were riled or close to a shift, their fangs were present.

"Do not mock me." Eduardo knew that his snarl was worse than his true feelings, but it wouldn't do for his friends to mock him one way or the other.

"*Calmate, calmate*, both of you." Irenio sat himself on the same branch as Cruz, but between the two shifters. "Drawing blood this high from the ground would be disastrous."

Eduardo knew that his friend's words were a little ridiculous, but they had the desired effect. The prickly anger he'd felt moments before eased away.

"The only blood that would have been drawn," Eduardo explained to his friends, "would have been from Cruz' veins. I would be just fine."

He heard Cruz open his mouth to speak, but Irenio spoke first.

"What's going on down there?"

Eduardo knew he was talking about the resort. Since it was built, there had been few guests that had come to stay.

The servants in the hotel were all members of his prowl. It was a deal that he'd made with the man who had built the resort.

It kept the numbers of outsiders to a minimum in the area. He knew that the world continued to advance whether he liked it or not, but the man who'd built the resort had some of the jaguar in him.

He understood what it meant to keep their presence as much of a secret as possible. And their identities?

Hidden.

He watched as a limousine moved toward the resort, crawling forward to lay on his taut belly to enjoy the sight.

"This must be the bride."

"Bride?"

Both of his friends had uttered the word at the same time, but in different ways.

Cruz sounded like he was laughing.

Irenio's tone was more thoughtful in nature.

When Cruz continued to laugh, Eduardo let out a sharp snarl and his nails bit into the bark of the tree, sending shards of bark flying.

Cruz quieted down and moved further away from Eduardo on the branch.

Irenio didn't move away. Instead, he sat quietly and watched along with Eduardo as the limousine pulled up under the portico of the grand resort.

Inching forward on his belly, Eduardo finally found a vantage point where he could see under the edge of the portico.

He could already feel his blood pumping through his veins at a faster speed. The air that he pulled into his lungs was scented as if his head was pressed into the petals of a rare flower.

Glorious.

Delicious.

Arousing.

He heard Irenio's cautionary snarl, but it did little to reach him.

Gone was the solid line between man and animal.

No, Eduardo rode the line of transformation It would only take the barest of thought or emotion to push him over the edge.

And he didn't seem to care.

His animal had been hunting for this scent for years.

They'd both longed to find the one who could flood their senses with joy and hunger in equal measure.

There.

He saw her.

He saw his mate.

One half-indrawn breath sent him over the edge and his body went through the change.

Bones broke and reformed.

Skin burst with fur and his back arched as his tail swished through the air.

He was close. So damn close.

All he had to do was get to the ground and-

A streak of color rammed into his side and together they tumbled through the air.

Snarling and clawing at the other jaguar, they broke through another canopy of trees, vines catching on their claws, legs tangling with each other and the leaves as they dropped like stones.

The ground rushed up to meet them and the sudden impact jarred his bones and his head.

As they both shifted back to their human forms in the mess of broken vines and snapped leaves, Eduardo found his head clearing.

He turned to look at the other jaguar who had tackled him from the branch, he expected to see Cruz' pained mien looking back at him.

Instead, he saw Irenio's face half-hidden from him in shadow, lines creased through the skin on his forehead.

He lifted himself from the ground with one hand and then the other, struggling as he went.

Eduardo sat there, concerned.

"Are you injured?"

Irenio almost stifled a groan, almost. "No more than I can handle."

"You knocked me down. You?"

Cruz reached the ground with a light jump. "That was crazy!"

He moved over to Irenio and cuffed him on the shoulder with a laugh.

The move sent Irenio down to his elbows on the ground.

"Enough!"

Getting up to his feet, Eduardo held out a hand to his friend. "Here, let me help you."

Irenio's reticent glare was immediately tempered before his king and he took hold of Eduardo's hand and got to his feet.

He lowered his head and began to apologize.

"I am sorry for what I did-"

"I can't accept your apology."

Irenio blanched, paling like the moon.

"You did the right thing." Eduardo's jaguar grudgingly agreed. "I wasn't thinking. I let my animal override my sense."

His friend kept his gaze on the floor.

"I'll keep a tighter rein on myself, my friend."

"You don't have to assure me of that." Irenio's voice was lighter than it had been a moment before.

"You're right. I don't. But I thought I owed it to you for the pain that you've gone through."

He turned then, his gaze inexorably turning toward the resort.

"Now, leave me."

Eduardo heard them move, leaves and broken bits of green under their feet. They were gone a moment later, and he took his first step toward his destiny.

CHAPTER TWO

ROSALICIA

Once she was shown to the Bridal Suite in the resort, Rosalicia didn't bother unpacking. She felt... unsettled.

She walked around the front room and then into the bedroom, stopping to open the curtains and look outside.

The gardens were astounding.

Lush and green with bright blooms bursting from the green like brilliant stars in the night sky.

She pressed her hands against the cool glass and touched her forehead to the window.

She wanted to get closer, but for the moment, it was enough.

Like a bird desperate to fly over that expanse of beauty and stuck behind an invisible cage, she sighed.

"Miss?"

Startled, Rosalicia turned from the glass and straightened her posture so her mother wouldn't hear about her lapse.

"Yes?"

The maid was impeccably dressed, if not a little too stiff. It was likely because her uniform was starched to the hilt. Her chin-high mandarin collar edged with prickly lace. The same at her wrists.

At the back of her head, Rosalicia wondered if she would have learned better posture if she'd had that kind of lace added to all of her collars.

It certainly would have irritated her under her chin, keeping her head as high as her mother's was known to be.

"I've been assigned to you for the duration of your stay. There will be

another maid coming later in the day to be at your service through the night."

"Two?" Rosalicia couldn't hide her shock. "I have two maids assigned to me?"

She didn't even have one at home and she knew that her father certainly made a good deal of money at his job.

She'd always been responsible for cleaning her own space.

The maid smiled tightly. "Actually, you'll have four. Two more on the day of your wedding to help you prepare for the ceremony."

Four!

That was a lot.

A lot of people hovering.

A lot of people touching.

She barely held off a shudder.

"During your stay, the kitchens will remain open to provide you with any meals or sweets you desire."

"What do you mean?" Rosalicia felt her hands start to shake. She wasn't at all comfortable with the idea that the kitchen staff would be forced to stay in the kitchen at night just in case she wanted... pastries? A steak? "I'm sure I won't need anything, they don't have to stay."

"It's their job, Miss."

It's their job. "Yes. Sorry, I didn't think about that. I'm just not sure that I would ever be hungry in the middle of the night."

The maid nodded. "Would you like to order lunch?"

Lunch?

Rosalicia placed her palm over her belly. She was hungry, but her stomach was unsettled. "May I see the menu?"

The maid waved her hand in a politely dismissive gesture. "There's no menu, Miss. Just let me know what you'd like. The kitchen pantry is well stocked."

Rosalicia almost laughed, but she was sure that the maid would think she was either a jerk or a little crazy.

She knew that she was definitely crazy being in this situation, but hungry was hungry. "I'd be happy with a grilled cheese sandwich and some soup out of the can. I can go to the kitchens and make it my-"

"I'll give your order to the kitchen. You'll have it shortly."

Then she was gone, like a magician of sorts.

Or maybe it was just because she felt like she was in a kind of twisted

fantasy, more her mother's than anything else.

If Rosalicia had her way, they would have a private ceremony in the garden.

That's all she wanted.

Something simple.

Something heartfelt.

Now they were set to have a ceremony with two hundred guests. A tent the size of a football field for their reception, complete with white silk table linens and half a dozen crystal chandeliers.

Instead of her simple ceremony with the bare minimum of a single attendant, she'd ended up with eight bridesmaids and their ring bearer and flower girl riding matching ponies down the aisle.

It was all too much for her.

It felt awkward and ostentatious, much more like her mother and sister's taste than her own.

Rosalicia had always felt more connected to her father than her mother, and that extended to her simple tastes. Her father took her camping and hiking, feeding her love of nature, while her mother took her sister to exclusive resorts and fashion weeks, spending thousands upon thousands.

Yes, her wedding, down to the dress and venues was definitely more of their taste than hers.

Maybe that's why she felt so detached.

Turning around, Rosalicia moved back into the bedroom and dug through her suitcase for a light cardigan and put it on to shield herself from the chill in the air. The whole resort felt like an icebox, but her mother had explained that it was because of the almost hundred thousand dollars worth of flowers all over the venue.

Wrapping the front around herself, she walked down the hall looking for her parents or her sister.

She didn't mind being alone. A solitary life was fine for her, but that was when she was in her own space and comfortable.

While she was waiting for her food, she decided to go looking for a space that gave her that feeling. If she was going to be stuck in this space for a few days, she would need a place to curl up and relax.

For a moment, she imagined finding a basket swing of some sort or a big cushion to nap on. Silly? Absolutely. But she loved to cuddle up and read when she could and nap afterward.

Vastly different from the likely thousand count sheets on the royally decorated suite that she'd just left behind.

If she threw the pillows from the silk brocade couch and chairs on the floor to relax on, her mother might lose her mind.

That put a smile on her face.

Turning down a hallway, she drew to a slow stop.

The door at the far end of the richly appointed hall had a plaque beside it.

GROOM SUITE

Her mother had banned her from talking to Tony before the ceremony, but that was a crazy tradition. Rosalicia didn't believe in things like superstition or fate. She didn't believe in things she couldn't touch... or see.

Listening in the hallway, she didn't hear anyone moving around. Smiling to herself, she remembered how her father always made a point of praising her for her extraordinary hearing.

While it made her sister angry, it was something that Rosalicia was proud of.

And since there was no one who she could hear in the vicinity, she thought she would take a chance and speak to Tony.

They'd been friends in school. Friends for years and while other schoolmates had snubbed her for her wealth or teased her for being awkward.

Tony was always her friend.

He never expected her to be anything but herself and for that alone, she gave him her heart.

She was still surprised that he'd asked her to marry him, believing that they'd stay lifelong friends.

If anything, she was curious about their wedding night. They'd done little more than kiss and she'd made a mess of that.

She didn't know where their noses should go and what to do with her hands.

Tony knew though, so she was counting on him to help make her first time... romantic.

She wanted him to be happy and so she wanted to talk to him and see what she could learn ahead of time.

Knowing a little more of what they would do after their reception would help her get comfortable with the idea, or at least less skittish than she was already feeling.

When she'd tried to talk to her mother about it, MOM had paled and

become dizzy, refusing to talk about 'such things' with her daughter.

And her sister? Jessenia had just smiled at her, lifting her eyebrows in a not-so-veiled hint that said Jessenia knew all about it.

It upset Rosalicia, hoping that even this late in their lives, that her sister might want to bond with her in some way. Instead, her older sister seemed to enjoy leaving her in the dark.

As she made her way down the hall her heart began to pound and her breaths shallowed.

Anxiety.

She knew what that felt like. In places with a lot of people around her, anxiety was her constant companion. Well anxiety and Tony.

Tony had been her lodestone for years. He kept her focused and settled and he said that he'd loved her for years.

Rosalicia felt the warmth in her heart for him that she hadn't felt for any man, and that was love.

She was sure of it.

She just wasn't sure about what was going to happen once they were married. The closer she got to his room the more her face tingled and her ears rushed with the blood pumping through her body.

"He'll explain it. He will."

Thump. Thump. Thump.

She could hear her heart pushing blood through her veins. Maybe she wasn't as sure as she'd thought before.

When she reached the door, she lifted her hand to knock and at the first touch of her knuckles on the door, it moved inward.

Strange.

Maybe he forgot to close the door.

Or one of the groomsmen had left it open.

It didn't upset or scare her. The security at the resort was topnotch.

It had to be.

Her mother would never had allowed for the wedding to take place here if there wasn't a security presence like that of the secret service.

Rosalicia's lips twisted in an impish smile. Wouldn't it be funny to see Tony's expression when she snuck into his room?

She hadn't even met the groomsmen yet.

The more she thought about it, the more appealing of an idea it sounded like.

After all, once she was married, she could be more of herself.

Or rather, she could discover who that was.

Away from her mother and her sister's dark looks, she could enjoy her life.

Pulling herself together, she held the door so she could keep it as quiet as possible as she walked in.

Which was probably unneeded as a resort as beautiful as this one would never have a door that squeaked.

With her teeth biting into her bottom lip, she closed the front door with a soft click.

All of her anxiety fell away from her shoulders as she turned around to look at the room.

Where her own room was almost completely ivory and creams with hints of peach and beige, the groom's suite was like a checkerboard. Black and white. Marble and ebony wood. Both stark and beautiful at the same time.

There was music playing. Something soulful with deep, rolling harmonies that echoed off of every hard surface in the suite.

And there were plenty of those.

The music called to her, putting a little sway in her hips. Wouldn't that surprise Tony?

It should, because it was surprising herself.

She moved through the main room and turned the corner into the hall. If the room was designed to mirror her room across the resort's exclusive wing, she was only steps away from the bedroom.

The door was closed, but she knew that the speakers fed into all corners of the suites. The registration confirmation packet was most informative.

Wrapping her hand around the doorknob, Rosalicia took in a deep fortifying breath and opened the door.

"Surprise!"

And surprised she was.

Her sister, Jessenia and Tony were completely naked on the bed and their mouths were only a breath away from each other as they'd just been kissing. They'd only stopped when she'd interrupted them.

As she stood there, her heart throbbing painfully in her chest, she realized two very important things.

One. She'd been right that Tony would know what to do in bed, he certainly seemed skilled enough to satisfy her sister. Jessenia had more than

enough experience on her own.

Two. There wouldn't be a wedding tomorrow. Certainly not one for her.

"Rose!"

It should have satisfied her a little when Tony tossed Jessenia off of him and she was so close to the edge of the bed that she nearly fell off.

But it didn't.

Tony swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached down to the pile of fabric on the floor, searching for... whatever.

She shook her head and turned, walking out of the room.

Tony followed her.

His feet were silent on the thick piled carpet beneath his feet but she could hear him blubbering and begging as he struggled behind her.

When she got to the door, he shouted and stopped her as her hand touched the knob.

"Rose, baby. Please listen to me!"

Rosalicia didn't let go of the door, but she turned around to look at him.

"What, Tony? What do you want to say?"

He opened his mouth, but he just gaped at her, his eyes empty as he struggled to tie a sheet around his waist.

When she turned the knob in her hand, he finally spoke.

"Don't leave, baby. Let's talk. I can explain."

"You can *explain*?" She exhaled or laughed. She couldn't figure out which. "What do you think you could say to make me forgive you?"

"We... we've been friends forever."

"Part of being my friend was hearing what my sister constantly did to hurt me."

"Yes, but this was just... a slip. A physical need that I had."

"We were getting married tomorrow, Tony! Tomorrow! What kind of a need was it that you had to have sex today?"

"Really, Rosie? You can't figure it out?" Her sister sauntered out of the bedroom with her panties on and nothing else. "Tony wants someone who can make him happy and you can barely kiss. How long did you think you were going to make him wait before he gave up coaching you around the bases and find a woman who could hit a homerun every time?"

Rosalicia shook her head. "I thought you were okay with waiting." She blinked back tears as she looked at Tony, ignoring her sister's smug face at his side.

"I am, sweetheart. I am. This," he gestured between himself and Jessenia, "was just a moment in our lives. You and me? We're going to be forever." He took a step closer and nearly tripped over the sheet gathered around his waist. "Wait and see. Tomorrow, we'll kiss as husband and wife and we'll never have to think about this again!"

Oh god.

The thought of kissing Tony ever again made her want to-

She turned the knob and threw open the door, stumbling into the hallway.

Before the door closed tightly after her she heard her sister laughing at the top of her lungs.

Afraid that she might mar the marble floors of the resort, she ran for the door at the back of the resort that led out into the gardens, tears streaming down her face.

CHAPTER THREE

EDUARDO

He heard her tears.

They coursed like rain down her cheeks, but he also heard her anger. Rage like that sounded like thunder in his heart.

His jaguar bared fangs and snarled, hungering for blood.

Death.

That's when Eduardo knew that the woman stumbling through the gardens was his mate.

No other woman could stir up such emotion in his beast.

He would defend any woman who needed it, but this woman was more than just a woman.

She held inside of her heart the key to his destiny.

A deep purring sound echoed in his head and he felt the hard push of his jaguar against the barrier that kept them apart.

All he had to do was let down that metaphysical barrier between them and in his place would be the fangs, claws, and preternatural hunger of his animal.

No.

He shook his head even though the animal was not there to see it. The beast within could feel his movements and share his thoughts.

We can track her. His jaguar lifted his nose into the air and breathed in the scent of her drifting to them on the subtle current of the air.

Eduardo stumbled back.

He was almost driven to his knees by the scent of her.

Delicious, purred his jaguar. *Tasty.*

Eduardo pushed him back. *She's not a meal.*

Oh, she is more than a meal, human. She is life for us.

He couldn't argue with the jaguar. The beast was more tightly bound to the magic that created their kind. It could pull on the energy in the ground beneath them. The very pulse of the earth under their feet.

And paws, his beast corrected.

Paws, yes. Eduardo shook his head.

A moment of pain, physical pain, turned their heads in the direction of the gardens.

"She needs us." Eduardo felt a pull stronger than any he'd ever felt before.

Then let us find her. His jaguar's tone brooked no argument. *And claim her.*

With that, Eduardo couldn't agree more. "Show me," he smiled and the teeth that showed looked more like fangs than teeth.

I'll do better than that, his jaguar promised.

And then they ran.



ROSALICIA

The rain that fell was welcome. It helped to wash away her tears.

She didn't even know what kind of tears they were anymore.

Angry?

Sad?

Lonely?

Empty?

She didn't know how to understand it when she felt a gaping hole inside of her chest.

The horrifying scene that she'd just been a part of kept playing over and over in her head and every time it did, she felt a different emotion wash over her.

It had made sense that she'd escape into the garden to think.

To feel.

Ever since she'd been a child, her father would take her into nature as a kind of respite from her mother's constant demands.

In the woods or by the water she could feel the world around her pulsing

with life.

The wind would dry her tears. The water lapping at her feet would tickle her into laughter.

Even the howls of the animals that hung in the air felt like an embrace.

"Remember, my darling girl," her father would tell her on a whisper, "you may be alone, but out in the world like this, you'll never be lonely."

The ground was wet beneath her feet, the loose soil turning to mud.

As she moved through the landscaped area into the wild jungle atmosphere. She wasn't afraid of what was out there, she was more afraid of what was inside herself.

The rain fell heavier from the sky, slicking her hair down around her face and pouring rivulets of rain from the ends of her hair.

Rosalicia lifted a hand to her face and moved her hair away from her eyes and ironically, that's when she stubbed her toe on something and stumbled forward.

That's when the falling rain felt like it was too much.

On the ground, the rain pummeled her, continually driving her down to the ground. When she tried to stand, she went right back down.

She knew she had to get up.

Spending too much time in the rain, even as warm as it was, was going to make her sick.

And the last thing she wanted was to give her sister the satisfaction of thinking that Jessenia had hurt her that much.

It might be true, but she would never say that.

Rosalicia opened her mouth to get a deep breath and ended up with a mouthful of water.

Great.

She was going to drown herself and they'd find her body moldering in the grasses.

She decided to give it one more try to get on her feet before she ended up crawling to find shelter from the rain.

Closing her eyes, she took in a breath and-

"Let me help you."

The voice turned her head and a moment later, she realized her mistake.

She expected the rain drops to pummel the side of her face, but they didn't.

Opening her eyes, she saw that the man offering her a hand hadn't just

dropped in out of the blue, he was quite literally shielding her from the rain.

Rosalicia heard the rain drumming its intense rhythm on the flat leaves around them, and she definitely felt the humidity coating her skin, but she was saved from the worst of it by this mystery man.

She took the hand he offered and before she could lift herself from the muddy ground, he had her on her feet. Sheltered by his arm and the bulk of his larger form she followed his lead as he walked her through the deluge.

"Where did you come from?"

Rosalicia startled, blinking at him as it sank in that they'd both asked the same question of each other.

She answered first, considering that he was the one taking the brunt of the storm. "The resort," she explained. "I'm... I'm a guest there, but I wanted to leave."

He tilted his head slightly to the side as if he was questioning her answer. "You're not dressed for the weather."

His words hit hard, but she had a feeling he hadn't intended to make them a criticism. His eyes didn't scold.

It seemed as though he actually cared about her clothes and her wellbeing.

She wanted to believe it, but with what she'd just seen, she wasn't sure if she could trust her own judgement.

"What happened to make you leave?"

"I... I don't want to talk about it." She waited to see how he reacted to her words.

It looked to her as if she could see her words sink in. And then he nodded.

A simple gesture in the middle of a rainy deluge.

"Let's find some shelter and wait out the storm. Then, perhaps, you might be willing to tell me what has you so upset."

She felt him wrap himself around her, tucking her against the front of his body to continue to shield her from the rain.

As they began to move, Rosalicia worried that she might slow him down. Or that her shorter strides might irritate him or cause him to stumble.

By the time they stopped, she found that she could look up and not have her sight obscured by the rain. The tree above them helped to keep the rain off of their bodies.

"Come," he gestured to her with his hand, and she moved toward him.

He smiled at her as he sat down between two roots that looked like they

had formed the walls of a shelter.

With her hand still in his, she sat down in the space between his legs, facing out toward the jungle.

Rosalicia felt his hands settle on her shoulders.

"This tree is still young compared to the others around us."

She smiled. It felt like he heard the question in her head.

"What kind of tree is it?" She thought to turn her head to ask, but instead he drew her back against him.

Almost instantly she was surrounded by his warmth and his arms.

"It's a mahogany tree," he explained. "They grow all around this area. I brought you here because I knew it could provide the shelter I needed to keep you warm."

"Hmm..." She had meant to say something, but it was the warmth she felt at her back and in the safety of his casual embrace that was lulling her to sleep.

The rain that made it so difficult to walk earlier was now just a melody in the distance.

Rosalicia tried to shake herself awake, but he set his chin on her shoulder, leaning his cheek against hers.

She felt the rough scratch of the stubble on his face and instead of scratching her, it sent shivers through her body. Shivers that had her wiggling back against him for more of his heat.

And he gave it, wrapping his arms tighter around her.

"Go to sleep, *minha gatinha*."

Her brow furrowed as she tried to understand his words. "What did you say?"

Rosalicia felt muscles move along his jaw and wondered if he was smiling.

"I said, 'Go to sleep, my little cat.'"

With his heat surrounding her and the aching heart in her chest, Rosalicia leaned into the comfort he offered. While she might regret her choice of shelter later, this mystery man had been as kind to her as her father.

That would have to be enough for the moment.

Well, almost enough.

She had a few things to say, so she didn't completely embarrass herself with atrocious manners.

"Thank you for helping me."

He cuddled her closer, if that was even possible. "Always, *meu bem*. Whatever you need will be yours."

Smiling, she wondered again what it was that he'd said to her, but she was fading fast and so there was one more thing to do.

"My name," she yawned as the world darkened around her, "Is Rosalicia. Rosalicia Estrada."

She couldn't see his expression with his chin on her shoulder, but she did hear something in her head that sounded like a soft, cheerful laugh that confused her.

"Save your questions for later, *meu bem*. I will be here when you awake. But for now, Rosalicia Estrada. I welcome you home."

CHAPTER FOUR

EDUARDO

He held her close while she slept. She was beautiful. She fit perfectly in his arms.

And she was his.

He didn't need his beast to tell him that she was their mate.

Eduardo knew that deep down in his soul.

No one else would ever fit against him so well.

Fit around him when he...

No. He would think about that later.

First, he needed to find out if her people were going to come after her.

She'd come from the resort and for the first time since they'd broken ground and carved a huge swath out of the rain forest that was his home, he found himself grateful.

As horrible as this monstrosity was, it had brought her to him.

Rosalicia.

He leaned down and breathed her in.

Pure.

Sweet.

Mate.

Eduardo shoved his jaguar back, sending a glare inwardly to the massive cat and told him to stay back.

It was hard enough to fight off the need to mark her. His cat made it all too clear that when he called her their mate, he wasn't thinking of the word as a title.

His jaguar wanted to mark her, bite into her bare flesh as they brought her

gorgeous body to a breathless orgasm.

The erotic images that flashed through Eduardo's mind were blissful torture.

His mouth on her flesh.

His heated flesh moving over her and in her.

He could feel his hands moving over her body.

Just sitting there in the shade of the tree's massive roots, he felt himself harden against her.

The curve of her bottom was nestled against him and if she made any movement at all, it would rub her sweetly curved backside against his cock.

Her scent had already created the most delicious haze in his brain, but he realized that she wasn't a shape shifter like he was.

She wouldn't know what he was beyond his physical shape.

She will learn.

His jaguar was right.

She would learn.

And he would enjoy teaching her.

We, human. We will enjoy teaching her.

"Hmm..." She moved in his arms, turning her head to the side, and snuggled deeper into his warm embrace.

Her gentle movements rubbed the side of her breast against his forearm and again, he was aching to touch her. To seduce her.

He needed her so much.

The blood in his veins rushed through his body as if it was hell-bent on driving him to distraction.

For several weeks, he'd seen delivery vans run in and out of the resort, preparing for an event. He had no way of knowing that the event would bring him his mate.

The first moment that he scented her and saw her, he'd been nearly overtaken by the need to touch her but Ireneo, the advisor who knew how to handle his headstrong moods, tackled him to the ground.

She wasn't a part of their people.

She didn't know what they were and she'd need some time to adjust. That's what his practical side told him.

When he heard her crying and felt her pain, that overrode his need.

Her comfort, her happiness, would always supersede his needs.

A subtle, cautious touch tested the link he had to the rest of the cats in his

prowl.

Turning his head, he saw Irenio crouched in the leaves nearby.

Eduardo appreciated the caution that his friend showed in his approach.

Holding his mate would soothe his need to protect her from others, but it was not foolproof.

And being in his human form kept Eduardo from speaking to Irenio's cat through the link that joined all of the members of his prawl.

"Closer."

He spoke, but it was barely a whisper. With his preternatural hearing, Irenio could hear his words just fine. It would work the other way as well.

Irenio kept his head low so his eyes wouldn't meet Eduardo's and his movements were kept low to the ground. Even though his friend was in his human form, he moved forward on his hands and toes.

"That's close enough."

Irenio stopped about five feet away, his body in a position as close to a cat's as possible. It felt natural to all of them, as if they were halfway between human and jaguar.

Irenio spoke softly. "May I bring you anything?"

"Not now." Eduardo shook his head. "Later, perhaps. She will need to eat and drink later today, but for now she needs-"

A growl forced its way through the human words. His cat was fighting for control.

He knew he couldn't reason with the animal. Its hunger and need were driven by a primal force as old as their kind and it will continue for the rest of time.

Eduardo swept his tongue across the top of his mouth and felt his fangs draw blood.

He was caught between man and beast and knew that he was teetering on the edge of his change.

He knew that he wasn't in any danger of hurting Rosalicia. His jaguar was just as determined to protect her as he was, but if he shifted he didn't know how she would react to his form.

She certainly wouldn't be able to understand him.

Not yet.

Not until she bore his mark.

"What do you need us to do?"

Eduardo turned his head, but kept his eyes on Rosalicia's sleeping form.

"Stay... nearby. Wait until I call for you."

Irenio started to move away, but stopped. Waiting for Eduardo to acknowledge him.

"Yes?"

"I'm happy you found her, Eduardo. You've waited-"

"A lifetime."

His voice came out rough, as if it had to struggle to be heard.

And perhaps it was.

Ever since his father had passed on and he had taken over the prowl, stepping into the role of their leader, he'd hope to meet his mate.

Years had come and gone and nothing.

Women, both shifter and human, had crossed his path on his travels and he had recognized none of them as his other half.

When word had come that a resort would be built on land abutting their own, he'd looked on with caution. Watched them build over time and admired some of their skill.

Liked what he saw of the landscaping that they used even as they cleared away part of the rain forest to build.

When they'd sent word that they were looking for workers and were willing to pay generously, he allowed his prowl members to apply and work there if they wished.

That's why his friends had heard of the wedding taking place there.

But if the woman who was sleeping peacefully in his embrace was the bride in question, a wedding wasn't about to happen.

At least not her wedding to another man.

His cats told him that he was a generous leader, but he would not share his mate.

No one. No one at all would expect him to.

She was his.

Rosalicia was his.

She just didn't know it yet.



ROSALICIA

She woke up, blissfully warm and well rested. Curled up on her side, she

heard the wind above her head singing through the trees and the soft chitter of birds.

Snuggling deeper into sleep, she smiled and chuckled. "I like this channel."

Turning over, she reached out for her alarm to hit the snooze button and stopped.

Something was in her head, a dark shadow in the back of her mind. Something she didn't want to think about.

The world inside of her head, her dreams, darkened as if storm clouds were rolling in.

Rosalicia turned again, trying to hide from the darkness around her, but the darkness just came in faster, heavier.

She put her hands over her head to keep the darkness away, but the more she tried to hide, the more it pressed down on her.

Fighting with the darkness, she waved her arm across her face, trying to push it away and hit something solid.

Hard.

Warm.

Her eyes opened wide and she struggled to sit up but she was wrapped up, held back.

"Oh god. Help!"

"*Calmate.*"

She froze.

That voice.

She turned her head to look. At him.

"You!"

The corner of his mouth quirked up, almost into a smile. "What about me?"

"I didn't... I wasn't... I don't..."

She pushed up out of his arms and got back on her feet, frustrated.

Rosalicia shook her head and walked a few steps away struggling to bring herself under control. She felt like the reins that she held on her emotions were slipping free from her hands yet again.

But as frustrating as that was for her, he didn't deserve her frustration.

Turning her head to look at him, she took careful stock of his face and his expression.

Short cropped hair did nothing to hide the features of his face. He was

ruggedly handsome, with features that she couldn't quite describe with any clarity.

To her, it felt like she was seeing two distinctly different faces imposed one on top of the other.

It was visually confusing, but she felt as though she could feel the essence of him beneath his physical beauty.

That was something more tangible in a way.

She'd certainly seen Tony's handsome face as one of his best qualities, and now she knew that beneath that broad, white-toothed smile was a deceitful heart.

No amount of physical beauty could make up for that.

"I owe you an apology and my thanks."

When she lifted her face to meet his gaze, she saw his surprise.

With one brow slightly higher than the other, he shrugged.

"You don't have to say anything to me, Rosalicia."

The way he said her name was enough to make her catch her breath.

"You may not think so, but I do. You found me when I'd just seen... When I'd had my heart broken."

His expression changed to one better suited to an avenging angel than a man.

"My family came to the resort for my wedding, but I walked in on my sister and my fiancé... together. That's when I left, running as far as I could get. Through the rain forest. And the rain."

Rosalicia turned to look back at the resort and laughed at herself when she realized she had no idea where the resort was.

"I don't even know where I am right now, but I'm not expecting you to volunteer to take me back."

His brow furrowed and again, he raised a questioning brow. "Do you want to go back?"

The question was a simple one.

And so was her answer.

"No." She shook her head and found herself almost smiling. "I don't."

"Then, you come with me to meet my people." He held out his hand to her.

She thought it was a little strange for him to speak as if he was the CEO of a company or a king of a country.

Still, she didn't have anything to do besides avoid the family chaos

waiting for her back at the resort.

Rosalicia started to reach out and take his hand, but she stopped, realizing that as helpful and generous as he had been in helping her, there was still something she needed to know.

"I don't know your name yet."

"*Suas*."



EDUARDO

She gave him a curious look, as if she was trying to see through a fog, but she seemed to accept his answer as the truth. Which he couldn't let stand as he was already walking a line of truth with her.

He knew so much more about her than she knew about him.

And while he knew it needed to be like that, he wasn't completely willing to keep her in the dark about his answer.

She took his hand, murmuring the name that she believed was his. "*Suas*?"

"My name, *minha gatinha*, is Eduardo."

He saw her brow lift and he lifted their joined hands to press a kiss to the back of her hand. "*Suas*," he explained, "means that I am yours."

She smiled. "Sweet words. Pretty. But," she sighed, "pretty words can be deceptive."

He pulled her in until he could breathe her in without an effort. "When I say I am yours, my little kitten," he saw her eyes widen, "I am yours. Of that, you can be sure."

Then, because he could not stop himself, he leaned in and pressed a kiss at the place where her neck met her shoulder.

His beast nearly broke through the surface at the touch of his lips against her skin, but he barely held it off.

Eduardo's fangs sliced through the skin inside of his mouth and blood ran hot across his tongue.

That blood fed his beast's hunger.

The jaguar, and himself as well, needed that blood to satiate themselves until the time came to claim their mate.

He was drawn from his reverie by the slight tremble of her hand in his

and the barely audible indrawn breath through her parted lips.

Eduardo could scent her arousal.

It was delicate and scented like spice.

Spice that he could taste on his tongue.

It would tide him over for a while, but not long.

He placed their joined hands against his chest and turned her so he could see her eyes.

"Come with me, kitten. Meet my people."

Eduardo saw the war of thoughts inside her head. He could feel her racing pulse through his hold on her hand.

Come.

He heard his jaguar purring through their link and wondered if the beast was as patient as he seemed.

It was quite the difference from the beast's insistent push that he'd felt as he held her while she was sleeping.

Now that she was awake and her hand was in his, his beast seemed calm enough to wait.

For the moment.

Come, human. Bring her to our prowl.

That was what he did.

CHAPTER FIVE

EDUARDO

The prowl came to the river, drawn by the pull of their own beasts.

He could feel their excitement and their joy as he brought Rosalicia closer to the water's edge.

As he brought her into the shade of the tall trees, he sensed her breathing change. That's when he knew that she'd become aware of their surroundings.

"It's beautiful." She sighed. "No, it's amazing. I've never seen anything this grand and wild."

Rosalicia tugged on his hand, bringing him closer.

His jaguar puffed up with pride.

She sought out the comfort that only he could give her, and before he could stop himself, his jaguar came closer to the surface and huffed out a comforting call.

She shivered as the sound played along her skin, but then she stilled as his people began to reveal themselves.

They stepped forward from the shade and out of the trees. The lush vegetation pushed aside to reveal even more.

"Oh."

Her hand squeezed his tighter and he reciprocated, giving her hand a gentle reassurance. There were just over thirty of his prowls standing before them. More had their jobs at the resort, but that accounted for most of the women and some of their men, but those who were in the rain forest, they had gathered to show their support.

"So many people," she breathed. "These people are your family?"

He knew that they weren't family in the way that she used the word, but

they were his family. They were his prowl.

"Yes."

When he saw Irenio step forward from the group, he turned to her. "This is Irenio, my oldest friend."

She tried to remove her hand from his, likely to offer it in greeting to his friend, but Eduardo was reluctant to let it go.

Urged on by his beast, he tightened his hold on her hand.

It wasn't a rational thought.

Irenio would never try to take his mate from him, but there was something elemental about his need to hold on to her.

To keep her at his side.

His people knew that he hadn't marked her yet.

They could scent her easily enough and they knew that his scent wasn't yet a part of her own.

Seeing his possessive hold on her would have been enough to tell them who she was.

Likely, Irenio would have spread the word that he'd found his mate.

By scent, they also knew that she was human so they would be on guard as to what they showed her until he signaled to them that it was appropriate to show their other forms.

They weren't accustomed to humans this deep into their lands. As his prowl, they would follow his lead in all things.

Proud of them beyond all reason, he leaned in and whispered into her ear. "They would like to meet you. Can I call them forward?"

Her breathing had changed again.

Shallow. Uneven. It caught in her throat when his lips brushed against the shell of her ear.

The scent of her arousal reached him and he had to grind his teeth together to keep himself from tumbling her to the ground.

His people would dissolve into the forest around them if that was the case, but she was still human and he knew that she would be innocent of their kind.

He had to hold back for her sake.

For her comfort.

His whole life-

His whole existence has changed because of her.

What he would have done before without a thought, he would now be

infinitely more thoughtful about.

"*Meu bem?*" He purred the words to her as he met her gaze with his own.

Smiling, he saw the need in her eyes as well as the way her nipples were pressing against the fabric of her top.

Growling under his breath, he turned so that he blocked her from the eyes of his prowl.

They all had the same preternaturally enhanced vision that all shifters had. They would have already seen her aroused state and they certainly would have smelled it.

Soft rumbling sounds came from the rough circle gathered in the clearing. He knew where the sounds came from.

The unmatched males of his prowl were reacting to her. As powerful as her aroused state was for him to scent, they were suffering from the scent.

She wasn't theirs, but the scent was like the sweetest berry to their senses. They hungered like he hungered.

A stir reached his ears and he turned to see what was wrong.

Claudio.

He could see the young man's mouth distorted in a growl.

His eyes shuttered and opened again, the darkness inside them said how close he was to shifting.

Eduardo saw Ireño turn to move and held back his own beast.

He wouldn't leave Rosalicia's side. He trusted his friend to protect her as well.

Claudio's body tensed and there were seconds left before he changed and Eduardo didn't want to frighten her now.

"*Parar!*"

His simple command of 'stop' was enough to still the crowd.

Turning his back to Rosalicia, he reached back to hold her behind him.

"*Ela será minha esposa.*"

Everyone in his prowl dropped down to a knee, even Claudio who was pale and sweating from his fight with his beast.

Later, he would speak to the young cat and tell him how proud he was at the fight he put up.

A hungry jaguar could be strong enough to overpower his human side in the presence of an aroused woman. Especially a beautiful, desirable woman like Rosalicia.

"Excuse me?"

Eduardo felt her tug on their joined hands and instinctively he held on.

"You big oaf!"

He heard the strident tone of her voice, but it took a moment for him to register that she was talking to him.

"I said... Excuse me!"

Before he could turn to her he felt something jab into his back.

Was that... a finger?

He released her hand and turned to face her, wondering what had happened.

Her eyes were fire.

Her brow a furrowed line.

And her lips, her beautiful, full lips, were pressed into a pinched, pale line.

"Rosa-"

"I. Am. Your. Wife?"

He shrugged.

"It is true, *meu docinho*."

"No!" She shook her head and glared at him. "I am not *your sweet anything!*"

He was taken aback by both her anger and the fact that she understood him.

"Você fala português?"

Her jaw tightened as she nodded. "Enough." She shook off his question. "So you thought you could just lie to your people because you thought I didn't understand your language?"

He took hold of her shoulders, but he eased his hold when her eyes flared in warning. "I do *not* lie to my people!"

"Oh? Really? You just told them that I'm your wife!"

He had nothing to say to that. It was true.

"You understood my words."

"I understand a lot of things."

He was prepared for her anger. He understood how she must feel, even though he hadn't meant anything hurtful.

Hearing the sadness, no, the resignation in her tone, cut deeply.

"Kitten, I-"

"No." She shook her head. "Don't."

She turned on her heel and started to walk away.

His beast clawed at him through their link.

"Rosa, please. Stop."

She turned and he felt the weight of her emotions pushing against him.

"What? What do you want from me?"

He wasn't sure she wanted to hear him answer.

"I told you that I left the resort because I'd just seen my fiancé and my sister..." She shuddered and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. "I thought you understood how I felt to have one deceitful man hurt me. Now, you say pretty things to me. You hold and comfort me and when you think I can't understand what you're saying, you tell your *people* that I'm going to be your wife?"

"Not that you asked me. And not that I'd want to marry anyone after what Tony did. Now, *you*." Shaking her head, her heart pounding like a frantic drum in his ears, she bit into her bottom lip, making a pale halo around her teeth in the lush curve. "I... I want to go back to the resort."

Her words hit Eduardo like a punch in the gut.

"You want to go back to him?"

Several emotions played over her features, but none of them were good.

"I want to see my father."

Eduardo reached out his hand to her. "Come, Rosa. I will take you back."

She drew back from his hand and the simple motion cut him deep. "I don't want you to."

It took him some time to react to her words. He didn't want to believe them.

But it didn't matter what he wanted.

It was how she felt.

"I... understand."

The look on her face said that she didn't believe him.

Even worse.

"May I send Irenio with you? He knows this area as well as I do, and he will be helpful in leading you back."

He saw her hesitate to accept his help.

He would do anything to assure her safety. Including begging. His pride had no place in his life when it came to her wellbeing. "Please, Rosalicia. Let me help you get back to your father."

Rosalicia looked at Irenio and nodded.

Eduardo didn't know why she agreed to accept his help but he was

grateful that she did.

"Thank you."

Rosalicia turned to Irenio. "Are you ready to go?"

Irenio stepped up beside her, gesturing toward the distant resort.

She nodded again, her shoulders raising and lowering with each breath before she looked at him. "Good bye."

They made it a few steps before she turned back.

Eduardo's heart pounded hopefully in his chest.

Had she changed her mind?

Her hands shook at her sides and she balled her hands into fists as she did. "I wish... I wish you'd talked to me first, Eduardo. No one wants to be the last one to know what everyone else expects you to do."

He stood there until he couldn't see them anymore and then he set out to fix what he'd broken.



ROSALICIA

When they saw the resort in the distance, Rosalicia tried to send Irenio back.

He stopped and she continued on walking until she heard something behind her.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw Irenio walking along, his gaze quietly watching the area around them as he had the rest of the way.

Rosalicia stopped facing him, and he stopped as well.

She took a step back and he took a step forward.

"Are you going to follow me all the way back?"

He nodded, still silent.

She almost laughed. "Is this because you don't want him to be mad at you?"

He shook his head. "Your safety is of the utmost importance."

Her brow furrowed over his comment. "No one is going to come after you if I get hurt. No one knows where I've gone."

"That's not true, *bonitinho*. I know where you've been."

Rosalicia turned around and stared back at her father, confused. "*Papai?*"

He held his arms out to her and she ran to him, crying.

Being held in his arms made her feel loved and comforted, but she didn't stay there long.

Swallowing down her pain, she stepped back and gave him what she hoped was a confident smile. "What are you doing out here?"

Her father shook his head. "I'm here looking for you."

Her eyes narrowed at him. "This far from the resort?"

He raised a questioning brow. "You should know by now that I would go to the ends of the earth for you. Coming into the rain forest? Child's play."

"We're not exactly on a well-marked trail."

"Remember the stories I used to tell you as a little girl?"

She smiled, thinking of the many nights where her father would tell her stories of his own childhood until she fell asleep.

"The stories of you in the forest? Of course."

He held out his arms and looked up into the trees. "This is the forest I told you about."

"Really?"

He nodded and gestured to Irenio. "What is your name?"

"Irenio. Irenio Martins."

"Martins?" Her father draped his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. "Was your father Joaquim or Luiz?"

Rosalicia watched as her companion for the last few hours looked askance at her father.

"Luiz. Joaquim is my *tio*."

She saw him look at her in surprise before he turned back to her father.

"How do you know them?"

Rosalicia looked up at her father and saw a shaft of bright sunlight turn the silver in his hair to a blinding crown of white gold.

What else didn't she know about him?

He gave her back a gentle, repetitive pat. "I grew up here in the rain forest." He leaned in against her shoulder.

"The resort is built on my family's land. Your father," he addressed Irenio, "and your uncle used to play with us in the forest. We'd climb trees and pick fruits when we weren't expected to help out our elders."

Rosalicia watched as Irenio's eyes widened and his lips parted in shock.

Watching him, she missed something that her father was saying.

"Did you hear that, Rosa?" He chuckled. "Irenio is a distant cousin of yours."

She turned to look at the man who'd walked her back toward the resort. Was a distant relation?

"Come, Irenio," her father waved for him to come closer, "come with us back to the resort. I've a few things to explain to my daughter and then we can share stories of your *pai* and *tio* before you go back to Eduardo."

"*Papai?*" Rosalicia stared up at her father in shock. "How did you-"

He pressed a kiss on the top of her head and gave her a mysterious smile. "Remember what I used to say to you when you would get into trouble and hide from your mother as a child?"

Rosalicia tried to hide her gaze from Irenio. She'd worked hard to put those childish acts behind her. Bringing them up in front of someone she just met?

It hurt more than a little.

"I remember." If he doubted her words, the blush on her cheeks would tell her father the truth.

Smiling, he turned to Irenio. "Don't think badly of my daughter. I think she believes that I was very upset with her back then."

Rosalicia wanted to speak and confirm his words because she did feel like he was upset with her. He'd stood by as her mother scolded her once her father found her in a hiding place.

"I was always a bit in awe of your rambunctious nature. It reminded me of myself as a child growing up here in Brazil."

"Then your daughter," Irenio looked between her and her father, "she has the blood."

"Yes, she has." Smiling, her father nodded. "Will you come back to the resort with us?"

Irenio seemed torn. He looked forward to the resort and back at the rainforest behind him. When he looked back, he shook his head. "I should return and-"

"Then later." Her father smiled.

Really smiled, leaving Rosalicia even more confused.

"There is a lot of food prepared. Come and bring the prowl."

Before Rosalicia could say anything, Irenio was gone, disappearing into the forest.

Her father turned his head down to look at her with a new brightness in his gaze.

"I see you've met our neighbors, *Princesa*."

She shook her head. "*Papai?* What are you saying?"

"Our people come from this land, Rosalicia."

"So you brought us here... for what?"

Her father turned and gestured through the forest. "Shall we walk?"

Rosalicia shook her head and smiled, matching her father's impish expression. "Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice, *Princesa*. Always."

She listened to her father and realized that he was right.

He was *always* right.

"Okay, let's walk."

CHAPTER SIX

ROSALICIA

They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes before she looked over at her father and let out a breath.

"I'm sorry I left the resort the way I did."

He turned his head to look at her and then turned back to watch the way ahead of them.

"I'm not."

"You're not?"

He put his hands behind his back, holding them together as they continued to walk. "No."

Frowning, she continued to walk, wondering what he meant.

"I should probably explain why I left."

He shrugged. "If you'd like to, go ahead."

Drawing in a deep breath, she explained as simply as she could. "I walked in on Jessenia and Tony... together."

She looked at her father out of the corner of her eye.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry that's how you had to find out, Rosa."

Her feet tripped over each other and she stopped dead.

He stopped a few steps ahead and turned back.

"You... you knew?"

He didn't keep her waiting for the truth.

"I've known for a while." He shook his head. "Your mother refused to listen to my concerns. She thought I was making up the stories because you are my favorite daughter."

Rosalicia put her hands against her chest over her heart. She could still

feel her heart beating even though she felt numb all over. "You knew?"

"I threatened Tony with his life if he continued the affair. I also told him that he should tell you the truth before we came to Brazil." He dropped his chin and spoke directly to her with his gaze fixed on hers. "He didn't listen, so I decided to punish him in a more fitting manner than death. I thought he should have your sister if he truly wants her."

To say that she was stunned was an understatement.

"What..." Rosalicia felt her knees go weak and so she sank down onto the ground. "What does that mean?"

Her father moved closer and sat down across from her, easily folding his legs together in his impressive suit.

"If you didn't find out before the day of the wedding, I would have told you before you walked down the aisle. It is my duty to give you over to a man worthy of you, my daughter."

"So you wouldn't have let me walk down the aisle?"

He shook his head. "I would have let you make the decision."

Her heart pounded against her hands like an automaton, beating just to push blood through her body.

When she looked back up into his face, he spoke again.

"Knowing what you know. Would you have me walk you down the aisle to him?"

She didn't have to think about it. She shook her head.

"No, *papai*. I wouldn't."

He smiled and reached out a hand to grasp her knee. He gave it a reassuring squeeze. "That's my girl."

She wanted to know the rest.

"So, what happened when I wasn't there at the wedding?"

His smile confused her, but he seemed so happy that she had to hear him tell the story.

"When you didn't arrive to marry Tony, your sister appeared at my side. She had a wedding dress on and your flower bouquet in her hands."

She ached at hearing the words. "She must have been a beautiful bride."

"Well," her father hedged, grimacing for a moment before continuing. "She thought that she would be the bride and had purchased her own dress for the event. Tell me, Rosa. Did you notice that nearly everyone on the guest list were Jessenia's friends and not yours?"

She immediately waved off the meaning of his words. "*Papai*, you know

that I rarely go out or see anyone. Mostly everyone I know are her friends when she invites them over to the house."

He nodded, agreeing with her.

"It seems that your sister had a grand plan for the wedding, Rosa. She intended it to be her own."

Rosalicia sat up, her back protesting as well as her heart. She finally understood why her sister had been so eager to help her plan.

"I always thought it was best to let her plan things as I don't like fine clothes and grand displays of flowers."

Her father nodded. "I remember the first time you saw your mother and sister cutting flowers from the garden to put into a vase. You cried thinking that they would die separated from their roots."

"I didn't know that they would die still attached to the plants back then."

"No," he nodded, "but you wanted the flowers to remain on the plant. You liked nature where it belonged. And I've always agreed with you."

"So," she hesitated for a moment, "Jessenia married Tony in my place?"

"*Calmate, Rosa. Calmate.* Let me tell my story."

Sighing, she relaxed and folded her hands in her lap, ready to listen.

"When your mother and sister started to plan your wedding, I had a feeling that there was something missing between you and Tony. That was when I started to pay closer attention.

"That was when I saw looks between Tony and Jessenia that didn't fit a man in love with you. They weren't very good at keeping their secret-

"And yet, I didn't see their lies."

"You were in love, Rosa. You thought that you had fallen in love with your childhood friend. Your emotion was pure. Your fiancé was not.

"And as you said, you didn't meet many people. You could not have known that there was something else out there. Someone else."

As he said the words, an image of Eduardo filled her head, and she felt his kiss against her neck.

Before she realized that she was moving, she'd lifted her hand to touch her neck where he'd kissed her.

"Interesting."

His softly spoken word turned her head and she saw his secretive smile.

"When I knew that he was untrue to you, I had a thought, an inspired one, if I do say so myself." His smile grew to a broad grin and Rosalicia realized that she hadn't seen him smile like that in a long time. "I thought to bring the

wedding here. I had a feeling that you might find a better man among the people here in Brazil. A man here in the place where I grew up. A place that I had always wanted to bring you to visit and later to live."

"So you built this resort? Our engagement wasn't that long."

"No, not for your wedding, but again, I had planned to bring you here so you could see where our family came from. And it was a way to make sure that members of the prowl could have jobs near to home."

She nodded slowly, but a thought sprung up into her head.

"Wait." She shook her head. "You didn't choose the venue for the wedding. That was all mom and Jessenia."

She saw him smile with a kind of childlike glee that made her frustrations ease just because she loved him so much.

"I left out a brochure on my desk and when your mother saw it she poured over the images and lists of expensive offerings at the resort and asked why I hadn't shown her the brochure earlier.

"I told her right then and there that it was out of the question. The resort was far too expensive. It was only an hour before I had your mother and your sister in my office demanding that we reserve the resort."

"Then the expense wasn't so much since you own the resort, but what about all of the plans for the wedding? You must be so disappointed at the waste."

"I have ways to use what was prepared. Don't you worry about it. My plan was always to make you happy."

She tried to smile and reassure him, but she didn't think she did her best. "Of course."

"Now, there was your sister, resplendent in a white silk gown with your mother at her elbow. They spoke in great volume about why I should let her marry Tony. After all, they had planned a brilliant day of celebrations and the guests were all there waiting to witness a wedding. Why should I care if the guests were happy and one of my daughters was happily married off?

"So I told them to wait and walked down the aisle to speak to the groom himself. Tony had a distinct look of fear on his face and I could smell how terrified he was."

Rosalicia thought it was a strange turn of a phrase, but who was she to complain?

"He told me that you'd seen them together but swore that he did love Jessenia and that he'd be a good husband to her."

He shook his head and huffed in a gesture that strangely reminded her of Eduardo.

"I don't think that he will be a good husband, but he wanted your sister..."

His tone almost made her smile. She would use that very tone as well when talking about her sister.

"So I offered him two choices.

"One. That he marry Jessenia and take her so far away from us that we would never see her again. While I think badly of Tony for his deception, Jessenia is your sister by blood. She should never have done what she did."

Rosalicia felt as though she was missing something, but she couldn't quite grasp it at the moment. She decided to put it in the back of her head and think through the problem later.

"I told him that I would give them money to live off of and that I would be very *generous* in the amount, but I expected to never see or hear from either one of them for the rest of their lives or I would then automatically give him the second choice."

Rosalicia's hands felt a little cold as she waited to hear the rest.

"The second choice was what I promised him earlier. Death."

"So they did marry."

"Yes."

She didn't know what to think of that, but she knew how it felt. Painful.

"They married a little while ago and they left before I came to find you."

She nodded and looked down at her hands, her fingers picking at the others as she tried to hide her disappointment.

"Why so sad, Rosa? Come. Tell your father."

"It sounds like you gave her her dream wedding."

"Rosalicia, my dear, there is something you should know about dreams."

She looked up to listen to him. He may have rewarded her sister, but he was still her father and she loved him with her whole heart.

"A dream can sometimes end up a nightmare. Hmm?" He gave her a wink. "She married in that beautiful room with all of her friends watching, but when it came time for the reception, there was no food and the expensive wine and champagne they ordered had been locked away.

"I only promised Tony and Jessenia a wedding.

"Their things had been packed and left under the portico of the resort. A cab had been called to take them to the airport and that's when I gave Tony a thick envelope and the assurance that they had been given a generous amount

of money to live on.

"Jessenia tore open the envelope in a fit of anger and a stream of dollar bills cascaded to the ground. Tony had the good sense to chase after them but your sister had the bad manners to throw a tantrum right there in front of her guests."

"Father..." Rosalicia gasped in a breath.

"It was more than she deserved for her actions."

"But she's your daughter, Papai."

"She's your mother's daughter, Rosalicia. When I met your mother, she already had a daughter and I fell in love with both of them.

"But the moment you were born, something changed in your sister. She seemed to hate you on sight and while I kept an eye on her behavior, I'm sure I didn't see or hear about everything she did to hurt you through the years.

"I am sorry for that."

"No, *papai*. You're not responsible for her behavior."

"I did love Jessenia, but over the years, she made it impossible to continue to feel that way about her. You are my only blood daughter and now, the only one in my heart."

Standing up, he held out his hand and she took it. With his help, she stood up and walked into his arms. "I love you, *papai*."

"And I love you, Rosa."

When she stepped back, he grasped her shoulders and held her still. "Now, I think you should come back to the resort and rest. A good long bath and a filling meal and you'll be ready for this evening."

She looked up at him, confused. "What's happening this evening?"

"Well," he grinned and turned, draping his arm around her shoulders, "I'm betting that Eduardo comes to talk to you and offer you his hand."

"Why would you think that?"

Her father lifted his face into the sun and smiled. "While I never met my true mate, *anjinho*. I believe you have... And we still have a magnificent meal ready to prepare."

She walked back to the resort with her father hoping that he wouldn't be disappointed when Eduardo didn't arrive like her father believed he would.

She wouldn't be disappointed by Eduardo's absence. Just because he'd shown her kindness and she'd felt at home asleep in his arms?

Just when she'd seen a light at the end of the sad turn her life had taken, it had spun around in another direction taking her breath with it.

How could it get any worse?

Walking beside her father, she turned to look at him. “When you said you’d grown up in Brazil, *papai*. I didn’t think you meant right here.”

He shrugged and just a hint of a smile touched his lips. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, or our family, Princesa. While we walk, I’ll tell you as much as I can.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

EDUARDO

Before Irenio returned, Eduardo had bathed and dressed, prepared to wage the sweetest kind of war that there is.

The battle for love.

Everyone from the prowl who had gathered by the river were waiting to go when he had bathed and dressed.

Instead of running through the forest, they were waiting by their cars and dressed to impress.

Even Cruz, who preferred not to wear a stitch of clothing if he could avoid it, had put on his best linen shirt and pants.

Still, he was barefoot beside the Jeep that his brother drove, his arms folded across his chest. "You should have marked her."

Eduardo glared at him. "We don't mark unwilling women."

Cruz' laughter was usually something he enjoyed hearing, but his thoughts were in such a turmoil that he needed to focus and think.

As the rest of the prowl climbed into their vehicles, it gave Eduardo a chance to speak to his friend in some kind of privacy.

Not complete, in any way. Everyone in their prowl could easily hear their quiet conversation.

Cruz crossed one foot over the other and leaned against the side of the Jeep. "Then you should learn from me, *El Rey*."

Eduardo wondered if he should let Cruz know that he might be picking his teeth up from the forest floor if he didn't stop poking his beast.

"The way I am with women, they'd welcome my mark. I have them breathless with pleasure half the night and the other half they sleep so that

they can have the energy to take me."

He'd heard of Cruz' conquests. Cruz liked to brag.

And brag loudly.

"If they'd welcome your mark, old friend," Eduardo gave him a pointed look, "then where is your mate? I don't see her here beside you."

It was perhaps a low blow, especially because he was the leader of their prowl, but Cruz repeatedly stepped over the line over and over again.

And Eduardo was still aching from Rosalicia's absence.

He was eager to visit the resort and to speak to her, but he didn't know what to say.

He'd half given up finding his mate when he'd nearly stumbled over her in the rain forest.

How perfect had that moment been?

Perfect until he realized that she was upset.

He wanted to soothe her.

He wanted to calm her.

He wanted to take care of her for the rest of their lives.

Love, his cat persisted.

Yes, love. Eduardo answered back.

Love. Honor. Cherish.

Eduardo was taken aback by the human phrase from his usually surly jaguar.

Surly, the cat snarled at him, *because we didn't have her.*

It was true.

The simple statement was as pithy, as it was depressing.

We need to go.

Eduardo found himself hesitating.

Go. Now!

A touch on his shoulder nearly made him snap and snarl at the man standing beside him.

Cruz.

The man was smiling like he always did.

"Come, *El Rey*. It's time to go."

Eduardo's lip pulled back to reveal his fangs. "Tread lightly, old friend. I'm on the edge and so is my beast."

"We can all see that, but I'm not trying to make a joke or poke fun at you, my friend. I want to help."

Eduardo arched a brow at his unusual offer. "How do you plan to do that?"

"By reminding you that she is your mate."

He narrowed his eyes at Cruz, quite ready to rip him to pieces if this was a joke at his expense.

"There is something inside of you calling to her. She likely feels the same pull. I want you to focus less on what you think you should say and call out to her with your soul."

Around them, the world grew quiet, as if nature knew that Eduardo's very happiness depended on what was about to happen.

When he lifted his gaze to take in his surroundings, he saw all of his people standing there. Watching him. Waiting for him to give them a sign.

They were all there for him.

For his mate.

They understood what this could mean for him and for their whole prowl.

It had been some time since a mating had happened. There were couples who were mated, but they had done so years in the past. Their own cubs were grown, but the single men vastly outnumbered the couples in his family.

It was as if their whole group was waiting for something to happen.

He knew that it was his duty to mate and hopefully father cubs to give them a new generation of jaguars in the rain forest.

No, none of that could happen if he didn't do something about it now.

Smiling at the circle of prowl members, he grabbed a hold of the Jeep's frame and climbed in.

He gave the dashboard a tap and looked at Irenio who was sitting in the driver's seat.

"Now, tell me what you heard again?"



ROSALICIA

Sitting on the edge of the prep table in the massive professional kitchen in the resort, Rosalicia watched as her father cooked alongside the kitchen workers who were all from the area.

She was still trying to grasp the idea of shapeshifters. That, and the fact that her father was one.

A jaguar, if she could trust her own eyes and the hands that touched his sleek coat before she'd nearly fainted.

Now, she was enjoying a sweet treat of fried plantains that her father was cooking for the staff.

She felt like she was in the throes of a strange and wonderful dream.

"Oh, I remember a story about your father."

An elderly woman named Morena sat at the end of the prep table with a basket full of graviola fruit on one side of her and a large basin full of the pale meat of the fruit before her on the table.

"You remember my father?" Rosalicia was curious to hear about her father.

To her, he was always larger than life.

Tall, with big broad shoulders, and a booming voice.

Thinking about it, she couldn't remember a time when she thought of him as anything but.

"Oh ho," Morena laughed, "I remember him very very well. He was a little scamp, you know."

"Oh?" Rosalicia slid off the end of the table and moved closer to Morena. "He was always so serious when I was growing up. I never thought that he'd be any different when he was a child."

Laughter made the rounds in the large, expansive kitchen.

Rosalicia moved to the side and washed her hands in one of the many sinks around the room. "What was the story you remembered?"

Morena leaned over to grasp another chair, but a young man that the women called Augusto ran over to lift the chair for her.

He followed Morena's gestures and sat the chair beside her.

"Come," Morena gestured, "I will tell you the story."

Rosalicia sat down beside the older woman and took up a cut section of the fruit and following Morena's practiced hands, she cut the spiny skin off of her own piece of fruit.

"If there was mischief about," she began, "your father, Henrique, was at the center of it."

"Now that's not exactly the truth," her father all but bellowed across the room, "you're making this into more than it was."

Rosalicia smiled as she discarded the skin into a trash bin and started to pull the seeds from the soft, white meat.

"How can you know that, Henrique?" Morena was almost laughing. "You

do not even know what story I was going to tell."

With a sigh and wave of his hand, her father went back to the stove and the large pan of hot oil. "With you," he scoffed, "they're always going to make me look like trouble."

Rosalicia couldn't even begin to fathom laughing with her father like this at their home.

He'd confided in her that his marriage to her mother hadn't been a loving one for some time.

She still didn't know that he was a shapeshifter.

Something that Rosalicia was still having a bit of a hard time understanding on her own, but here in Brazil, her father was a different man from who he was at home.

As strange as his revelations had been, Rosalicia far preferred her father's personality here.

It was probably in part due to the fact that he'd been able to divulge his secret to her.

Morena moved on to another piece of the fruit so Rosalicia tried to move faster to keep up.

"Henrique," she said the word almost as a sweet, good-natured taunt, "found that he liked to eat eggs."

Her father groaned and his chin dropped down to his chest. "Not this story."

"Yes," she laughed, "this story."

"And your father also heard that there were some men nearby who were running a cock fighting ring."

"Cock fighting?"

Raissa, one of the few younger woman from the prowl, yes, her father had explained quite a bit on the walk back to the resort, brought over an empty basin.

She placed it in front of Rosalicia and the two women shared a smile.

"Cock fighting is when grown men bet to see which rooster will win against another rooster."

Rosalicia continued to pull the seeds from the fruit, but her mind couldn't wrap itself around the idea.

"How does one rooster win?"

There was a moment of darkness that descended over the room as her father explained.

"They attach knives to the legs of the roosters and they slash and cut at each other until one... wins."

"That's... that's horrible."

Morena reached over and gave her a gentle pat on her arm. "That's what your father thought, too."

Her father went back to cooking as Morena continued the story.

"The men ran their games at a poultry farm."

Rosalicia nodded. "They likely felt that having a bunch of roosters around hens would work on a farm like that."

"Mmmhmm." The older woman nodded sagely. "And your father figured out a way to get some chickens to bring back with him and give those men a taste of how it felt to be clawed at."

Rosalicia almost dropped the fruit she had in her hands as Morena wove a story of a cock fight interrupted by a snarling, pouncing young jaguar with his tail swishing in the air.

Everyone in the kitchen continued working, but all other conversations stopped as they all listened to the tale.

By the expressions on their faces, Rosalicia knew she wasn't the only one hearing this story for the first time.

"The story still circulates in the villages and towns all over the area," Morena added. "They all talk about how the chickens, nearly half of the chickens from the farm, followed the jaguar into the forest. Not only did the men lose their jobs, but nearly all of them had to explain to their bosses about the loss smelling of pee, as they'd been scared silly by the demon cat that came from the shadows!"

Everyone laughed.

Well, everyone except for her father who tried to hide the smile on his lips.

"So no one cock fights around here anymore?"

Morena's expression sobered and she nodded. "No one. Over the years, the story gets more fanciful and more dark as well.

"To hear them tell it now, it wasn't a jaguar at all, but a dark creature from hell who hunts down men who play with their cocks."

The kitchen became quiet instantly.

Everyone in the room looked at each other.

Well, everyone except for her father.

He grumbled something under his breath and shook his head. "Really?"

They all burst out laughing, but no one more so than Rosalicia. She laughed until she was crying, tears glistening on her cheeks.

It was the most fun that she'd had in years, which said quite a lot.

It wasn't about being in Brazil or at a fancy resort.

It was about the people.

The prowl of Eduardo's people.

A man who she'd judged too harshly because of the actions of another man.

It was hard to imagine that just a day ago her world seemed so... simple.

And yet, it wasn't a reflection of who she was inside. The way she lived her life had been decided upon with the assumption that she was a woman who'd fallen for her best friend.

But he hadn't been her friend.

He couldn't be and sleep with her sister.

And Jessenia?

She'd been mean to her for so many years that Rosalicia couldn't remember when she'd been kind.

And now they were both gone and she had the opportunity to make new decisions for herself.

Decisions made with the knowledge that her father was a shapeshifter and Eduardo?

He just might be the missing part of herself that she'd always been waiting to find.

The raucous laughter and conversations in the kitchen stopped suddenly.

The noise dropping away to leave behind it the noises of a kitchen, but no voices on top of it.

Rosalicia looked up and saw that all eyes had turned toward the large swinging doors at the end of the room.

Sitting in her chair, with the scent of fresh fruit in the air, she saw Eduardo standing in the open doorway.

All of the air rushed out of her lungs as she saw him standing in the doorway.



EDUARDO

Seeing Rosalicia made him smile.

It made his jaguar purr like a kitten. Something he wasn't going to let the often surly beast forget.

"Rosa?" Her name was pulled from his lips before he'd intended to speak, but seeing the soft blush on her cheeks made his heart surge in his chest.

He saw a tall man in the room, just past Rosalicia and suspected that he was Rosa's father.

Irenio had explained what had been said when her father met them on the way back to the resort.

Knowing that her father was one of their kind meant that things could be more difficult.

Eduardo felt his jaguar raise its head and look at him through their link with a narrowed gaze.

Relax, he told the cat. I don't care how hard it is to be calm. You're going to do it.

The spotted shadow in his head hissed at him.

Hissed!

"Henrique Estrada." The older man lifted a brow, waiting for a response. "You must be Eduardo."

He nodded. Eduardo schooled his expression into something less severe than his normal scowl, but as he held out his hand to introduce himself to Rosalicia's father, Henrique stepped in and gave him a bear hug.

The way that the older man wrapped his arms around him, all Eduardo could do was endure the near-strangling embrace.

Henrique turned his face toward Eduardo's cheek.

I smell you all over her.

Eduardo's jaguar got to his feet, ready to tear through their link, but the strange crawl of metaphysical energy across his skin said that Henrique wasn't a shifter used to shifting.

In fact, he doubted that the man had taken the form of his beast more than a handful of times since Rosalicia was born.

Interesting.

Even more interesting was the fact that the man's beast wasn't nearly as powerful as his own, but he was making a show of power.

And yet, my daughter is still innocent. For that, you have my thanks. And my blessing.

A moment later, Eduardo could breathe again.

His jaguar had happily rolled onto his back and was sunning his belly.
Through their link, Eduardo scoffed at the creature.

Look at you.

Yes, it replied, look at me. Look at us!

Eduardo didn't know what to think, but when he saw Rosalicia giving him a hesitant smile he knew what to feel.

Love. Honor. Devotion.

He knew that Rosalicia would inspire a lifetime worth of those very feelings.



ROSALICIA

Her father spoke to Eduardo. She heard and saw it, but then her father embraced him in greeting, but she had a feeling that the few moments of silence was about something else all together.

“Henrique Estrada.” Eduardo repeated her father’s name. “My father used to tell me stories about you and how close you two were to each other as children.”

“I was sorry to hear that he’d passed.”

A strange shadow passed over Eduardo’s features. “He lived a happy life. He rests with my mother. They were always together from the day they met until it was their time. Always together.”

Her father’s face held a combination of emotions. “He found his mate? Lucky him.”

She heard the sadness in her father’s voice and had confirmation that her mother had never been ‘the one’ for her father.

Rosalicia was grateful for the life he’d given her and what he must have suffered with such a divisive person as his wife.

Eduardo darted a glance in her direction and moved further into the toward her.

"I'd like to speak with Rosalicia. I have apologies to offer her and promises to make."

"What's that?" Her father's deep and resonant voice was warm with happiness. "What is it that you feel you need to promise my daughter?"

Rosalicia got up from her chair and reached for a clean cloth that Raissa

handed her. "I think we should talk," she told her mate.

Before she reached his side, he held out his hand to her.

Rosalicia took the hand he offered her and smiled. "Where should we go?"

Eduardo paused and she remembered that the women said that he'd never been to the resort before.

It was Morena who seemed to have all the answers.

"Go to the conservatory," she suggested, "you'll have privacy out there."

Eduardo smiled and gestured to the door.

Rosalicia walked beside him and when he leaned across her to open the door, she whispered into his ear.

"At least as much privacy as one could hope for with a bunch of jaguar shifters all around us."

Then she walked through the door leaving Eduardo to gather up his thoughts and follow her.

She hoped it wasn't the last time that she left him speechless.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ROSALICIA

They stopped in the conservatory.

The room was over two stories tall. Its towering wall of spotless glass panels gave them the ability to look out from one incredible garden full of meticulously landscaped hot house blooms into a wild world of color and plants teeming with life.

At any other time, she would have been enthralled with either display, but not now.

Not when she had Eduardo to herself.

He gestured to a sofa piled high with thick, richly appointed cushions that looked more like one of the pillow palaces she'd built as a child.

But this moment wasn't nearly the same.

She wasn't alone here.

She had Eduardo, holding her hand and her heart in the deep, intense look of his eyes.

"Everyone said you were coming, but there was a part of me that said I was crazy to hope."

His eyes narrowed and his hand tightened around hers. "I would always come for you."

She blushed and then shook her head.

He moved closer, putting their joined hands on his thigh, so he could hold her one hand in two of his.

"You didn't think I would?"

His voice was softer than she expected it to be.

It felt strange to see his face twisted in pain.

No, not pain. Disappointment?

She didn't like the shadow darkening his expression.

Especially because she'd put it there.

"Would it make sense if I said I knew you would come here, but I wasn't sure whether I'd be ready for you?"

She shook her head.

No, that wasn't what she meant to say.

"For us?" She gestured with her free hand, struggling to find the words. "I don't know what to say to you."

"You don't have to talk right now," he almost smiled at her, "but I'd like you to listen."

"Is this about you being a shapeshifter?" While she waited for an answer, she bit into her bottom lip and willed her stomach to calm down.

He hesitated, but not for long.

"You... you know?"

She grinned, happy to surprise him in one way, but still unsure what all this would mean in the long run.

"My father. I knew he was from Brazil, but I didn't know that he was from," she cast a look out the window, "this very area. Since I came back to the resort, he has been explaining a lot to me."

His brow furrowed and he touched her, gently. "How are you... coping with it?"

Her brows lifted and she almost laughed out loud. Instead, a soft giggle was all she could manage.

"Truthfully?"

His eyes narrowed on her. "I'll always want the truth from you."

She nodded and a smile followed a heartbeat later. "I don't know if I'm coping at all. I keep thinking I'm coming to grips with all of this, but then there are moments where I think I might dissolve in maniacal laughter and end up in a sanitarium."

He lifted her hand to his lips and placed a slow, warm kiss on the back of her hand. Then he turned his head and rubbed his cheek against her skin.

The sound she heard in her head was a soft gravelly sound, but she could also feel it through the skin on the back of her hand.

It must have come from Eduardo.

Rather, it must come from his jaguar.

"Do I scare you, *meu bem*?"

“No.” The answer escaped her lips before she could think about it.

It was an answer from her heart.

Her soul.

He let out a sigh and she could almost feel his relief, as if it was her own.

Maybe it was.

Being a mate to a shapeshifter was as strange to her as walking on the moon. Well, maybe not. Before her trip to Brazil, she knew that people had walked on the moon.

“Maybe,” he lifted his head to pin his gaze to her own, “if I tell you how I feel, it will be easier for you to understand that what we have is real.”

She nodded.

Eduardo drew in a breath and slowly let it out. As he did, she felt his thumbs sweeping over the back of her hand.

"Let me start by explaining what I feel when I'm with you."

She watched his shoulders lift and drop with each breath and enjoyed the heat of her hand in his.

"I see you," he smiled, "and I feel joy."

Rosalicia heard the rasp in his breath and wondered if it was because he really felt the words.

"If you ask most of my prowl, they'd likely say that I'm a sullen man if they're worried about being harsh. If you ask my friends-

"Like Irenio?"

"Yes." He nodded. "Irenio and a few more of my friends would say that I have too much on my shoulders. That I worry more than I smile.

"They would be right about that. I do. But, there's a good reason for that. I've been, for lack of a better word, the leader of my people for more than ten years. Even though I wasn't a young man, I wasn't sure that I was ready for the responsibility and it weighed heavily on my shoulders.

"But these last few years, I've felt my beast become more and more restless. I've always had such a strong connection to him and I still do, but control?"

He sighed as he lifted her hand to his cheek.

Closing his eyes, he turned her hand. When he placed her palm against his face, she shivered at the tingling scratch she felt from the scruff of beard on his cheek.

"What does it feel like?"

Eduardo opened his eyes, fixing his gaze on her. "I'm not sure what you

mean."

Hesitating, she shook her head. "Never mind."

She tried to yank her hand back, but Eduardo wouldn't let go.

His gaze narrowed on hers, but it wasn't anger that she saw, or even frustration.

What she saw in the depths of his eyes was bottomless understanding.

A searching hunger.

A hunger she understood.

A hunger she felt matched what she felt deep down inside.

She may have believed that she'd been in love with Tony. Maybe she had been in love with him, but it was difficult to know that with his deception and callous acts still so fresh in her head.

But that hunger staring back at her?

She could feel it inside of her soul.

"I think..."

Rosalicia shook her head and changed her words.

"I feel like I understand what you're feeling."

His dark brows lifted as he continued to watch her.

"Inside me," she touched the fingers of her free hand to her chest, "I felt that something was wrong. I felt like... if I just got through the wedding, then everything would be fine after.

"When I went to see him the day we arrived, I wanted to see him and reassure myself. I wanted to talk to him and make sure that we were still on the right page.

"I feel something for you."

She continued on quickly because those words seemed too small.

"It started with surprise," she explained. "You were there when I felt more alone than I'd ever been, but when I saw you... when I heard you speak... when I felt your touch, the world changed.

"I changed."

She swallowed, trying to calm herself and clear her throat.

"The more time that I spent with you," Rosalicia leaned into his touch, "it felt like everything inside of me was trying to connect with you. Like if it could, my soul would burst out of me into your arms."

She smiled, startled at her own admission.

"Is that what it feels like? Your... beast?"

He smiled. "He's preening right now." Eduardo licked his lips and her

blood heated by degrees like it was sitting over heat. "He likes that you think he's a beast."

"Isn't he? You call him one."

He shrugged. "He'd be whatever you want him to be, *minha gatinha*. He'd be ferocious to make you happy. Or he could be as easy as a kitten. Just for you. Right now," he was so close that she was sure she could feel his pulse if they weren't touching each other, "all he wants is to be close enough for you to touch him."

"Can he feel me touching you?"

Eduardo's voice was strained when he answered her.

"Yes. He already can see you through my eyes."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

His voice deepened and something like static electricity crawled over her skin. "Watch this."

She wanted to ask, 'Watch what?'

But then she saw it.

His eyes.

No... those weren't Eduardo's eyes.

They'd gone dark.

Fathomless.

She blinked slowly and reached her free hand over to pinch at her arm.

She was awake.

It was incredible, as if she was staring into another consciousness.

Smiling, she drew in a breath. She would have laughed at herself if she could.

She really was staring into another consciousness.

Eduardo's jaguar.

Rosalicia lifted her free hand and touched Eduardo's chest, her palm flattening over his heart.

"Can you... feel that?"

His eyes narrowed and she felt air on her face, soft puffs of it.

"I guess you can."

Keeping her gaze on his face, she drew her hand free of his and with both of her hands, she moved them over his chest and then his face.

The sound that reached her ears was like the purring of a large, classic car engine.

The vibrations alone made her shiver.

"I wonder," her voice was barely a whisper, "if you like what you see?"
In a split second, Eduardo was there, looking out from his own eyes again.

He shook his head. "Careful, *meu bem*. You can't tempt him like that."

"Tempt him?" Her brow furrowed. "To do what?"

There was only a fraction of a heartbeat for her to even try to grasp what was happening before he snaked a hand around to the nape of her neck.

Then his lips found hers and she was suddenly grateful for temptation.

CHAPTER NINE

EDUARDO

It turned out that temptation was good for the two of them.

Eduardo and Rosalicia spent their days getting to know his people... she called them hers, too.

And while her father seemed eager to get his daughter married to her fated mate, Eduardo wasn't interested in pushing her in that direction.

He was enjoying the evolution of their relationship.

Seeing the rainforest through her eyes had given him a new appreciation for the lush beauty that was his home.

And hers.

His jaguar rolled onto his back and batted at their link with his paws.

He enjoyed thinking of Rosalicia. His jaguar liked everything about his mate.

The way she smiled.

The way she laughed.

And today, he was finally getting his chance to come out and play.

It wasn't that Eduardo was afraid that his mate would react badly to his jaguar, he was afraid of his beast.

The more time that Eduardo spent with Rosalicia, he was able to tame his beast a little more. Now, he wasn't literally chomping at the bit to meet her.

Eduardo no longer felt the keen pain of desperation when he was near his mate. Together, he and the beast had fought off the maddening urge to claim her.

She needed time. They'd known that instinctually, but now, it was Rosalicia who was doing more than showing an interest in taking the leap in

being together. She had asked him to claim her.

His jaguar was on his paws and crouched down in the shadows, baring his teeth in a heart pounding snarl.

Calmate. She is ours.

He swore his jaguar rolled his eyes at the entreaty, but there wasn't time to scold the massive beast, as they had company.

Now it was his jaguar's turn to give the same admonishment to him.

Calmate. She is ours.

Eduardo was on his feet, his hands smoothing his clothing knowing that it wasn't needed.

Rosalicia didn't care what he wore.

And he... he couldn't wait to see her bare before him.

A sight that he'd dreamed of.

She came into sight as she stepped through a break in the vegetation of the rain forest. Her clothing had changed in the time that she'd been in Brazil. Instead of clothing with designer labels that had been more of her mother's choice than hers, Rosalicia wore the loose fitting cotton and linen blouses, skirts, and pants that fit the hotter, humid weather.

When she reached him, she smiled up at him and a soft and playful wind lifted the ends of her hair.

"You're beautiful."

Eduardo smiled and shook his head. "That's what I was going to tell you."

His jaguar narrowed his dark eyes and snarled at him. *You should do better than beautiful when you speak to our mate.*

When his smile grew, so did hers.

"What is he saying to you?"

Rosalicia's question didn't surprise him. Gone was the woman who was as quiet and reserved as she was beautiful.

Her soul, her very spirit, had blossomed like the bright and vivid flowers of the forest.

"He says I should do better than just beautiful when I compliment you."

She shook her head and leaned into him, her hands flattened on his chest. "You know I don't need pretty words."

"You like the truth."

"And so do you," she rose up on her toes and brushed her lips across his, "and the truth is that I've never felt as beautiful as when you look at me just the way you are now."

He leaned in and covered her lips with his.

She opened her mouth under his and her hands fisted in the cool cotton of his shirt.

Eduardo filled his hands with her hair, threading his fingers through the wavy mass, and turned her head so he could delve into her mouth with his tongue.

She whimpered and his jaguar purred deep in his throat.

Yes.

His beast was more than happy with her taste, but Eduardo knew that the beast wanted more.

How did he know?

Well, he was just as enamored with his mate as his beast, Eduardo just had to be sure.

He held her head still with his hands in her hair as he broke his lips away from hers.

The look in her eyes was hazy and hungry, but he had to know. "Rosa? Rosa, talk to me."

She seemed to break free of her dream-like state with an indrawn gasp and a sigh. "What do you want to talk about?"

"You."

He saw her smile.

"And you?" She wondered aloud.

He smiled back. "Us."

Her expression changed, her eyes darkening as her arousal came to the fore. "I like that. Us."

"Are you sure, Rosa?"

She stepped back, her eyes glittering with the light of the sun. "I want to be yours in every way, Eduardo. You've given me the time to get to know you, and that was the greatest gift I've ever received."

He felt his voice deepen, crawling from his throat like a jaguar through the shadows. "You'll have more than that, Rosa. I'll give you the world if you want it."

"I don't need the world." She shook her head and held out her hand. "I need you. *Você é o mundo para mim.*"

His chest swelled with joy and pride at her words. She'd never spoken much Portuguese through her life, but she'd been speaking it with the prowl and her father. She was becoming incredibly fluent in his native language.

Hearing her say that he was her world humbled him beyond all words.

"I will do everything I can to be worthy of your love, Rosa. Everything. I. Can."

"It's not that hard," she smiled at him, "I just want you. And now," she lifted her chin and looked him straight in his eyes, "I want to see your beast, Eduardo."

Hearing the words so plainly spoken nearly brought him to his knees, but it was his beast who kept him standing.

Let me out.

The voice in his head trembled with anticipation.

I want to feel her hands on me.

It was nearly impossible to surrender his form to his cat. At first, he'd told himself it was to protect her from the eager beast, but now he was coming to terms with the fact that he was the one more dangerous at the moment.

He didn't want to give up his form and let the beast out.

"Eduardo?"

It was the look on her face that changed his mind.

Or rather, it made the decision for him.

The entreaty on her face was his undoing.

He wasn't going to let her worry that he was hesitating or changing his mind.

With a single thought, he lowered the barrier to his cat and as he felt the air around him swell and buckle, he found himself a foot or so shorter than he'd been a heartbeat ago.

He could feel the rush of emotions of his jaguar, but he was somewhat in the backseat.

Muscles bowed and stretched.

His voice had been silenced for the moment, but he didn't struggle or worry.

His jaguar knew as much as he did, the importance of Rosalicia, to both of them.

The purr that filled the air around them had the rough edge of a four-legged animal instead of a human throat.

All that was left to do was for him to sit back and hope his jaguar didn't send her running through the forest back to her father.

A wave of disgust rolled over him, pushing him down on his metaphorical back.

He was being told to shhh in something more or less in the way he spoke to his cat when he was the corporeal side of their form.

He didn't argue or fight for control.

No, this was his jaguar's chance to come face to face with their mate.

The first meeting of many.

They had the rest of their lives, and he intended to make the most of it.



ROSALICIA

It was a miracle.

Astounding.

One moment Eduardo was there and the next, no, not even a moment later, he was gone and in his place stood the largest jaguar she'd ever seen.

"Wow."

Yes, she *was* that articulate.

"Incredible."

See?

She'd already talked to Eduardo at length about his beast. She didn't want to make an utter fool of herself, but as she was finally face to face with the massive cat she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep from losing a bit of her mind just standing there with it.

She lowered her chin just a hint and looked into his eyes.

"Crazy, isn't it? I feel like I know you, but... No. I know you."

The eyes looking back at her were familiar. She'd seen his cat looking back at her more than a few times.

More than a dozen.

Maybe more.

And now, it was looking back at her in his own form.

The head of the cat dropped a little and turned slightly to the side.

"Pets?" She giggled. "I think I can do that."

Reaching out one hand at first, she touched her fingertips to the top of the cat's head.

"Oh, wow."

It was like silk, but a little scratchy. Which probably didn't make a lick of sense, but that's what it was.

She laid her hand flat on the top of his head.

The cat made a sound, and she almost laughed. It was a sound she'd heard before, but not with this magnificent beast under her hand.

She set her second hand beside the first, and together, she moved her hands over the spots. Her hands skating over his fur and her fingers tracing the irregular spots as if she could memorize them.

A deep, growling purr met her ears as she laid her cheek on the top of his head.

"You're a giant. I know Eduardo said that you'd be much larger than regular jaguars, but I had no idea you'd be the size of a mountain."

The jaguar lifted his head in a movement that looked decidedly like Eduardo. The cat's chest expanded and his shoulders became a broad wall of muscle and bone.

"Who could imagine how amazing you are?"

The look in the cat's eyes changed and she saw Eduardo looking back at her.

"I feel like I'm on something... something really good." She laughed out loud. "Okay, okay. Come back, *meu amor*. I need your arms around me."

She swallowed instinctually as she felt the pressure in her ears change. A moment later, she felt the bubble of pressure burst around her.

Rosalicia saw a rush of movement and then she was on her back.

No, she didn't hurt herself falling over, but she was most certainly in Eduardo's capable embrace.

The blue sky fought with the shifting canopy of leaves over her head to fill her vision. But then all she could see was him.

Rosalicia lifted her hands to cup his face. "So handsome, *meu amor*. My love. My mate."

He covered her mouth with his.

No, not quite.

It felt like he ate the endearment from her lips.

Rosalicia felt his teeth drag over her flesh and his tongue swept over her lips as if he could taste the sentiment.

"Mate." He looked into her eyes, his own flickered back and forth from his dark human eyes to the depthless shimmer of his beast. "I'll never tire of you saying that."

She arched beneath him, her arms wrapping around his neck.

His gaze shifted again and she was looking at the man she loved.

Love.

It filled her and threatened to spill over the edges of her soul like a glass filled with wine.

And made her nearly giddy with intoxication.

"I'll never tire of you."

"But, Rosa," her name in his voice made her shiver, "you haven't had me yet."

Yet.

The word made her tremble with anticipation.

"Do you know what I dream about when we're apart?"

He laid her gently on the ground, freeing his hands.

She shook her head.

"I dream of all of the beautiful parts of these lands that I will get to show you. I think of the fruits that we can pick. The same fruits that I'll feed to you from my fingers. And," he licked his lips and she felt hot all over, "I'll drink their juices from your skin. I'll taste you... everywhere."

A soft, indrawn gasp was all she could manage for a moment.

Then he rose up over her, looking directly down into her eyes.

"Is that what you want, Rosa? Will you let me taste you all over?"

She knew she was ready to give herself over into his care.

And his passion.

"Yes."

CHAPTER TEN

EDUARDO

He felt her surrender, but it wasn't a loss.

It was joy.

It was love.

It was everything.

His kiss trailed down her throat and he hesitated a moment at the place where her neck met her shoulder.

He could scent her skin, but he could also scent her life's blood just beneath the surface.

His dick jumped, and he felt it touch her thigh, but it wasn't near enough.

"Your clothes." His voice was heavy with the weight of his cat pressing against their link. "They're still on."

He lifted his head to look at her, and she looked back.

What he saw in her eyes was heat and hunger.

For him.

For what they would be.

"I want to feel you bare beneath me, Rosa. Can I-"

His little innocent shocked him when she wiggled her hands between them and lifted the hem of her blouse.

Her anxious grumble reached his ears.

It couldn't be easy with him pressing down on top of her.

"Here," he hushed her with his deep voice, "let me help."

He managed to strip her blouse from her body and when he dropped it beside them, he found himself humbled by her beauty.

"So lovely."

He saw her skin react to his heated breath, the tiniest little bumps rose where it touched.

It was wonderful... marvelous.

But the texture of her skin paled in comparison to the glory of her breasts.

They were round and tipped with nipples just a few shades darker than her skin.

He heard the change in her breathing as his gaze traced over her delicate curves. "I wonder," he exhaled as he spoke, his breath ghosting across her skin, "if they taste as luscious as they look."

Eduardo flickered a look at her face and saw that she was watching him as intently as he was studying her body.

Wetting his tongue inside his mouth, he leaned over, and gently parting his lips, he closed them over the tip of her breast.

Her indrawn breath and the way her hands moved restlessly between them, he knew that she was aroused.

The way her nipple pebbled in his mouth made him smile and that movement of his mouth must have intensified the sensations that she was feeling.

Arching beneath him, she fed her breast into his mouth. All he had to do was open his lips and draw her in deeper.

The taste of her skin, the light sheen of sweat from the sun, it mixed on his tongue and made him hunger for more.

He used his tongue against her nipple, feeling the scratch of heated flesh against hers.

He could feast on her for days and days.

Then she moved beneath him and his hunger only deepened.

Eduardo turned his attention to her other breast, his fingers coming up to pinch and gently roll her swollen flesh.

Rosalicia's hands moved nervously against him. It felt like she couldn't figure out where to set them or where to grab a hold. They reminded him of the tyrannulet bird flitting from one branch to another in the forest.

He slipped his free hand past her waistband and moved his fingers across her silken skin.

Eduardo was well aware that his hand and fingers moved over her belly where their cubs would grow. And when his fingers slipped through her curls, her legs fell open but there was only so much room with the rest of her clothes still on.

Pulling his mouth from her breast, he smiled at the slick sheen that he left on her skin. He kissed the gently sloping valley between her delicate breasts and tucked his fingers into her waistband, and drew it down over her hips.

"So beautiful."

He meant it and more.

Her skin was as delicate as he'd ever seen, but there was a strength inside of her. And it was that strength that called to him.

When she lifted her hips so he could pull it off of her body, his gaze was full of her naked flesh and he was desperate to see every inch of her beauty.

As he tugged the fabric off of her legs, he leaned over again and again, touching kisses to her thigh and the inside of her knee.

When he got to her ankle, his gaze moved across her skin as his fingers easily circled it, holding it still. Turning his gaze toward her face, Eduardo saw her eyes widen slightly.

He brushed his lips against the inside of her ankle, and her leg twitched. She would have pulled away, if he didn't hold her still.

Smiling to himself, he opened his mouth and darted his tongue out to taste her.

A soft, throaty groan reached his ears and his cat echoed the sound from deep inside his soul.

He swept his tongue in the other direction and stopped when he found a place where her pulse was just beneath the surface of her skin.

There, he fixed his mouth and gently sucked on her skin.

Bare before him, her knees fell open, and he got his first tantalizing view of her sex.

He was already hard, but seeing the glistening pink perfection at the apex of her thighs made him harder, heavily so.

Eduardo huffed out a breath from his lips and the brush of his breath against the slick skin of her ankle made her cry out.

He turned, still on his knees, and wrapped his hand around his cock.

Rosalicia's eyes widened at the sight, but it wasn't fear or trepidation he saw in her eyes.

It was arousal and a keen anticipation that he'd seen after she'd had her first taste of the cagaita fruit and immediately leaned in for another bite.

He'd love to see her lips, plumped from his kisses, wrapped around his cock, but not at that moment.

He wanted his first taste of her.

Eduardo gave his cock one long, sweeping stroke before he dropped down so he was on his hands and knees, looking at her along the length of her body.

Her breath caught in her lungs as his mouth curled in a smile and he leaned in to her sex.

Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep breath, bathing in the sweetness of her arousal and her own unique scent.

Leaning in closer, he nudged his nose against her folds and then tipped his chin down as he swept his tongue through her pussy.

He did it again, lapping at her sex like a cat hungry for milk.

"Ohhh..."

Her voice reached his ears and he tipped his head back a little to see her.

Her hands, those amazing hands that he loved to feel on his skin, were on her own.

Fingers pressed against the soft curve of her belly and drawing up toward her breasts.

He lifted his mouth from her for a moment. "Yes, Rosa. Touch yourself. Let me watch."

Her gaze lowered to his and as they watched each other, he continued to lave at her folds, drinking in her heat. Rosalicia's cheeks turned a deep red as her fingers brushed over her nipples.

"Ahh..."

Her hips raised and her thighs pressed against his head.

"Oh! Sorry, I-"

He cut off her apology when he lifted his nose through her silken curls and fixed his lips over her clit.

"I... I... That feels so amazing."

You, he tried to speak to her through their physical connection, *feel just as amazing*.

Her hips lifted, pressing against his lips and he had to wonder if some part of her *had* heard him.

As soon as he mated with her, as soon as he marked her, they would have the deeper connection that he desired.

But he wanted her to have her release first.

He would always want her to be first to show her the place she held in his heart and his hunger.

Crouching between her legs, he slipped his hands beneath her and

grasped the sweet curve of her ass, lifting her toward his mouth.

Eduardo saw the look in her eyes, the slightly widened stare and knew that she must see how his beard and lips were slick with her arousal.

Watch me. Again, he hoped she would hear his words. *Watch me take you.* He narrowed his eyes. *With my tongue.*

And then he did.

He kissed her folds, spread them apart and then penetrated her sex with his tongue.

Eduardo changed back and forth between that and bathing her clit, knowing that he was building her arousal to the point of breaking.

He watched her from his vantage point. Saw her touch her breasts, fondle her nipples.

He doubted that she was conscious of all the sounds she was making, or the way her body moved in the most amazing and sensual ways.

But she did know when he brought her over the edge.

Her keening cry.

The way her eyes flew open and her gaze met his with a startled stare.

He drank down her orgasm, lapping at every part of her sex that he could reach. Tasting it... Savoring it as he gently lowered her to the ground.

He felt a familiar pressure in his lower back and the heavy bob of his cock. He wanted to fill her. Fuck her. Mate her. It was more than physiological.

It was elemental.

It was fated.

"It's bigger."

Her voice was softer, but he didn't hear fear in it.

He heard anticipation.

"Will... will it fit?"

He willed himself not to laugh, even though it would have only been a rough, scratchy sound. He didn't want her to think her concern was trivial.

"It will fit, Rosa."

The look in her eyes was easy to read. *Are you sure?*

"It will fit because you were meant to be loved by me. You were meant to be mine as I was meant to be yours. And it will fit because how else will I give you the children we're fated to have."

They'd talked about it before... The children she wanted to have and she was almost shocked that he wanted them as well.

It was something her ex-fiancé had wanted to put off indefinitely. Another reason why she never should have been with him in the first place.

She is ours now. Take her, human. Mate her.

He smiled and drew her closer, folding his knees beneath him as he leaned over. He put the head of his cock at the apex of her thighs and used his hand to sweep the swollen head through the slick folds of her sex.

He groaned deep in his throat.

"It... It feels," Eduardo tipped his head back as he moved his cockhead back and forth, "it feels like you're kissing it."

Her sharp intake of breath forced him to open his eyes. He stilled his hand and looked at her. "Rosa?"

"I'd like to," she paused, "kiss it, I mean."

The muscles low in his abdomen flexed and tensed at her innocent comment.

His cat growled with a hunger that was audible in his throat. "You will, Rosa... later."

There was no way that he could have her mouth on him now and not lose his damn mind.

Her smile tied him up in knots, but he couldn't wait to feel her body wrapped around him and to finally make her his, body and soul.

Bracing one hand on the ground at her shoulder, he leaned in and gave her a searching kiss, pausing only to remind her, "Can you taste it, Rosa? Can you taste yourself on my lips? On my tongue?"

Before she could answer him, he swept his tongue back in her mouth, relishing in the way her tongue moved against his.

As he seduced her with his mouth, he fit himself between her folds. He was just about to slide into her when she lifted her hips and locked her ankles at his back, pulling him inside.

He held still, trying to decide how far to go, but she answered his unspoken question.

"More." She turned her head to the side and rocked her heels against his back, Rosalicia lifted her hips so he could slide in further. "I want it all, Eduardo. I want you."

"I'm trying to go slow, Rosa. I'm doing my best."

"Then take me." She met his gaze, biting into her bottom lip for a second. "Make me yours so we can start our life together."

How could he argue with that?



ROSALICIA

He took her breath away.

In one deep stroke Eduardo was buried inside of her.

She let out a slow breath as her body quickly adjusted to his size and the weight of his body on top of her own.

Rosalicia closed her eyes and smiled. "I've never imagined that it would feel so... perfect." She opened her eyes and saw him over her. Felt the hard thickness of his cock inside her.

Squeezing him with the walls of her sex, she heard him groan and under his breath, he grumbled words she didn't understand.

But the look in his eyes was unmistakable.

He wanted her.

And she was more than ready for him.

Bracing his arms by her shoulders, he pulled back, dragging his cock through her sex, stretching and easing its passage as he went.

When she felt him nearly pull free, she reached out her hands and grasped his arms. She didn't want to let him go.

He smiled down at her. "*Calmate*, Rosa. I'm not leaving you. Never."

She held onto his arms, holding onto him for support, her eyes fixed on his until-

Oh.

He sank into her over and over. She felt him stretch her with every thrust and when he reached the bottom, he moved his hips, grinding his body against hers in just the right way.

She was breathless in moments.

The rhythm that he set was relentless and she loved it.

She loved him.

She loved everything that their lives were going to be together.

The humidity of the air clung to her skin and when he bent over her, hitching her legs higher on his waist, she felt the first heavy drip of sweat fall on her chest.

His sweat mingled with hers and with him bent over her, she could reach her hands to his back and her nails bit into his flesh.

He hissed and doubled his efforts, pounding into her body.

It was incredible

Life changing.

"I love you, Rosa."

She pulled from her heart and soul when she answered him back, telling him that he was the world to her. "*Você é o mundo para mim.*"

At her use of his native tongue, she saw a distinct change in his expression. His jaw hardened. His eyes darkened. And he drove into her until she couldn't seem to catch her breath.

The world around her seemed to go silent, but everything inside of her was alive and aching for the release that she was about to reach.

He braced on one arm and snaked a hand between them.

She didn't expect the deft control of his fingers, but once he touched her clit, he put pressure in just the right place and-

She called out his name, sending the birds in the trees above them soaring into the sky.

Her whole body shuddered and bucked beneath Eduardo, in the throes of an orgasm unlike any she'd ever given herself.

And it kept coming.

Waves and waves of energy rolling through her as Eduardo built up to his own.

She could feel it in the tension driving through his muscles.

She could see it in the strained lines of his face.

Rosalicia wanted to help him find his release, but she didn't know how.

She reached out her hand and pressed her palm against his heart.

It felt like electricity arcing between them from her skin to his.

He reared back for a moment, and when his eyes met hers she saw the world looking back at her. His eyes and his jaguar's blended and shimmering with some kind of preternatural magic as old as the earth itself.

Eduardo leaned down, nuzzling his lips against her neck.

It took the gentle touch of his lips against her skin and the hard thrust of his cock inside of her that threw him over the edge of the precipice.

His body erupted inside of her and her body drank him in. Just when she felt that she had reached the pinnacle of ecstasy, she felt Eduardo bite into her flesh.

His teeth pierced her at the juncture of her neck and shoulder, but instead of crying out in pain, her voice was filled with joy.

He'd made her his.

His wife.

His mate.

And the mother to future cubs that would help revitalize their prowl.

Yes. *Their* prowl.

She'd finally found where she was meant to be.

In Eduardo's arms.

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

FOUR YEARS LATER

Rosalicia sat back against her husband as their children played in the grass. It was hard to imagine that just a few years before, she'd been teetering on the edge of despair when she'd met her mate.

Eduardo must have sensed her thoughts as he reached an arm around her and rubbed at her rounded belly.

Little Morena, named after the shifter who had become like a mother to Rosalicia, danced along the edge of the river, followed by one of her brothers.

Morena sang up into the trees and a score of birds answered her back.

"I wish I had been like her when I was younger." Her words were tentative.

Wistful.

"I was always worried about what my mother would think."

Shifting behind her, Eduardo placed a kiss along the shell of her ear before he spoke.

"I wish I could change those years for you, *meu bem*."

She shifted and half-turned to look at him, stroking his cheek with her hand.

Rosalicia smiled when he leaned into her touch.

And that's when she heard the deep and growly voice in her head.

Ours. Mate.

Leaning closer, she pressed her forehead to Eduardo's and smiled.

Yours. Yes.

When she sat back and looked into her mate's eyes she felt a well of love

overflowing inside of her.

"I don't want to fix those years." She shook her head. "I don't want to forget the pain that my sister caused me or my mother turning her back on me either. I want to remember them because it makes me so very grateful for what I have now."

She licked her lips before leaning in for a kiss.

A kiss that her mate was more than happy to give her and deepen until she was breathless.

But their child inside of her was only too happy to put some distance between them with a swift kick against Eduardo's chest.

Laughing, Rosalicia rubbed her hand over her belly. "Sorry."

"I'm not." Eduardo placed his hand beside hers on her stomach. "Another fierce jaguar cub protecting his mother."

She narrowed her gaze at Eduardo. "His?"

He shrugged. "We have two girls and a boy," he spoke to her softly, "it might be nice to not be outnumbered."

"What's this, I hear?"

Rosalicia grinned at her father as he sat down nearby, her youngest daughter in his arms. "Eduardo wants a boy to balance out the family."

Her father's eyes were full of mirth. "If you have another girl, he should be so lucky." Her father reached out a hand and rubbed a knuckle against her cheek. "I am so proud of my girl."

Eduardo gathered her close against his chest. "If we do have another girl," he rubbed his hand on her hip, "then we'll just have to try again."

She turned to him with a slightly wicked look in her eyes. "You don't seem to mind the trying."

He turned her face toward him and took her mouth in a hungry kiss.

Another kick pushed Eduardo away an inch and their youngest woke up in her grandfather's arms, crying for her mother.

Rosalicia reached out and took the baby in her arms, but instead of moving to sit beside Eduardo on the blanket, her mate held her on his lap.

"I'll go watch the others," her father volunteered and stood to do just that.

When he had his back turned, Eduardo reached up to her shoulder to release the ties, and the fabric fell to her waist, baring her breast.

As she brought the babe up to her nipple, the little one nuzzled at her mother's breast before pulling it into her mouth.

Rosalicia turned to look at Eduardo, who was enjoying the scene before

him with unabashed happiness.

"I could have done that," she told her mate.

"I know." He trailed the tips of his fingers along her bare shoulder. "I just wanted to help."

She heard the laugh in his voice and slightly shook her head.

"You don't believe me, mate?"

She heard the slight bite in his words, but it wasn't anger she heard. It was humor and anticipation. In the time that they'd been together, Eduardo had learned to laugh much more and take time to have fun.

And the prowl approved wholeheartedly.

The leader they had before had been good. They all respected him, but now, with his growing family, the prowl loved him as well.

Loved his family and the new life they'd brought to the prowl.

Others in the group were finding their mates as well, some human, some shifters, but all found their happiness in the rain forest.

Eduardo rubbed his fingertips against the crown of the baby's head, tousling her thick, black hair.

"Just you wait until we're alone," his mouth curved into a catlike grin, "I'll show you how much of a help I can be."

As if she needed confirmation about what he intended to 'help with,' she felt his cock harden against her curves.

"Thank you, Eduardo."

Confused, he shook his head and then looked at her with an intensity that never failed to send shivers all over her body. "For?"

"For being patient with me. I was still shaken when we met, unsure what was happening to me and my heart. You gave me the time to understand who I was and what I wanted.

"I'll never forget how gentle you were with me. How giving."

"I would give you the world, Rosa." He lifted his hand to cup the side of her face. "If it is in my power, you only have to ask."

Rosa looked down at their infant as she fed at her breast, tears welling in her eyes.

Eduardo wasted no time in brushing away her tears and she could only smile at him and sigh.

"You've given me your heart and your soul. You've given me a loving home and our amazing children. You *have* given me the world."

He reached out and took her hand in his. "I'll do anything to make you

and our children happy and healthy." His voice was rough with emotion. "I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, because here," he squeezed her hand gently, "is where fate led me."

GLOSSARY

anjinho - little angel

bonitinho - this means “pretty” or “cute.”

calmate – calm, be calm

meu bem - my darling

minha gatinha - my kitty

meu amor – my love

meu docinho - my sweet

onça-pintada - spotted jaguar

onça – jaguar

pai – father

papai – informal version of father

parar - stop

suas – yours

tio – uncle

Você fala português? – You speak Portuguese?

Você me completa, meu amor. - You complete me, my love.

Você é o mundo para mim. - You are the world to me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reina reads like she writes:

Heat to Sweet,

Contemporary to Historical,

Paranormal to Normal,

Military, First Responders, & More!

Always with an HEA because we all deserve it!



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