

## Chapter Eleven

After we were done, we walked up from the basement hand in hand. He kept his arms wrapped around me as if he could not bear for us to be separated. We slept together in Anton's huge bed. I thought about my little shanty house in the abandoned office. It seemed like a lifetime ago I was huddled and starving. Now I was safe and warm, with strong arms around me.

What would have happened to me if Anton hadn't come? I would have died there. I would have smothered to death or frozen. I had been so afraid of Anton, so afraid of all men that I had run from the person who would eventually save me. I didn't believe that kindness such as his could exist.

He brought me tea in bed in the morning. If I hadn't liked him before, I certainly did now. He had a television in his room and we watched the news as we sipped our drinks. Life had returned to the world. People were going back to work, kids going back to school.

The bookstore would be open soon and I could go back to work. There was no question of me staying anywhere else. Anton insisted that I stay there with him.

My life was starting to form again. I had a house and someone who cared about me... which, I had to admit, came as a bit of a shock. It was only two months ago when I was planning to marry another man, a man whose child I was carrying, and here I was, catching myself falling in love with someone else.

I should've at least felt guilty about it, but nothing about Anton or my feelings for him seemed wrong, not even in the broadest sense... or even similar to how I felt about Michael. I cared about Michael, I was smitten with him, and even more so with the life I thought we would have.

But Anton... there was a part of me that he reached, a hungry part I didn't even know existed until he woke it... and, somehow, it was clear as day to me that this, right here, was the kind of love that I'd waited for all of my life.

Another thing that made me joyful was that I could look into getting certified to teach in Maine, and build the life I actually wanted. Teaching elementary school in a small town had been my dream and now I might actually be able to live it.

It was noon when the doorbell rang. We were dressed and reading in the library. I was looking up certifications in Maine on Anton's laptop. The staff had still not returned, we were still all alone. He stood up to get the door and I followed him, walking in my stocking feet.

I hung back as he opened the door and my eyes went wide when I saw a man holding a gun directly in Anton's face.

"Hello, Kristen," the man said. "Your father's been looking for you. Vacation's over, time to come home. Move aside, rich boy."

I didn't recognize him. I had no idea who he was. That only meant one thing, my father had hired a professional to come and find me. My escape had moved up the organization and they were taking it just as seriously as I feared.

"This is a very bad idea," Anton said. "Leave now. Or this house will be the last thing you ever see."

"That right, rich boy?" The man said. "You ever heard of the name The Butcher? That's me. And no, you haven't heard of me because I'm very good at my job. I know that there is no one else in this house other than the two of you and we're far enough away that no one is going to hear either of you scream. Now, let's go, Kristen."

"She's not going anywhere," Anton said, blocking the door with his body.

"Kristen!" The Butcher called out. "Say goodbye to your little boyfriend. You and I both know that his money isn't going to be enough to protect you. You want to watch him die?"

I moved toward the door. He was right, my father would always find me. I would never be safe. I was only putting Anton in danger. I touched his arm, trying to get him to move, but he refused.

"They call you the Butcher?" Anton said. "Why is that?"

"Because I kill people and dispose of the bodies. I'm a ghost. No one knows me. The law can't touch me."

"So no one knows you're here. No one will come looking for you once you're gone?"

"Don't get any ideas, rich boy," The Butcher said. "You aren't going to take me. I have a gun on you. I'll shoot you dead before you can take a step."

"Anton, please," I said. I was crying now. I wiped away the tears and tried to move him, but he was like a solid brick wall.

"How would I send a message to your boss, if I wanted to?" Anton said.

The Butcher scoffed, the gun still trained on Anton. “This isn’t a problem that can be solved with money. Kristen ran and when she ran she offended a very powerful man. Nothing will correct that except for Kristin going home, apologizing and doing her duty.”

“She’s not going anywhere and if you don’t leave, you’re going to die here.”

“That’s enough talk. Let me in the house,” The Butcher said. He trained the gun on Anton’s face.

Anton thought for a moment and then moved aside. He moved me with him, so I was always shielded by his body. I looked around him at The Butcher, who held the gun steady in his hands.

“Let’s go, Kristen. I don’t have time for this-” his jaw fell open, but he was a professional and the gun remained in place.

Anton was changing, morphing into the lion. The Butcher yelled out and then took a stumbling step back. He fired once, the sound of the gun echoing around the house. But Anton was ready, he dodged the bullet and then began stalking the man.

The Butcher fired again, but the shot missed and Anton lunged. He hit him with his full lion’s weight and The Butcher slammed back against the wall. He dropped the gun and then he fell. I raced forward and grabbed the gun, training it on The Butcher, but he was frozen, staring at the lion in front of him.

“What...” he said. “What’s happening?”

In a moment, the lion was a man again. His clothes were in tatters hanging off of him, but he didn’t seem to care.

Anton grabbed the Butcher by his collar and pulled him to his feet. The Butcher had an obvious concussion, but he stumbled up and barely managed to stay here.

“You go back to your boss and you tell them that Kristen is dead. She froze to death in the abandoned office building where she was staying. She’s dead. There’s no use in hunting for her.”

“Proof, they want proof,” The Butcher said. He looked less terrifying now. He was drooling a little, his eyes were crossed and he was swaying on his feet. There was a large goose egg forming on the back of his head.

“I can get proof. It’ll be in the paper. You’re right, I do have money, but I also have connections and a power you could not imagine. You will return to your masters and tell them that Kristen is dead. There will be a death certificate for proof. I’ll see to that. And trust me when I tell you that if you ever tell anyone

Kristen is alive or anything about what you saw here today, I will find you and I will kill you. No one will ever find your body. This is not only possible but easy. You know this as well as I do.”

Still holding onto The Butcher’s shirt, Anton pushed him to the door and then out into the snow. I still had the gun trained on him. He stood dazed in the blinding white of the day. This had obviously not gone as he planned.

“I’m going to call the police and tell them I was attacked. I’m going to give them your description and any fingerprints that might be on the gun. I suggest you start running.”

The Butcher stared at us, his mouth hanging open. He looked from me to Anton and then back again. Finally, he nodded and turned, stumbling down the snow-lined lane.

Anton slammed the door, locked it and then set the security alarm.

“Death certificate?” I asked him.

“Your father isn’t the only one with connections. Now you get to pick a new name. You can be whomever you want. I can get everything together. You can start a whole new life.”

He walked over to me and gently took the gun. “It’s okay,” he said. “I told you. I’ll always keep you safe. You, and our baby.”

“Anton...” I breathed, stunned at his words.

He smiled. “Did you think I could think of this child any other way?” he asked, but for all the seriousness in his tone, the look in his eyes told me he was teasing.

“There aren’t a lot of men who would,” I noted, and he scoffed.

“There aren’t a lot of men who can shapeshift into a lion, either,” he said, a crooked grin dancing on his lips.

Well. He did have a point there.

“I love you, Kristen, and that means I could feel nothing less for the child you carry... or any child you bring into this world. To me, they would all be our children, and the one you’re having now would be my firstborn. Family’s about more than DNA... and your baby deserves to be loved just as much as any other child in this world... so how could I not?”

The things this man said... no wonder he made my heart do cartwheels for him.

## Epilogue

“See, Michael?” Anton said to the baby boy swaddled in a fluffy blue blanket, whom he rocked in his arms, as they entered the bridal suite. “The most beautiful bride in the world.” I smiled at the sight the two of them made – Anton in his fitted silk tuxedo, and Michael in his pristine white baby clothes and favorite blankie.

It was enough to make a woman’s heart swell with love and joy.

“You two are not supposed to be here,” I chided them, but they knew too well I was happy they came by. “Especially you,” I looked to Anton, “Don’t you know it’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding?”

“I make my own luck,” he stated matter-of-factly, but couldn’t keep his mock-hauteur for long and was quick to smile again. “Besides, Michael was getting a little cranky without you.”

“Oh, sweetie,” I cooed, standing up from the vanity table and walking over to take Michael in my arms. “Did you miss Mommy?”

Michael let out a few happy blurbs, flapping his little arms up and down, and cuddled up against my chest, his simple joy making me giggle.

“Look at him,” I sighed happily, and lifted my eyes to Anton, “Look at us! Who knew we could ever end up like this?”

“I did,” my husband-to-be stated proudly, almost as leonine now as he was in his animal form, “I’d always known we were meant to be together. All of us.”

The smile on my face grew into a full-blown grin.

And he was right. It felt impossible sometimes, how easily things fell into place with them, the fantastic hand in hand with the mundane. It was almost like a dream... one I would never want to wake up from.

“You know what, Anton Lev?” I said, all the love I had for him clear in my eyes, “You really do say the loveliest things.”

Without words, Anton lowered his head, and planted one of those heady kisses of his on my lips.

Mm... my favorite.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing here?!” Sarah exclaimed as she came in from the hallway. “Shoo! Shoo! There’ll be plenty of time for this lovey-dovey

stuff after the wedding!” Like a force of nature, she swooped in, took Michael into her caring arms, and then all but kicked out Anton, who couldn’t stop laughing.

And I laughed too.

How could I not?

This was the happiest day of my life so far, and a promise for even happier days to come... and, for once, I did not fear it would all come crumbling down.

There were no more monsters under my bed.

The lion ate them all up.

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THE END