

## Chapter Nine

I spent two more days in the house. I was still asleep more than I was awake, but my strength was coming back. Most of the time was spent in the library reading in front of the fireplace while the rest of the world dug itself out from underneath the snow. One night Anton and I watched Casablanca in his family's home theater. There was a huge screen with comfortable armchairs and we shared popcorn from an old-fashioned machine.

I barely paid any attention to the movie but watched him instead. He gazed at the screen as the movie unfolded. His thick beard was clean and trimmed and he looked handsome and strong in a tight, black sweater.

I wanted to lean against him. I wanted to rest my head on his shoulder and let him put his arm around me. There was already such a comfortableness between us. Our silences were never awkward and conversation flowed easily. It seemed like we could talk about anything, books, movies, TV. We didn't have everything in common, but we didn't need to. I explained to him the genius that was Margaret Atwood and he explained Plato's philosophy of the man in the cave.

He didn't press me about my past or why I had been squatting in an abandoned building. We lived only in the present. We talked about the snow and winter and how long it would take the town to dig itself out. We discussed philosophy and travel and he always laughed at my jokes.

He liked to cook. On the third day, he spent all afternoon making us dinner. Filet mignon with fingerling potatoes grown in the garden. He made a thick and creamy asparagus soup with crunchy bread and a strawberry pie for dessert.

Once, around three in the afternoon, I tiptoed into the kitchen to check up on him. His sleeves were rolled up on his arms and he wore a white apron, as he carefully measured out the flour.

"Do you need any help?" I asked.

"No," he said with a shake of his head.

"Good, because I am a terrible cook. I'm a good eater, though."

Dinner was at six. I took a shower and dried my hair nicely. I changed into one of his sister's dresses paired with my own pair of warm tights. I was surprised to see myself looking back at me in the mirror. I had been wearing clothes that weren't mine for so long, it felt good to be wearing something other than oversized jeans

and t-shirts. I wondered about my clothes back home. Was my father keeping them? Or had he thrown them away?

The table was set elegantly. There was a fire roaring in the marble fireplace, tall candles had been lit on the table. Expensive looking china decorated with delicate blue flowers. It all matched and there were about four different forks on cloth napkins. There was a spray of roses in a vase at the center of the table. Two settings had been put out near two seats cornered close to the fireplace. He pulled my chair out for me and I sat down.

“This is very nice, thank you,” I said.

“I like to cook,” he said as he sat down next to me. He ladled us each a hearty bowl of soup. My mouth watered from the smell and I dug in with relish.

“Oh my God, this is so good,” I moaned. It was a struggle not to fill up on soup and bread, but I could smell the filet resting in the kitchen and I forced myself to be patient. This was all so wonderful, I never wanted to leave, but I knew I would have to. The roads were cleared, people were emerging and heading out into the snow. I would have to join them, eventually.

“I should probably go back to Main Street tomorrow and open the bookstore. The roads are clear by now.”

“Do you want to work in the bookstore?” He asked me.

“Yeah, I like working there. I like to have a job,” I answered.

“But is bookstore worker really the job you want?” He asked me. “You’re an educated woman. Did you go to college?”

I took a sip of the red wine sitting next to me and nodded. “I went to NYU,” I said. My face felt flushed, my stomach was tight.

“For what?” He asked.

“Education. I wanted to be an elementary school teacher. I did all the certificates and everything.”

“So what stopped you?” He asked.

For a moment, I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t know how to respond. I wanted to tell him everything. I opened and closed my mouth several times as I searched for the proper words for what I wanted to say.

“You’ve already done so much for me. I don’t want to burden you with my problems.”

“It’s not a burden,” he said and then to my surprise he reached across and took my hand in his. “Do you understand how easy it is for me to help you? I have means,” he waved his hand, encompassing the mansion and all of his wealth and connections in one smooth motion. “It hurts me to see you struggling to tell me something. I want to help you and I won’t ask for anything in return.”

“Why?” I asked. I couldn’t believe he could really be that kind. I had met a lot of powerful men in my life and none of them had been kind or generous.

“Because you did see a lion that night. You were trapped in that barn because of me and my family. You almost died because of us. But it wasn’t just that. From the first moment I saw you in the bookstore I was enamored and I want to get to know you better and I want you to know me. If you tell me why you’re running, I’ll tell you where the lion came from.”

I looked down at my plate and said, “My father works for the mafia. I won’t tell you who for. All the men in our family are involved. I’ve spent my life around drug runners and murderers. I never wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to move to a small town and teach and forget about the strange men that used to come to our house to wash the blood from their hands.

“There was a man high up in the organization named Stephen Reynolds. He was fifty-four years old and disgusting. He used to chew tobacco, his mouth was stained yellow and he was always spitting out huge wads of spit.” The words were tumbling from my mouth. I had told no one this, but now that I had started I couldn’t stop.

“He used to leer at me and my sisters, he would slap our butts and stick his hand up our skirts and down his shirts. We used to run out of the house when he came over. My father always wanted to impress him, he cared a lot about what Stephen thought.

“Then, last year, I met Michael Genaro. He was so different from every man I’d ever known at that point... respectful, well-read, and oh so gentle. It might sound pathetic to you, but... that was all it took for me to fall in love with him – that he treated me like an actual person.

And he loved me back. It was such a miracle to me, that it made me forget everything I hated about my life. We were planning to get married, talking about

our future together – a future I was finally letting myself hope might have some happiness in it.

“But then, two months ago, my father called me into the living room. He was sitting in this old, smelly armchair he loved and he told me to sit down. He told me that Stephen Reynolds was interested in me. He wanted to marry me. Move me to his house in upstate and be his little wifey.” Nausea rumbled in my stomach at the memory.

“I told him no, but my father didn’t like that. I had no other options. I would marry Stephen and be his devoted wife. That’s when I finally broke down and told him about Michael. I kept him a secret from everyone, even my sisters, terrified of what my family might do to him, to us... I hoped he would’ve wanted me to marry someone I cared about, but hearing about it only made Father furious. We had a huge fight, and he told me I’d either leave Michael and marry Stephen or I’d regret it, and I refused to back down.

“But, five days later, I realized I should’ve kept my mouth shut, should’ve just nodded along to whatever he said and then run away with Michael as far the hell away from him as we could go.

“Because Father told Stephen about Michael... and Stephen... he’s not the kind of man who takes being denied well. And when he retaliates...”

Tears pooled in my eyes, and my breath caught at the awful memory of that day.

“Michael and I were out on a date. We’d just seen a movie and were going to his uncle’s restaurant for dinner when... oh, Anton... there was so much blood...”

My lower lip shivered, and the tears came pouring out.

“Stephen must’ve been having us watched, because he was waiting for us in the alley we’d usually cut through. He shot Michael right in front of me and said “Now you’ve got no excuse”... and then he just... left me there as he walked away, laughing. I called 911, but Michael passed before they reached us.

“I knew in that moment I could never go back home. The paramedics wanted me to wait for the police so I could make my report, but I snuck away before they arrived and went for the closest ATM. I had a bit of money saved, a paltry sum, but it was mine, so I took the money and just... ran.”

I didn’t want to tell him the rest of it. Hell, I didn’t want to tell him everything I already did.

But I couldn't stop myself.

"I didn't really have a plan, so I just kept going from town to town until I spent my savings. It's how I ended up in Williamstown. But something happened along the way... something I didn't expect."

I paused, trying to gather the strength to come out and say it, and to his credit, Anton didn't push. He just patiently let me tell my tale in my own pace, listening intently, not missing a single word.

"My period stopped," I finally told him, "I didn't even realize it was late, I was so out of it from everything that'd happened, but when I did, I bought a test right way and... and it was positive. I'm pregnant." I looked into his eyes. "So there you go. I'm a daughter of a crime family without a penny to my name, carrying my dead lover's child." I couldn't help but laugh bitterly. "God... it sounds like a Jackie Collins novel." I sighed. "And, to cap it all off, I can't get a real job either, especially not one as a teacher. If I do that, I'll be back in the system. My father has connections in the FBI. He'll find me. They'll make me pay."

It hit me again: the shame, revulsion, disgust, horror and fear. My own father had sold me away. My own family was willing to give me to a man twice my age just so my father could have a better place in the organization. They didn't care about me at all. I was all alone, other than the man across from me who had saved my life. The one man who might be different from everything I had ever known.

Anton was clutching his fork so hard that his fingers were white. He sighed heavily and I could hear the anger in his voice.

"I would never let that happen," he said.

I scoffed and shook my head. "These are powerful men with connections. Money doesn't stop them."

"I have more than money, more than connections. They have no idea how powerful I am. If anyone ever came for you I would send them back to their masters in several different pieces."

"What?" I said. This didn't make any sense. Anton wasn't a mobster. He didn't cut people into pieces. "How?" I asked him and to my surprise, he gave me a rueful smile.

## Chapter Ten

“Finish your meal and then I’ll show you,” he stood up and retrieved the steaks from the kitchen, my eyes followed him.

“You promised to tell-”

“And I will. I promised,” he said, matter-of-factly. We ate in silence for another few minutes, but I didn’t have it in me to stay silent.

There was something else I needed to know... something he’d only tell me if I asked.

“Anton...”

He looked at me, silently waiting for the rest to come out.

“About the baby...” I started, but he interrupted me almost immediately.

“I know this is too much to take in at once,” he told me. “And I know it might be too quick for you to be believable. But you can trust me when I say neither you nor the child you carry will ever be without protection again.”

I was stunned.

“All I wanted to ask was if there was any way you could arrange for me to see a prenatal specialist,” I mumbled, staring at him.

“Of course I can,” he smiled at me and resumed with his meal.

It took me a bit to regain my faculties, but I did eventually follow suit and dig into my food. We finished quickly and then he stood and extended his hand to me. I took it carefully and followed him.

“Are you going to show me where you breed the lions?” I asked.

“We don’t breed lions,” he repeated. His words were slow, he was staring straight ahead with a look of concern on his face.

“You asked me how I found you,” he said. “I didn’t follow you, I tracked you.” We walked through the kitchen and he opened another door that looked like it went to a pantry, but instead it opened to a second door. This one was made of a hard steel with an electronic keypad next to it. He entered in a long code and the door silently swung open.

There was a series of stone steps that went deep into the earth. I followed behind him, taking the steps carefully, my one hand on the wall to steady me. After what felt like forever, the steps stopped and we were in a sort of unfinished basement. It was huge, about half the size of a football field. Running from wall to wall was a strong, iron gate.

“Where are the lions?” I asked as I approached the gate and peered inside.

“I am the lion,” he answered.

I turned to look at him confused and to my surprise, he walked through a door in the gate and closed it from the inside. “I can control it,” he said as he slowly removed his black sweater and kicked off his shoes. I stared at him in confusion, unable to speak or even form words.

“Most of the time the transition is controllable and I am in control when I’m the lion. The only exception is the full moon. That’s what this cage is for, to hold us,” he leaned against the bars of the cage and looked at me.

I felt out of breath for some reason. “I have no control over myself when the full moon arrives. I would have killed you if I could. I failed to get down here in time that night. I lost track of time. When you refused my offer, I needed to let off steam. I transitioned. There are barrier spells all along the property lines. The “No Trespassing” and “Posted” Signs keep people out and the magic keeps the lion in.

“I was in my lion form and I forgot all about the full moon. When night fell, the lion took over and I was out of the house.” He slammed his hand against the bars. “I’ve never made that mistake before and the one time I did, you were there. You came so close to dying, the thought horrifies me. I would never have been able to live with myself.”

He unbuckled his belt and slipped off his pants wearing nothing but a pair of tight boxer briefs. He was strong, with a firm chest and back that was lined with muscles. His strong arms led to a strong torso and sturdy legs. He looked at me for a moment and then he turned away as he stripped out of the last of his clothes.

Fur spread across his back. With a sickening crack, his legs and arms popped and reversed themselves as he fell on all fours. He let out a snarl as his jaw elongated and teeth exploded from his mouth. His hair and beard grew long and shaggy around his thick shoulders. In a moment, it was done.

I took a step back and then another. There was a lion across from me. It licked its lips and paced behind the bars. But unlike the other night in the barn, he wasn’t

hunting me. He purred loudly and rubbed his face along the gate. I held my hand out and took a step towards him.

My hand was shaking. This was impossible. A Shapeshifter, here in this house, Anton? It couldn't be. I couldn't believe it. The lion sat and looked up at me with its big eyes. For a moment, it looked like a simple housecat, its tail flicking behind it.

I reached through the bars and the lion nuzzled against my hand. He was warm and soft and I could feel his purring. I ran my hands through his thick mane and it leaned into me, it seemed to like the attention. It was huge, though. The lion was almost as tall as I was and its paws were bigger than my entire head.

It felt impossible that I was sitting here petting the animal that only a few days ago had tried to kill me. He hadn't meant it, though, he had been out of control. One I could easily forgive him for.

I watched him change back. I imagined he would have liked the privacy, but my eyes could not look away. It was like his lion form melted away to leave just the man. He was on all fours when he came to. It took him a moment to stand. He was gasping for breath.

I opened the gate and walked through and wordlessly began to help him. Handing him his sweater and pulling it down over his firm chest.

"I've never shown that to anyone outside of my family," he said quietly. "You can't tell anyone."

"Never. I'll never tell a soul," I said staring up into his brown eyes. He slipped his pants on, but his chest was still bare. I couldn't stop my hand from lifting up to touch him.

I trailed a line across his chest with my fingers. His arms snaked around my waist. He pulled me towards him. I looked up as he looked down and then our lips met. We kissed, gently at first, our mouths discovering each other.

His hands were in my hair and then reaching down to grab my ass. I reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck. His kiss was rough, but his lips and tongue were soft. I felt lost in him like I didn't know which way was up. I clung to him, desperate for his touch.

He pushed me back until I was pressed against the cold, earth wall of the cell. My hands grabbed at his hair as he leaned down and created a trail of fire along my collarbone with his tongue and lips.



“Anton,” I whispered as I threw my head back. “Yes,” I moaned.

He let out a low growl that rumbled in his touch. He scraped his teeth along my neck and I shuddered as he kissed and licked my neck. I shivered in his arms and clung to his strong shoulders. I was trapped by him, he pinned me against the wall. His body pushed flush against mine.

He broke away from the kiss and pulled back to look me in the eye. He reached for the hem of my skirt and then his hand snuck underneath. He caressed my leg through the thin fabric of my tights. Arching my back I leaned into him as his hands traveled farther up.

He slid the tights off me, easily. The cold air of the room embraced my legs and I shuddered against him. He kicked my legs apart as his hand moved between my legs. I gasped as he slid a finger inside me. I strained for his touch as he began to gently stroke inside of me.

My fingers curled into a fist as I whispered for him to keep going. “Yes,” I said, over and over again. His mouth was on my neck again, biting and teasing me. For a moment, he removed his hand, but only to lift my dress off of me. He easily unhooked my bra and I was standing naked in front of him.

His right hand resumed its movement, as his left encircled my nipple. I grabbed his head as a bolt of sudden pleasure rocked through me. His hands, lips and tongue were devoted to my body. I was overwhelmed by his touch. My skin was on fire. Electricity sparked in my veins and I ached for him.

He pressed against me and I could feel his erection. I reached down and stroked the length of him over his boxer briefs. He growled again and bit down on my shoulder.

“I want you. I will have you,” he whispered into my ears.

“Yes,” I moaned in response.

He spun me around and then lowered me onto the stone floor. I gasped and shuddered when my back felt the cold stone of the floor. Anton quickly moved between my legs and took himself in his hand.

“Are you ready?” He asked.

“Yes,” I said. He thrust into me. I cried out as my body expanded to take him all in. He began to move, back and forth over me. I wanted nothing more than for him to keep going. He was consuming me and I let him. I could feel him move inside

me. And then I could feel his hand as it began to spin just above the place where he entered me.

I moaned loudly and clung to his shoulders. “Yes,” I whispered, my voice echoing around us. “Yes, Anton!” My body writhed underneath him. I was out of control. I never wanted him to stop. I would have done anything to keep him going.

I was so close. My body was tense as he pushed and thrust into me. Finally, I could take no more and I screamed out the word yes as pleasure rocked through my body. My body writhed out-of-control as I rode my orgasm to its finish. Above me, Anton came with a groan. We were both spent and breathing heavily on the cold stone floor.