

“I will have him, Brother.” Rosa hissed. Her venomous tone clashed with the quiet peace of June twilight.

Alejandro handed his sister a glass of wine. While she soothed her temper, he watched Michael, the man she desired, kneel before the daughter of their host, offering her a golden ring.

“He seems to have chosen youth and innocence over wisdom and power, Sister.” Alejandro replied.

“He shall reconsider.”

“Friends! Join me in toasting my daughter and my new son in law!” Don Guerezzo approached.

“You have nothing to toast, Señor. Your daughter shall remain unwed.” Rosa did not trouble herself to be tactful with the father of her rival.

Don Guerezzo stopped smiling and looked between Alejandro and Rosa. “This is a new era, Señorita. We do not believe in *la bruja* any longer. Be well, friends.”

Rosa smiled as he left to enjoy the congratulations of his other guests. “Then you are a fool.” She whispered. “Come, brother. We have not much time, and you have a young girl to seduce.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Christine shredded a fire-colored leaf as she wandered among the graves. The lace of her wedding gown caught the dry stems and twigs beneath her feet. The wind chilled her bare arms, and she thought for a moment of going back into the house, warm and bright with a thousand candles flickering welcome.

But she knew what awaited her there. Michael. He was a good man. She could not argue that. There was nothing wrong with Michael. He would be a good husband. He did not drink or gamble. He worked hard and was careful with his money. If she married Michael, she would never want for a thing.

Michael was a good man. But he was not Alejandro.

But then, Alejandro was most certainly not Michael.

“Cristina,” his voice rolled out of the shadows. “I did not think you would come.”

“Alejandro!” Christine left the path and hurried toward his voice. “Surely you did not think I would smile and play bride to a man who has never so much as made me blush.” She twined her arms around her lover’s neck.

“It does not take so much to make a young girl blush.” Alejandro replied, stroking his thumb along her lips, and down the soft, pale flesh of her throat.

Christine drew in a sharp breath as she heard the sound of footsteps in the dry leaves. “We should go, before they realize I am gone!”

The gunshot drowned out Alejandro’s reply. His hand fell from her breast, lifeless.

“You should be up at the house. This is not a good place. It is where *la bruja* lies in wait.” Christine looked up at the hard face of her father. Behind him, Michael held a shotgun over his shoulder.

Christine screamed.

“Quiet, girl!” her father commanded. “You do not know what you’re dealing with.” He turned to Michael. “Take her back to the house and keep your eyes open. I’ll take care of this,” he gestured toward Alejandro’s stiffening body.

“No!” she tried to run but Michael’s arm around her waist was too strong. He held her close and led her back toward the house, refusing to allow her to watch as her father buried the body of her lover.

The evening passed in a blur, as the bridesmaids kept her wineglass filled and her mind numbed with chatter. No one seemed to notice her silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the guests filed past offering congratulations, Christine’s eyes remained lifeless, her replies rote and unthinking, until the very last guest took her hands and kissed her cheek.

Rosa. At once, she seemed to hold the wisdom of great age and the vitality of youth.

“I have a gift for you, Cristina,” she whispered, her honeyed voice insistent as she pressed a velvet pouch into the bride’s hand. “If you choose to use it, I will help you.”

Christine stared at the woman’s face, but it revealed nothing as she moved on to offer congratulations to Michael, who stood nearby.

“If you choose to use it...” Christine carefully undid the gold cord that secured the pouch. She shook out the tiny object within: a single shotgun shell, still warm and tangled with Alejandro’s black hair, matted with blood. Christine retched and dropped the gruesome thing back into its pouch.

“Rosa!” She called out. The woman was at her side before she could finish a breath. “What is this?”

“You must choose. Will you stay, here among the lights your new husband - although not truly your husband yet...” Rosa smiled knowingly, “Or would you have Alejandro?”

“Alejandro is dead.” Christine whispered.

Rosa took the pouch from Christine’s cold hand. “For now, yes. But his spirit waits still. Alejandro will not leave this world without the beauty that he so desired.” Rosa stroked Christine’s pale cheek. “If you go to the place where Alejandro lies with this, the instrument of his death, you will be together, and no man will come between you!” Rosa turned Christine’s face toward her own, her eyes flashing.

“How?”

“Stupid girl!” Rosa hissed. “Time is short, and you know who I am. You know that I speak the truth.”

Christine paled. “There is no such thing as *la bruja*.”

Rosa laughed. “Come with me. I will show you. Unless you choose to stay here...”

Christine took the pouch and tucked it carefully into her bodice. “Show me what to do. This is my wedding night. I would spend it with the man I love.”

Rosa simply smiled, and faded into the shadows with Christine close behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rosa stopped at the newly dug grave, not far from the spot Christine had met her lover just a few hours before. The air held the faint odor of gunpowder, as though the place was unwilling to forget what had happened there.

“Alejandro! She has come to you, as I promised,” Rosa called out.

Christine listened, but she heard nothing. The birds were silent, and the air was still, as though it waited with her.

“Alejandro!” Rosa called again.

Still, nothing but silence.

“He will not come for me. You must kneel there, in the place where he lies. Hold the bullet in your hand and call to him, quickly!” Rosa commanded.

Christine pulled the velvet pouch from her bodice and fumbled with the cord. She took a deep breath to still her churning stomach as she shook the bloody bullet into her hand. She knelt down on the cold, damp dirt.

“Alejandro,” she whispered. “Will you come back to me?”

The silence was broken then, as the wind began to roar. Christine whirled around, but she saw no one.

“Alejandro, my love. I am here!”

Rosa smiled as she saw Alejandro’s hand break through the mud to grasp Christine’s wrist.

Christine screamed, as the bloody hand pulled her down. She clawed at the fingers that felt no pain, and would not let go.

Rosa simply smiled. “Of course, child. There is no such thing as *la bruja*.” She watched, patiently, until Alejandro pulled the panicking bride below the earth where she would be his forever.