

Chapter One

(Edited)

From His cross on my pink wall, Jesus stared at me. Painted blood dripped from His palms, feet, and side where they'd pierced Him. I'd always understood the message behind His dejected gaze-Be good, so I won't have to do this again.

There were sparklier versions of the Holy Cross, of course, but my grandmother bought all her religious e igies at Dollar Tree in Little Havana, where tall glass prayer candles wrapped in plastic images depicted Jesus's heart beating on the outside of His body, glowing like the sun, eyes trickling with crimson tears.

Underneath Him, atop my bookcase peppered with lit candles, was another childhood staple-my ceramic Virgin Mary lamp. It was painted pastel blue and gold, and at night, switched on, the Holy Mother, with her incandescent bulb buried deep inside, radiated nightmares. Her youthful appearance was replaced by the yellowing crevices of her cloak. Her cheek lines resembled a forest hag. As a child, I called her Scary Mary.

But it wasn't just her appearance that creeped me out.

An unwanted, intrusive thought always flitted through my mind whenever I touched her. It was my grandfather, sitting at his o ice desk, signing the greeting card to go with the lamp, which was to be my First Communion gi . He nervously awaited...something. I never knew what exactly, or why it unsettled me.

Tonight, I turned her on quickly so my fingers wouldn't conjure up the image.

I sat down cross-legged and took out the square basket containing my tools: a black candle to symbolize tonight's New Moon, my abalone shell, my palo santo, my lighter, and my tarot cards wrapped in red silk. I laid it all out across my worn pink and purple rug woven with shreds of glittery thread. Then I waited.

In the corner of the room, a glow-in-the-dark peel-and-stick full moon emitted a so , green glow, as I waited for my grandmother to finish closing up for the night. Soon, all was quiet. Here we go... I lit the candle first, then picked up the three-inch stick of palo santo, charred on one end from multiple uses, sticking it into the flame. It crackled as it caught fire.

For a moment, I heard Abuela shu ling through her room next to mine, as she entered her bathroom, slippers padding across the tile floor. My breath caught in my throat, I heard sink water rushing through the walls, then the springs of her bed creak as she settled again.

Taking a deep breath, I blew on the lit end of smouldering wood. The flame went out, releasing a thin stream of smoke into the air, unpredictable curls swirling as it rose. I wa ed the smoke over the cards, clearing them of stagnant energy. I would've used sage to cleanse them, but sage smelled like weed, which definitely would've brought Abuela to investigate.

"Smoke of air, the fire of wood, cleanse and bless these cards for good. Tell me what I shouldn't or should..." I whispered.

Tomorrow was the Youths for Jesus retreat, a two-week camping thing my church did every summer out in the Everglades. I was supposed to be praying to the Virgin for a successful trip. Instead, I was hoping tarot cards would fix my life.

I'd been a member of Youths for Jesus for thirteen years now. I couldn't remember a time when Ministerio Jesus hadn't been a part of my landscape. Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes, First Communion, Confirmation, youth group picnics, youth group assemblies, youth group retreats, and everything in between. There was no escaping church. Not when your grandfather had been the school's principal for twenty-four years.

Tomorrow, they'd be making me an assistant leader. I knew, because Camila, my best friend, already a YFJ leader, told me a er their meeting two nights ago. I was supposed to act surprised and be happy about this.

"Just telling you so you can be ready," she'd said.

I'd feigned excitement.

A er Camila went home, something inside of me died. I'd been naïve to hope this retreat might be my last. A er all, I was starting college in August. I wouldn't have much time to devote anymore. But no-they were reining me in tighter. Closer. I could almost feel the invisible choke collar around my neck.

I stopped shu ling the cards. "What do I do?" The air conditioner turned o , as an eerie quiet settled through my room.

Who was I talking to? God? I wasn't sure anymore. Maybe my conscience. Maybe the Universe was God. So were these cards, this candle, this room, these walls, the cross around my neck that my father gave me. All of it. Maybe everything was made of the same energy, vibrating at di erent rates. Maybe religion was a thing of the past, and it was time to follow my own beliefs.

I lay down the first card-the Ace of Cups, a tall, silvery Holy Grail overflowing with glistening water. It symbolized new beginnings, an emotional new start. Was tomorrow the beginning of a new life in the ministry? If so, I didn't want it.

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But how could I get out of it? Saying no to my parish would be like denying my family. There was no easy way out. If I didn't show up in the parking lot at 7 AM tomorrow, there'd be hell to pay.

I lay down the second card-the Fool, a naïve young man teetering on the edge of a rocky cli , his dog trying to warn him of the dangers ahead. I sni ed a laugh. "Yeah, no shit."

I held the last card in my fingers.

Suddenly, I heard Abuela's door pop open, followed by the hallway's fluorescent light glowing underneath my door, and the scraping of slippers along the floor. I grabbed a pillow I kept nearby in case this should happen and quickly covered the cards and shell. She knocked and then flung open my door.

"O, estás despierta?"

"I'm awake, Abuela. I'm on the floor." I added a smile, so she wouldn't think I was sassng her. "Valentina, what's burning?" She stepped in, the edges of her bata de casa swishing against the floor. She sni ed the air like a police dog.

My heart pounded. If she saw the tarot cards, she'd tell me I was asking for trouble. They were not a sanctioned part of our faith. "Uh, I opened the window. Maybe smells came into the room?" I lied. I'd been lying for a while now. They gave me no choice when my real words were never the ones they wanted to hear.

She scanned the room with sharp green eyes, which fell on Scary Mary. "Ay," her tone brightened. "Qué linda la lamparita." She moved towards it, her foot a couple of inches from my hidden card spread. Her fingers gingerly touched the lamp. "I remember when we gave it to you. How come you never turn it on?"

"I mean, look at her, Abuela."

"But it's so pretty. Cuco used to leave it on for you every night."

"And I used to turn it o the second he'd leave." I never told her about the weird thoughts I'd have wh touched it. ver I'd

She sni ed again. "It's stronger around here."

"It's the candles. They're cedarwood. Actually? I'm praying right now, so could you..." I waited for her to realize she was intruding.

She shrugged and turned to go. But then, her slipper caught the edge of the cushion, dragging it a few inches. The corner of the Fool card slid out from underneath. Abuela stared down at it. She looked at me. It was hard to tell what she was thinking.

"What are you doing?" she asked suspiciously.

"Writing my retreat letter," I lied again. The "retreat letter" was an anonymous inspirational note we were asked to write every year on the eve of the trip. The letters got scrambled and then passed out, and you were supposed to get someone else's letter while they got yours.

For the first time, I wasn't writing it.

Abuela scowled. I braced, but she only tucked the Fool back under the cushion with the toe of her slipper. "Don't you have to be awake early?"

"Yes. The sooner I finish, the faster I can get to bed."

She shu led to the door, and for a moment, looked like she was going to say something. She began closing the door, giving me a tight-lipped smirk. "Goodnight, Vale."

"Nite, Abuela."

The door closed all the way...almost.

She opened it back up. "Vale?"

"Yes, Abuela?" I held my breath.

"I would not consult the esoteric if I were you. God has laid out his plan for each of us. Your job is to follow that plan."

My heartbeat pounded in my ears.

"Catholics don't dabble in dark arts. You understand?"

I stared at her disapproving glare. I could tell her she was wrong, that I was eighteen and could decide for myself what I believed in, but did I want to start a fight at this late hour?

Quietly, I swallowed. "Yes, Abuela."

She waited a moment, gauging my sincerity. "Now, put those cards away and pray for forgiveness."

Forgiveness? For what?

I wasn't doing anything wrong.

"Okay," I said. "Goodnight."

She watched me another moment, then closed the door. I listened for all the sounds of her going back to bed, for all the good it did me the first time, then let out a major breath.

This was why I needed to come out of the broom closet. I couldn't read cards, sit under the moon, burn herbs, meditate, or do any of the other unsanctioned things I did as long as I was in this house.

I couldn't keep living this way.

This wasn't a phase. I wouldn't be growing out of my spiritual curiosity anytime soon, no matter how wrong it seemed to them. The more I read, the more I learned, the less God could be a bearded, robbed Father in the sky, judging everything everybody did. That didn't sound like love to me.

I couldn't become an assistant leader either. I couldn't go on the retreat. I wasn't the person they thought I was. But my bags were packed, and Camila was expecting me to give her a ride tomorrow.

"What do I do?" I whispered. I was still holding the last card between my trembling fingertips. I slid it out from underneath my leg where I'd tucked it and flipped it over.

The Moon-Hecate the Crone, Goddess of the Crossroads, stood on the foggy road, holding a torch. Her silver hair flowed in the cold wind, signifying truth and power. The Moon card was about deception, intuition, and secrets. Together with the Ace of Cups and the Fool, I faced a new beginning. Adventure and magic, but not without peril. Moonlight revealed hidden truths. And sometimes, like Scary Mary, we wouldn't like what we see.

I wrapped up the cards and placed them back in the basket, along with the shell and palo santo. Standing, I blew o Scary Mary, too, when I paid to stare at her dark, creviced wrinkles, and under-eye bags that'd make any kid cover their head with a blanket.

"Do you agree?" I asked her.

Mary flickered in silence. Above her, Jesus wept. And above Him, dancing lamplight bounced o the crucifix, creating a shi ing reflection on the ceiling. For a moment, it looked like a wolf, howling at the moon.

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