

Chapter Eleven

I tried catching whiffs of whatever she was smelling, but nothing even remotely resembling burning flesh came to me. Only the slightly putrid smell of the stagnant lake. "I don't smell anything. I'm sorry."

"I don't either, love," Mori said, their hand on Fae's back, as they tried to get on Fae's same level of sensory perception.

This was Fae's clairience, I was pretty certain. She gagged, folded over, and threw up into a sandy patch. "It's gone...it's going..."

Wilky cast a solemn glance at us huddled around Fae, then went back to staring at the Devil's Tree, hands on hips. That boy lived as much in his own world as Crow or even me, for that matter. We stayed with Fae until her moment had passed, then I stepped onto the veranda and caught my breath. What the hell had I experienced out there? I'd picked up on the resort's sadness, and I'd seen weird things, but I'd never felt actual pain until now. I rubbed my neck and prayed for God to protect me, feeling like a hypocrite for both abandoning and asking Him to assist at the same time. Mori headed up the hilly slope, holding Fae's narrow shoulders.

"Are you okay?" I asked when they came up to stand where I was. She nodded weakly. It was weird to see Fae like that without her usual high energy.

"I think we're opening up," Mori said. "There's five of us now."

"And that's without the full moon ritual. Maybe..." I thought about my words carefully. "Maybe we shouldn't do it?"

Fae and Mori both looked at me, wheels in their brain cranking away. "We just have to get used to it. It'll be fine." Mori waved to Wilky and Crow to let them know they were taking Fae inside.

Enough for one day. An ice-cold drink was what I needed, but we had no ice. Instead, I chugged down a bottle full of warm water and headed to bed, my head spinning. The ballroom felt heavier than usual, but that made sense given what we'd just gone through.

I was in a bathroom—a public bathroom—surrounded by urinals.

The tile was light green. There were cracks in some of them. The ceiling had a wide, ugly amber stain. Drops of water dripped through the stain, and I realized it was pouring outside. For some reason, as often happened in dreams, I couldn't leave. I was stuck; my feet didn't work.

I texted Camila to come get me, but Camila wouldn't answer. She was mad because I'd leave the retreat. It took minutes to press each letter on my keyboard. I'd mess up and have to start over again. Frustration mounted. Tears slipped from my eyes into the corners of my frown. I looked up from the phone and saw I wasn't alone. Antoni was there. Good ol' freshshaven, clean-cut Antoni, leaning against the sinks with his hands pressed on the edge of one.

You should be honored, he told me. Other girls would've done anything to spend that time with him. I got lucky. Couldn't I see that?

I told him to shut up and go away, I was trying to work my phone, to get us out of here before the campground closed and we'd be forced to stay overnight. Nothing happened, he said. He'd been polite. By doing his business at the sink, he'd leave me out of it. He'd spared me. He hadn't "used" me. He'd done the correct thing. Other guys wouldn't have been as thoughtful. I needed to stop acting as though he'd done something wrong, because he hadn't. I was making a mountain out of a molehill.

He went on. He wouldn't shut his mouth. I certainly hadn't brought it up, so why did he insist on talking about it? I rarely thought about him during my waking life—yes, my waking life, because I was dreaming, I knew it. So, why wouldn't he stop talking about it?

My phone refused to work. I had to start the text all over again. Men had needs, he went on. All he'd done was act on impulse. He hadn't hurt me. He'd respected me.

Shut up, Antoni. Shut the hell up.

A strong hand curled around my arm. I stared at his fingers, digging into my flesh. He had the balls to touch me? To lay his hands on my arm? I yanked it out of his grasp. Touch me again, I warned.

Behind him, something bubbled in the sink. Something thick, gurgling up from the drainpipe. I didn't want to look, though he wanted me to. He wanted me to see what was in the sink, what my hand had made him do. He was proud of the outcome, proud of how he'd handled the situation. Would I rather he'd done it there or inside of me? he asked.

He hadn't hurt me. And I needed to know that, he insisted.

I don't care anymore. Just fucking stop, I told him.

My eyes opened to a nearly lightless ballroom. A few ribbons of moonlight filtered in, illuminating dust vortices closest to the windows. The rest of the vast space sat in obscurity. The ballroom felt like it had a pulse, or was that my heart? The dream had felt so real, I half-expected Antoni to be here.

I let out a slow breath. Our conversation still lingered in my mind. I was shaking. From the dream, but also because the stupid incident wouldn't leave me alone. It was still in my psyche despite my insistence that it wasn't. This asshole was still in my subconscious, a demon who needed exorcising.

"Shit..." I sat up.

Rubbing my face, I stood and moved to the window to peer out at the filthy veranda overgrown with weeds, the grassy slope to the lake and Fae's garden. Far in the distance, the gnarly, twisted tree hid in the shadows of the quarter moon high in the clear, still sky.

I looked away.

Last thing I needed was another memory invasion. The burning and tugging sensation had not been my own—I knew that. Staring out the dusty glass, I watched the stagnant lake shimmer with a glow of its own. In this half-wake, half-sleep state, I knew in my bones that we were not alone.

The claims were asleep—I counted three bulky lumps (Mori and Fae slept together tonight). Someone stood a few feet away, invisible, scrutinizing eyes watching me from the darkness.

Judging.

But I hadn't done anything wrong.

I imagined my eyes widening like a cat's, irises adjusting to take in as much light as possible. I tried to make sense of the hotel's scattered, discarded objects. What might've been a bar or fallen stools could've been a dead man lying in his own filth next to a piano. Gossamer cobwebs hanging from curved archways, dancing in the draught, could've been a woman dangling from her neck. The one column just outside the ballroom in the central hallway, lined up with the entrance arch could've been a person watching me.

The feeling of displaced air intensified.

It sounded like a woman's voice.

Why are you here?

Another woman replied, Leave her.

The ballroom felt alive, simmering and waiting.

I needed to use the bathroom, but hell if I was walking past the Devil's Tree again, and hell if I was going anywhere near a bathroom in the dark. I was haunted enough as is. I forced myself back to bed. It wasn't until the soles of sunrise lit up the room's faded red wallpaper that I was able to finally sleep, even if it was half-baked. By then, my feelings over the dream had subsided, but resentment ate away at me like tapeworms devouring the lining of my stomach.

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