Chapter Twelve

I awoke to a viciously hangry stomach, but Wilky saw my head pop up and immediately brought me a plate of sausage and eggs balanced on his sketchpad. "I kept it warm for you." He pushed the plate into my hands, along with a fork.

"Thank you." I stared at his hands. He had nice hands, clean nails. "I barely slept last night," I said, digging into the food. "You've missed half the day. Did the Sunlake keep you awake?" He sat cross-legged, sketching a drawing of what looked like a landscape with lots of trees.

"The Sunlake, or my own brain, one of the two," I said between bites.

"I had wild dreams. But I always have wild dreams." His Haitian accent reminded me of home.

"What did you dream about?" I scarfed down the last of the eggs, working in a glance or two at his inquisitive brown eyes. "If you don't mind my asking."

Wilky saw I was done and handed me his cup of orange juice. "You can have the rest."

"Thanks."

"I always dream about people...shadows...torches."

I stared at him over the rim of the cup. I thought about the glowing orbs in the trees I'd seen last night, the bright blobs of light I'd seen yesterday morning, too, how much they reminded me of people carrying torches. "They move like a line of people walking?"

"Yes. Like this." He turned around his sketchbook. His drawing was of the trees behind the lake, with the Devil's tree in the background. Walking toward it was a line of shadow people holding what could've been perceived as torches.

"I think I saw them last night."

He stared at me. "By the lake?"

"I think so. It was hard to tell, my head started hurting so bad, but I'm sure it was torches. That would make sense since Fae smelled burning, right?" But she hadn't smelled torches-she'd smelled cooked flesh. Wilky looked like he had at least a half million things he wanted to say. His gaze was focused on Crow taking photos in the hallway. "I think it's more likely that Fae was smelling the fire."

He looked at me again. "The one that closed this place down when it was a resort. A kitchen fire in the late seventies. Lots of spiritualists died." "Oh." I put down my plate.

"Haven't you seen the burnt kitchen?"

"Fire?"

I shook my head.

He sketched for a minute. "What I experience is something else. I hear screams, I see torches, and it always, always feels like I'm there."

"Like you're in someone else's body," I guessed.

"Yes." He stared at me. "Like, I'm experiencing someone else's memory."

Exactly what I'd experienced last night by the Devil's Tree-someone else's memory, "Do you wake up right away?"

"Not always. I usually get to the part where they reach the tree, but I don't know what happens after that, I wake up sweaty. But uh, you don't want to hear about this. Finish your breakfast. Mori and Fae will show you around when you're done." He stood with his sketchbook.

He didn't wait for my reply, that I did want to hear about his dreams. I wanted to know who was carrying the torches, who did the screaming. I wanted to share my crazy-ass nightmare about Antoni, explore why he was still on my mind. He took off, though.

My phone vibrated-a text from Cami, asking how I was doing, and could I call her. No, not now. My mind was far away in another world.

After a short walk, I was throwing my hair into a ponytail, thinking about Wilky and watching Crow move through the halls with his camera, trying to capture his spirit guide lady when Mori and Fae approached me, hands clasped together.

"You were up last night," Mori said. "We could see you standing by the window. Ghosts keeping you up?"

"Ghosts inside my head," I replied.

Fae reached out, and I flinched. She was only trying to run her fingers through my shoulder. "The worst kind."

"True," I said.

"When we got here a year ago, we couldn't sleep either," Mori said. "We thought we needed getting used to the hotel, but it turned out the hotel needed getting used to us."

I never thought of it that way before, a building needing adjustment to new inhabitants. "I'm fairly sure The Sunlake Springs doesn't want me here," I said.

"Why do you say that?" Fae asked.

I shrugged and checked my phone absently. Five new texts from my mom, three from Abuela, and a couple more from Camila. Shutting off the screen, I slid it into my shorts' pocket. "I don't know. It's just the feeling I get. How long do you plan on staying?" I asked, changing the subject. "A year seems like a long time."

"I have no other place to be." Mori looked at Fae.

Fae was now behind me, braiding my hair. "Me neither. As long as it takes to find what we all want. It's not like anybody's missing us. My mother thinks I live in Atlanta with my rich boyfriend."

"Seriously?" I laughed.

"Yeah. I'll tell her the truth one day. Right now, she doesn't need stress. Better to make her think I'm fine." Fae tapped Mori's chin then bottom lip. "Which I am." Mori smiled, but I could see they probably felt bad about Fae living a lie. I understood. We lied when we were afraid of lied when our loved ones couldn't accept us. I longed for a day I could be completely honest about

hurting people. We who I was.

"Nobody cares about us, Vale. We're totally okay with that."

"I care," I said.

Fae swung around my side and stared into my soul. "That means a lot. It really, really does. Thank you." She popped a kiss on my cheek and went back to braiding my hair.

Mori reached out to take Fae's hand again, or to make her stop touching me, one or the other. "Come on, let's take a walk." Mori led us out the ballroom and down the hall. At first, I thought we were headed toward the atrium, and I was glad I wouldn't be alone inside it, but then they turned and faced the lobby with an upward sweep of the hand. "Voilà. Zees ees ze grand lobby. Bee-oo-tee-full, right?" they said in a bad French accent.

"It is. Every time I pass by it, it blows my mind," I said. In the full sunlight, the old rusted bird cages glinted with flecks of gold paint. I remembered the odd feeling in my stomach when I'd touched one the other night. "It's one of my favorite parts of the hotel." Fae did a grand jetté across the floor, landing, then another leap in a different direction. "What room are you in, ma'am? May I help you with your bags?" She giggled.

I admired the hippie child in Fae. I wasn't sure I could dance the same way knowing my family didn't care about me. Mori pointed to a spot near me. "Right here is where Crow took a photo of a white figure that looks like a mermaid. You can even see her tail. It's pretty cool."

"But why would a mermaid be walking in a hotel?" I asked.

"Why would a hotel by a lake have paintings of mermaids?" Mori asked rhetorically, gesturing to a large painting high up on the wall. I had, in fact, not noticed the enormous work of art featuring a gorgeous siren coming out of, not the ocean or beach, but a lake's surface. The trees behind it and the rowboats were the giveaway. "There's siren symbolism everywhere. Check out the columns."

"Those I've seen," I said. "They're beautiful."

"We're not that far from the ocean," Mori said, "and Florida is nearly an island anyway, so it's not a surprise they're a big part of The Sunlake's Art Deco history."

"Some people say the Lady of the Lake is a species of mermaid," Fae said.

"More like a water spirit," Mori told her. "Trust me, I know my water spirits."

"True, but I like to think of her as a mermaid. So, there. Anyway, Crow took another photo over there." She pointed to the chained and locked double door entrance. "Of someone pushing a woman in a wheelchair out the doors."

I imagined people from long ago moving through this space, like escapees of Crow's photos. I saw multiple layers of time overlapping each other, playing on 1.5x speed-doctors, nurses, patients, orderlies, veterans, hippies, all criss-crossing in time and space. I even saw the little boy from the atrium, cutting through the lobby with a toy in his hand.

A toy-or a craft of some kind.

"Where is he anyway?" I almost missed his grumbling about the clairs agreeing to let me stay. "Crow?"

"He's in the north wing today."

"What's in the north wing?"

"The north wing was used for veterans, the south for women's psychiatric ward," Mori explained, taking us past the atrium. I stared at the mermaid perched on the fountain, holding up her sun. She watched me intently, as we walked past.

"That's not an accident, by the way," Mori said. "North was considered higher, closer to God, war heroes deserving of Heaven. And south...well, closer to Hell."

"Yay! Women are the root of all evil!" Fae said sarcastically.

"Same reasoning behind blue for boys, pink for girls," I said. That was another thing my wonderful patriarchal religion had taught me-that, as a woman, I was the cause of everybody's misery.

Fae's eyes widened. "I never knew that, Vale. You just taught me something."

"I'm a treasure trove of useless information," I replied. "What's Crow's photography project about?"

"Preservation." Mori took us down the central, dividing hallway. Above were Moroccan-style lanterns hanging from the ceiling, the glass tiles of which were pretty intact. "He's trying to convince the county to restore the hotel. I think the place is beyond saving, but I don't tell him that. He hates hearing it."

Suddenly, my foot sank into a depression in the tile floors, and I twisted my ankle. "Ow, damn it..."

Mori and Fae hung onto my arm. "Whoa. You okay?"

I winced. My ankle hurt like hell. Walking through the Sunlake was like stepping through a fun house at the fair. Floors were wonky; walls strained under the weight of the tall ceilings. Crow's wish to see this place restored would make for a breathtaking sight, but it shouldn't happen. They'd have to raze the place to the ground and start all over to make sure it was all to code. My father had seen less damaged buildings demolished for more minor offenses.

"So, we're headed to Hell now?" I chuckled, hobbling into the south wing.

"We never left," Mori made a mock eerie voice.

We stepped through a double doorway to a vast room with rusted metal counters and carts knocked onto their sides. Brick walls were charred black, while other black circles of soot radiated throughout the floor. The low ceiling's wooden beams were also charred and broken up in spots where water leaked in and dripped down the moldy walls.

"Here's the kitchen," Mori said. "A fire killed twenty people here in 1979. They never opened again. Through there is the dining room, which you'll see has beautiful floor to ceiling windows."

Mori and Fae stepped over puddles of water toward the dining room, but I stayed behind. Through the double doors stood a woman, watching me. She was perfectly still, arms by her sides with straight brown hair that hung below her waist on one side. The other side of her hair was gone. Her scalp was a bloody, singed mess. The skin of her face was missing, exposing ligaments and an eyeball about to fall out.

She lifted a hand in greeting.

I nearly threw up my breakfast.

"If it's early enough in the morning, I can smell cooking in here," Fae said from far away.

The woman lowered her hand, dusted it off on her apron, and vanished. I couldn't speak or move. She wasn't a vision like the others. She was a person right in front of me, a solid human for a whole minute until she disappeared, and neither Fae nor Mori had seen her.

"Vale?" Mori called.

"Yeah, I..." I hurried off toward the dining room, unable to put what I'd just seen into words.

Mori had caught on to something wrong with me, but Fae was going on, running her delicate hand along wooden tables devoid of tablecloths. "Sometimes I get the taste of coffee in my mouth. Sometimes I smell cigars over in the smoking room. Wilky hears the clink of silverware in here. Isn't that cool?"

That woman had seen me. She'd looked right at me. She'd said hello, happy that someone had finally noticed her. But I couldn't get over the burns covering her body. That was a ghost, wasn't it?

"Vale, you okay?" Fae asked.

"Yeah." I decided I would wait before letting on that I could see them! I could see the ghosts of the Sunlake Springs Resort. The clairs hadn't, but I had. "Speaking of Wilky," I said. "What happened to him last night? After I felt that pain in my head?"

"Oh." Fae's expression fell flat.

"Wilky's got his own shit he's dealing with," Mori said, showing me through the dining room. It really was gorgeous with soaring, floor-toceiling windows, half of which were cracked or had holes in them. "He deals with it in his own way. Don't take it personally. It's not you."

"I won't. Did something happen to him here?"

course. "Not to him, but family members, yes. There's no evidence of it, of The state does a fantastic job of keeping stuff like that out of the public eye. But Wilky hopes to find proof. I don't think it'll change anything. It's more of a peace of mind thing."

"What happened to his family?"

Mori and Fae looked at each other. "I'm sure he'll tell you in time."

So, unspeakable things happened to people Wilky knew, and he was here trying to make sense of it before the hotel got torn down. I hoped he'd find it and that I could help somehow.

Fae stretched my hand out to look at. "You have pretty nails. Mine are horrible." I tried to leave my hand in hers. I was never going to form relationships with people if I kept being afraid of what my hands would see. For the brief instant she held it, I saw a world of sadness heavy enough to fill a chasm. It made me admire her positivity that much more.

"Yours are great, Fae. Everything about you is." I had to tell her that. Something about Fae struck me as needing lots of love, like maybe she hadn't gotten enough as a kid. "All of you is great. I'm in awe of your abilities."

"Awww, Vale. We're so glad you're here!" Fae clung to my arm.

I let her.

We headed down a set of steps, sinking into cooler air compared with the rest of the hotel. "Vale, we're all born with them, but the older we get, the more we lose that innocence needed to wield magick. We lose ourselves in tech and tune out energies. Gut instincts come from your solar plexus, by the way." Mori pointed to my stomach. "Part of developing your senses is learning to get out of your own way. Trust those instincts."

They were so right. Being away from home, here in this place, with no other distractions had helped me tune into the world around me. I wondered how strong I'd become if I stayed long enough.

"Yay, now comes my favorite room." Fae tapped her fingers together with delicious anticipation. "Welcome to the basement." Mori gestured to a horrible underground made of all brick walls. The thinnest slivers of light filtered in from two windows near the ceiling. The north wall boasted a tall, wide set of metal doors, one of which was open and tilted sadly on its hinge.

"I thought Florida didn't have basements because of limestone," I said.

"Some buildings do. I don't know...this one does." Mori leaned against a wall and watched me. If I didn't know better, I would've said they were waiting to see what I felt in here.

My initial impression of the basement was that I immediately wanted to leave.

Fae twirled and danced across the filthy floor. "Don't you love it? Do you smell the mustiness? I can't get enough of that smell!" I didn't care for it. It was more like mold. And I didn't care for how far underneath the ground the room was either. Felt totally wrong for a state where the subterranean levels were mostly water. "Why is this your favorite?" I asked Fae.

She floated over to the metal hatch and jumped into the open doorway, posing with her legs up against the wall and a hand in the air. She reminded me of a forest nymph flitting from flower to flower. "Because this is the treasure roooooom," she cooed.

"Well..." Mori rolled her eyes. "Nobody knows that."

"This is where we think my great-grandfather's money is buried. In his journal, he wrote how they shoveled fifty yards west of the south end of the lake just before they started building the hotel. He never reclaimed it after he got out of prison."

"You're sure it's still here?" I asked.

She flipped her palms up. "No. For all we know, a construction worker found it and kept it for himself. I know it's stupid to think it might still be here, but wouldn't it be sublime if it were? Mori thinks I'm insane, but I can almost smell it!" she cried. "Right here, behind this wall!"

"You smell dead bodies, love," Mori said. "And we don't say insane,"

"If only I had a sledgehammer!" Fae pretended to smash the wall with a mighty mallet.

I stared at them both.

Mori raised an eyebrow. "This chute is where dead tuberculosis patients were dumped. Bodies rolled down the tunnel and came out by the north side where the elevation is lower. Trucks came every morning to haul them away."

"Sounds...lovely," I said.

"It's not," Mori said flatly. "Sometimes I do trance writing in these rooms, and I feel them crying. They want to go, but they can't."

"Want to look inside?" Fae gestured to the black hole in the wall.

"Tempting, but no." I backed away. A watery sound was coming from the wall. A thin, steady stream dripped out of the brick and trickled in a mini river onto the floor where it drained into a hole in the corner of the basement.

For a moment, we stood in quiet reverence. There were no words for this. Centuries slid on past, while walls held secrets. It was up to us to discover the events that took place using all the clues at our disposal. Energies changed. Mori seemed worried about the trickling water, same as I was, while Fae's dreams of finding gold spun through her head like cotton candy around a paper core.

Crow would have a hard time convincing anyone to restore this hotel. I was no architect or engineer, but there was just too much structural damage. "Let's find Wilky. He'll show us the rooms," Mori broke the silence.

I couldn't get out of the basement fast enough.

In the evening, we did more group meditation, carefully smudging ourselves with sage and asking our deities and spirit guides to envelop us in protective light against negative energies. I envisioned the purple light that Citana Rose taught me to envision, sweeping over my body like cascading paint, from head to toe, creating a cocoon of impenetrable strength.

At first, I found it hard to concentrate, but eventually, by the end of the hour-long session, I felt like our breaths were in synch. So were our hearts. It wasn't all that different from that part in Mass when we all take communion then recite the Our Father, then face each other to shake hands.

Community. Love. Brotherhood.

I didn't see a scowl on Crow's face. For the first time, he shook my hand and gave me a playful side-eye. "Valentina," was all he said.

"Crowley."

They headed inside for food Mori had picked up from Citana, while I stayed on the veranda, studying my tarot cards, staring out over the still lake. It was peaceful but I wasn't at peace. I was experiencing too much at once, and I couldn't help the feeling that the hotel hated me and wanted me out. That was ridiculous, though-how could it? Why would it?

Something moved on the south side of the lake. Nervous energy, flitting. I saw the pair of golden eyes before I could make out the rest of the shape. The wolf, or German Shepherd, or coyote, whatever he was, paced back and forth along the shoreline.

"Hey, Lobo." I waved. "Nice to see you again."

Lobo's tongue lolled. He scanned the resort from right to left, lowered his head in that way dogs do when they don't know how to get around an obstacle, and watched me. He seemed panicky out there in the tall sawgrass. I called to him to come. I wanted to see him up close, make sure he was real, that I wasn't imagining a black wolf, even though they were supposedly extinct.

Maybe he was one of the last, hanging on like a final soldier, hiding out like Sasquatch from mankind, his sworn enemy. But Lobo didn't want to come around, or maybe he couldn't. The lake itself presented a challenge, as though he'd forgotten how to circumvent it. I watched him for a while, until he finally gave up and receded into the shadows.

On my duffel bag, I found a flower. A pink, five-petaled bloom similar to the hibiscus that grew in my backyard. I twirled it in my fingers, looking around amusedly to see who might've given it to me. Whoever didn't matter. What mattered was that, through this flower, I was a member of a new family. Welcomed and appreciated, which was more than I was at home.

Mori smiled. "It wasn't me. I'm not the one with a love of swamp rosemallows," they laughed, lifting their chin to Wilky sitting on his bed, drawing on his sketchpad.

"What?" He had the worst fake-innocent look on his face I'd ever seen. "It wasn't me."

"Sure, it wasn't." I laughed, slipping the bloom into my hair over my ear.

He broke into a lovely smile that made my stomach knot up. "Welcome to the Sunlake Springs Resort, moon child," Wilky drawled. He turned his sketch around. It was of me with the very same swamp rosemallow over my ear. He'd perfectly captured my stance, my body, my long hair over my shoulder... the curve of my calves.

Behind me were four silhouettes. Stringy and bony, long-haired Fae, stocky, bold, and strong-armed Mori, tall and lanky Crow with his spiky hair, and muscular Wilky with his signature boxer stance, Rising behind us, bright and bold in a dark background, was the fullest, largest of all moons, watching over us.

"I love it. Thank you so much," I said, my heart full of gratitude, I'd found friends with which to hang, after all.

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