

## Chapter Fifteen

By the time I pulled into Macy's driveway and spotted Cami's car sitting there, my stomach was ready to purge. In the ten minutes since I'd left the Sunlake Springs, I'd gone through every single possible reason I might give Cami as to why she couldn't stay. None of them would go over well. She would fight me. I knew this.

I stepped out of the car and hopped up the steps to the house. No matter what happened, I would convince Cami it'd be best if she got back in her car and drove six hours back to Miami. Tonight. After she'd driven six hours to get here.

Okay, sure.

I opened the screen door and strolled in like I'd just gone out for a quick Frappuccino. Macy's rolling bag stood in the foyer. She must've just gotten home when Cami arrived. I jingled my keys to signal I was home.

Macy and Cami stood talking in the kitchen at the small island. Macy saw me before Camila did. She had that look in her eye when someone has been holding down the fort for you while you're away doing bad things. I threw on my best fake enthusiasm.

"Oh, wow..." I faked surprise.

Cami's face whipped my way. She gave me a bright smile, as though she were the best girl I could possibly receive. "You're here? No way!" I floated into her orbit, as she reined me in with her gravitational pull. "Surprise!" I was swooped into the Cami hug, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't like coming back to Earth after visiting.

Macy's expression was mixed worry, relief, and admiration. Right before I pulled away, Cami got a whiff of my sweat-soaked, weed-stinky body and gave me an odd look.

"Yeah, sorry. Need a shower."

"Good Lord, girl, where've you been? Dumpster diving?"

"He, he, funny." Immediately, there was tension. The old me would never smell like baked armpit.

Macy pulled out a stool and sat to watch the show. "Cami was just saying how it rained the whole way on 95 until she got here, then the sun came out."

Cami beamed. "Yep. It was a sign. I was getting closer to you. My sweet sis." She swung her arm around my shoulder. Something was off. I could read Cami like a book. She'd come all this way as an ambassador from Youths for Jesus, possibly even my family.

After a few pleasant exchanges, I invited Cami upstairs so we could talk in private in my room while Macy shook her head quietly and popped open a bottle of wine. Thank you I mouthed over my shoulder at her.

She nodded.

As we headed upstairs, Cami made small talk about the cars that had cut her off, how hard it was to see through the driving rain, and Praise Be to Jesus she'd made it in one piece.

All I could think about were the ghosts of the Sunlake Springs and how I could see them.

"I take it you asked my mom where I was?" Because I sure as hell hadn't told her. Getting away literally meant getting away, in my book. She nodded, "She gave me your sister's address, told me you'd enjoy having a visitor. Hope it was okay that I surprised you."

It wasn't,

And I'd be having a word with my mother at some point in the next few days.

"Yes, so happy to see you." Too bad I'm going to have to kick you out soon." How was the retreat?"

We entered the room. I closed the door behind us. There was nothing of mine there to even nervously fiddle with, so I threw myself on the bed and hugged a pillow, pretending I was really tired. Outside, the sun was lowering in the west, creating tangerine stripes across the wall.

Cami threw her packed bag that looked like it had enough stuff for a week's stay into the desk chair. "Ay, the retreat," she said, voice loaded with resentment. "The one you let me at by myself."

"I guess we're going to talk about that."

"Shouldn't we?" She sank onto the edge of the bed. She looked different, though it was probably me who'd changed.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I've been thinking about it for a while, Cami. Believe it or not, you're the first person I said anything to. I haven't been into the whole Youths for Jesus scene for a while now. Even before Antoni, so don't think that's why," I added before she could mention it.

"I was going to ask you that."

"Of course, you were."

She watched me a moment then glanced at her nails. "I thought your grandfather's death also might've had something to do with it. Didn't it affect you? I thought it was weird how you didn't mourn him that much."

How could I explain to Cami that Cuco hadn't meant to me what he'd meant to the whole Ministerio Rey Jesus family. To me, he was my strict grandfather whose sole way was the highway. To them, he was a pillar of the community, a treasure. "I miss him, but that's not why I ditched the retreat."

She shrugged. "Thought maybe you left because he wasn't around anymore to watch over you. I know you felt pressured by him."

"I did. But Abuela is the same way, and so is my mom, to a certain extent. All our friends are. So is school. I mean, MRJ has been our whole life since we were little, our entire worldview. There hasn't been a moment I haven't been immersed in it, you know?"

"It's a good community."

"It's not everything."

"It's a good, safe place, Vale, filled with good people. I know we're not all perfect, but that doesn't mean we should be discarded."

"I never discarded anyone, Cam. I just needed to get away. You understand that, don't you? Everyone needs a vacation. Mental health is a top priority."

She sucked in a breath. "So, you wanted to see what it was like outside the church walls."

"Basically."

"I guess I can't blame you for wanting to visit your half-sister."

"It's just sister, Cami. We don't call ourselves 'half-sister.' We don't purposely quantify the fifty percent, you know? Besides, we've gotten close like full sisters." I felt a bit guilty saying that. I'd spent so much time away from the house.

A minute went by where we didn't say anything. The full moon ritual was set for tonight, 10:05 PM, and I could not, under any circumstances, miss it. I wracked my brain trying to figure out how to get back to the resort without Cami. I would have to make an excuse, another lie. Two steps in the right direction, two steps back again.

"Were they surprised I left?" I asked.

A puff of air escaped her lips. "Um, yes. Father Willie wanted to call you and talk to you, Sister Agatha called your mom, and everybody kept saying how rude it was the way you left."

"Rude? I quietly slipped out. I bothered literally no one."

"But you know they don't see it that way."

"See, that's my point. Now you understand why I don't want to be a part of it anymore. Did anyone consider maybe I was having a crisis? Did anyone give me the benefit of the doubt? This is my point, Cami. The church is supposed to be about acceptance, tolerance, love, understanding, yet when people don't act perfectly, everyone gets judgmenty."

"No one got judgmenty."

"You just said they were saying how rude I was! That's judgmenty, Look," I pressed my fingers against my eyes, "I don't want to discuss it. I came here to refresh. You're the one who decided not to warn me that you were coming, and the first thing you talk about is the retreat."

She crossed her arms. "You asked how it went. I told you."

"Fine."

"All I'm saying is it's okay to try something different, but ultimately, we all go home, Vale." To God, to the Lord. She didn't have to spell it out for me to understand what she meant.

"What if we don't?" I asked. "What if we find happiness elsewhere?"

"Are you saying you're happy here?"

"I might be. I don't know. I've only been here two weeks."

"Then find a church near you, wherever you are. That's the important thing."

I gawked at her. I hadn't wanted to open this can of worms here and now, but if we were going there, may as well. "Why is that the important thing?"

Cami blinked a few times. She scanned the room for a reasonable answer. Like most people I knew, she couldn't begin to fathom a life without religion. "Because it is. Because you need God in your life, Vale."

"Who says I don't have God in my life, Camila?" I was nearly shouting. In thirteen years of friendship, I'd never shouted at her.

She stared at me.

I never said I was done with God, no matter how feverishly I'd danced buck-naked under the moonlight with strangers. Thinking of them felt at such odds with Cami's presence. This had all been easier without her here. Now that she was, I felt disoriented and lost.

For a moment, I considered giving in to the safety of my former life. Maybe the clairs were leading me astray. Maybe Cami was here to save me.

"Where's your stuff?" She glanced around.

I looked at her. "Like what?"

"Your clothes, your bag...there's nothing here but a bed and a desk. Where were you before I got here? Your sister texted you, then you arrived fifteen minutes later. Just tell me."

"I was out." I was my old self again, defending my actions with partial truths. "Where? Tell me, Valentina, for fuck's sake, just talk to me!" She hurried and walked over to the window. "You're different. I can tell."

"I am different, Camila. That's what two weeks away from home will do to you."

We were two canoes in a swiftly moving river, each traveling at a different rate, at times moving in'd each other, at times drifting apart. My heart hurt to think I'd decided our friendship would be on pause long before she got here, before the retreat, maybe during our senior year, and I hadn't bothered to tell her.

She had a right to be angry.

Staring at the neighbor's yard, she clucked her tongue. "Is it a guy? Someone you met online?"

"What? No. Camila, it's not always about a guy." I stood and paced the room. There was no changing her. I couldn't bring her along where I was headed either.

Outside, the sky grew deeper purple. The clairs were probably going batshit wondering where I was. I owed them nothing, yet I didn't want to let them down. For once, I was exactly where I wanted to be. My choice. I wanted part of the full moon ritual. I liked the new possibilities, the new friendships, the exploration of this new spiritual side, even if, at times, it was scary as balls.

"Look, I know you came all this way just to see me, and I promise I will explain everything to you. I'll come clean, but for now I have to go." I moved to the door, hoping she'd leave of her own accord.

"You said that last time right before you left the retreat."

"And if you're my friend, you'll trust me." I'd driven six hours. I'm not going back tonight. It's dangerous to be on the road late by myself. I don't think you want that for me, do you?"

"Then stay here. Macy has everything you need. She's a great hostess."

"I don't want to hang with Macy, Valentina. I want to be with you. Whatever it is, I can handle it. I want to be a part of your life, no matter what it is."

I stared at her. "You don't want this. Trust me."

"Trust me, Valentina."

We'd been friends since the age of five. I was pretty damn sure she couldn't handle it, but who knew? She might prove me wrong. I didn't want to be a hypocrite like the others. I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt.

"Fine," I hurried. "Come along, or stay here. I don't care. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

"Don't be so dramatic."

"Suit yourself."

I left in a hurry. If Camila wanted to join me on this journey I'd started without her, I was no one to stop her.