

## Chapter Sixteen

Letting Cami come had seemed like the right choice, but now I had a devout Catholic in the car who also happened to be a Youths for Jesus leader, from Ministerio Rey Jesus, which also happened to be one of the city's biggest mega churches, and we were en route—where else?—to meet a coven of witches.

I'd stormed downstairs where Macy had picked up on my fuming vibes. She'd pulled me into the kitchen and stared deep into my eyes with absolute sincerity. "Do you need me to keep her here?"

"No. I've inconvenienced you enough."

"I don't mind."

"I appreciate it, but I need to deal with her myself. Stupid of me for thinking I could have a summer of peace and quiet." "I'm sorry, Vale."

I sighed. "I'll be back soon."

She grasped my arm—our eyes connected. "And you'll tell me what's going on then?" She knew something was up. "Yes. Promise."

She'd touched my chin and let me go without another word.

Truth was the least I could give Macy Edwins.

Now, pulling into the long, cracked driveway of the Sunlake Springs Resort, it seemed like such a stupid choice to bring Cami. I should've insisted she stay behind until I could complete my obligations.

"Where're you taking me?" Her wide gaze absorbed the dark surroundings. We ventured further away from the main road deeper into darkness.

"To your death."

She stared ahead without a word.

"I'm kidding." I stopped the car and got out to pull the iron gate as far open as it would go. Shu ling back to the car, I drove through the gates. "Just a head's up, you're going to have a lot of questions. Save them to the end."

"You're scaring me."

"There's nothing to be scared of. I've met some people, that's all, and we're doing a prayer tonight." "That doesn't sound so bad." "Not the kind of prayer you're used to."

I could see the cogs in her head chugging at a furious pace to keep up. "I don't understand." "I told you to stay, Cami." I drove down the darkened path of shrubbery that had, from all the rain, grown considerably in the last few days. The ground beneath was uneven, as we bumped along. Branches reached out to scratch the sides of the car. Up ahead, the old Sunlake came into view. "What the...?" Her gaze had fallen on its silhouette bathed in moonlight. It looked ominous with its dark and forbidden central tower and most its windows blown out. "What is this?"

"An old hotel. A hospital. It's called the Sunlake Springs. Remember, no questions." I pulled up to the building, parked in my usual spot, and got out, rehearsing how I was going to explain this to the clairs. I considered asking Cami to stay behind, though from the looks of it, she didn't want to get out of the car anyway.

"You're going in?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. You can stay or follow." I didn't wait for her reply and le to locate the unlocked auxiliary door behind the registration counter. She decided to leave the car and follow me in.

I squeezed through the gap in the doorway. A feeling of coming home to a place I barely knew overcame me. Tonight, the lobby was extra dark, particularly disheveled, and I felt Cami's trepidation like nervous rats around my ankles.

"I don't like this." Her voice was out-of-place in the dusty stillness.

Without my flashlight, I scanned for shadows and listened for voices so I could confront anyone before they saw her. "Wait here."

"Vale." She panic-whispered. "Don't leave me."

"I said, wait here." I walked away.

Inky darkness greeted me, a gloom that deepened with each stretch into the expanse. I passed the bird cages and came face-to-face with the dreaded atrium. A er all I'd seen today, I covered my eyes and hurried past it.

"Don't come out. Do not..." I warned the spirits.

"Valentinaaaa," Cami whispered.

I ignored her. "Hello?"

The hallway felt cold.

A crack snapped behind me, Cami tiptoeing into the hallway. "Are we allowed to be here? Why on Earth are we here? Oh, my God, oh, my God..."

Doubt at having brought her continued to seep in. My stomach clenched into itself. I knew I'd face questions. Crow would go back to mistrusting me. From where I stood, I heard the low thrum, the heartbeat, his drumming in the distance. A peek at my phone told me it was still early—8:30 PM—still the clairs had already begun raising energy just like we had with the mock run.

"This way." I led her through the ballroom, where the heaps of bags, clothes, and personal belongings tipped Cami o that we weren't alone.

"People live here?"

"Just temporarily," I said, to ease her fears.

I was so used to making things palatable for Cami and others who would disapprove. Why I worried so much about other people's reactions, feelings, or fears, more than mine, would always be a mystery to me. "What's that noise?"

I led her through the room, hoping I wouldn't "see" whatever curious spirit was there. My heart jumped into my throat when I heard a voice from the alcove to my le .

"I knew it," someone groaned.

Cami let out a squeal. "Oh, sweet Jesus."

"Crow." I pressed a hand to my chest. He wore his jeans without a shirt, kept his arms crossed over his skull-moth and nude, long-haired woman tattoos. "Why are you lurking in the dark? Aren't you supposed to be outside?"

"Don't tell me where I should or shouldn't be, Vale. Who is this?"

I stepped aside to reveal Cami hiding behind me. "This is my friend, Camila. She surprised me with a visit. That's why I le earlier, because my sister called me. Don't worry, she's not going to bother us."

"She is bothering us. Why did you bring her?"

"I didn't have a choice." I glared at him. Surely, he understood that sometimes shit just happened. "You know I have a family. They worry about me."

As soon as I said it, I felt bad for insinuating that I had a family who cared, and Crow didn't. That wasn't what I meant. "That's not my problem. You know what's involved. Soon we'll have cops here asking us to leave."

"She's not going to do that," I said,

"Who is this guy, and why is he talking to you like this?" Cami was charging up, ready to defend, something she did when she wanted to appear tougher than she was.

I turned a glare on her. "Can you please?"

"We can't have her here," Crow said. "Get her out."

"Cami, just...take my car and go back. I'll explain later. I promise it's nothing."

"It's nothing? You brought me to a place that looks like Halloween Horror Nights and some random guy comes out of nowhere and starts telling you what to do? What's going on?"

"There's something I have to do." I wrestled with o ering an explanation, but we didn't have that kind of time. "See my things over there? Sit for a while. Don't go anywhere until I come back. Believe me, you don't want to be caught alone in this place."

"Is this urban exploring, what you're doing? I can't believe this," she mumbled, doing what I asked and plopping beside my du el bag, drawing her knees to her chest. "You owe me, huge."

Crow stepped out of the alcove and took me by the elbow, but I yanked it out of his grasp. We walked out the back doors onto the veranda. When we were far enough away, he turned his scrutinizing gaze on me. "What were you thinking bringing a friend here when you know what we're doing tonight?"

"I told you, I didn't have a choice! She blindsided me."

"You always have a choice, Vale."

Fae flew up the slope, wearing her flowing skirt on the bottom half but nothing on the top. Her hair was covered in wildflowers. She looked glowingly beautiful, as always, but now, instead of appreciating her, I cringed inside, thinking of what Cami would say about her.

Mori waltzed up the walk to the veranda, a little more modest wearing an open-sided tank top. "What's happening?" they asked.

"Valentina brought a friend," Crow hissed.

Mori gave me a confused expression. I didn't care anymore if Crow got upset with me, but seeing Mori's questioning face suggesting possible betrayal to the group hurt. AME "I had no choice. She drove a long way to see me. When I said I had something to do, she insisted on coming along. I'm sorry, guys. We can still do this. She's not going to bother us."

"Her being here is already a disruption," Crow said.

"I can't say I disagree," Mori said.

"One I can't do anything about," I insisted.

Crow clenched his jaw. "If she reports us, you're going to hear it from me." He jabbed a finger in my direction.

I slapped his fingers away.

"Crow, stop," Mori said. "We can't do that, not tonight. Negativity will throw o everything we've worked hard for." "Whose fault is that?" he spat. "I knew she'd do something like this. Even if the girl doesn't interfere, now Vale's not in the frame of mind. We can consider this botched."

"It's not botched, Crow," I said. "I'm fine."

"That better be the case." He walked down the slope to the lake. "Is everything alright?" Fae asked, coming up to me and holding my face in her hands. "Yes, you can count on me. Let's do this." I didn't know why it was so important to me that they trust me when I said everything would be okay, but it was. I had to forget about Cami for a while, she was my past, my childhood. She stood for everything that had led me to this point, whereas the clairs represented the new. Not the future—I wasn't sure how long I would live with them, but they vere definitely my present. My now, the only moment we really had.

I had committed to helping them. I had to give them that. The moon above shone brighter than anything I'd ever seen. Beautiful and just as ready for this as we were, wearing her crown of brilliant rays, I'd prayed we wouldn't have rain, and the universe had provided. Wilky, drumming by the lake, wore a white wrap around his hips. In his state of half-awareness, he looked in the zone.

I gave one last look at the veranda to see if Cami was there, if she was watching, and then, like a dandelion in the wind, I let the problem of her being here go. She wouldn't interrupt, I would commit 2002

My clothes came o ,

Fae spread black salt and flowers in a wide circle around us, while Mori poured bowls of lake water along the same arc. Crow worked on lighting the fire inside our metal fire pit, tossing wood in to make it roar and spit, as Wilky pounded beats to match the ones inside my chest. Fae set handmade flower crowns atop everyone's heads, little daisies from the fields.

Mori poured water over our shoulders. "Goddess Moon, we see you tonight. Goddess Moon, lend us your light," they sang with Fae.

Crow smudged us with sage that burned my nostrils and filled my lungs, an earthy aroma I was beginning to love. Mori started chanting in the same language I'd heard them use back in Cassadaga with Citana Rose, I felt each word in my soul like I'd heard them a thousand times before. Fae's twirling both dizzied and drew me in, as she grasped my hands, and together we frolicked around the fire to Wilky's beats and Mori's song.

very time I held Fae's hands, I saw a sad little girl wishing she had more than a dirt floor to sleep on. I wanted her to have it all, to be successful, to have the confidence of ten thousand goddesses.

It was a beautiful night for a full moon ritual—my first with other people. And despite my best friend sitting alone in a hotel full of questionable energy, waiting for me to come back to her, back into the fold where all was safe and familiar, I was ready to move into the unknown. Ready to dance freely. Ready to open this portal.

"Let's do this," I smiled at the moon.

And the moon smiled back.