

Chapter Eighteen

I grabbed my flashlight and clothes, hopped into my shorts, stumbling into the resort. Following the twinge of whimpering, I found Camila crouched on the lobby floor, covering her head with shaking hands. She shot me a glare.

"Stay where you are." Brown eyes flashed in the beam of light.

"As if I would hurt you. What happened?" I squatted beside her. She scrambled backwards on her hands then stood clumsily. I ushered her behind a column where we could talk in private.

"Something touched me." Glassy tears spilled over her lower lids.

"Where?"

"In there!" she shouted, pointing to the ballroom. "Where you le me by myself! What is this place? Who are these people? You know what doesn't matter. Something e ing touched me. I have to go." She crossed the lobby, carefully sidestepped the clairs, then hurried toward the auxiliary door.

"Cami, wait." The others tried following, but I shook my head.

"Are you leaving again?" Crow li ed a broken plank of wood o the floor and twirled it. "Cause if you are, I'll need you to stay away for good. These interruptions aren't helping our work here. We spend too much energy resetting from all these emotional interruptions."

Emotional interruptionsLike he didn't have emotions.

"Crow," Mori muttered. "Come on."

"I'm going to talk to her one minute," I told him. "I'll be back."

Slipping behind the counter into the o ice, I found Cami outside, trying to work her phone between my car and Crow's truck. She jabbed at the screen with rage. "Damn it..."

"The service sucks here."

She pointed an accusing finger at me. "Stay with your bruja friends. I'll have somebody pick me up." "Cami, I tried to warn you." "About which part? That you're a bruja? Or that you're a liar?"

"A liar? That's a bit much." My head ached from when I slammed into the tree, and Cami's drama wasn't helping. "You said you needed space. You said you were in a weird place. You made it seem like you needed a break, but the is that you're here with these...people...who are in it with the Devil."

"The Devil?" I sco ed. "My Lord...first of all--"

"You're going to deny it? I saw you dancing in your circle, the chanting...I'm surprised you didn't cut o any chicken heads and drink the blood."

I had to laugh. "Would you listen to yourself? I am not 'in it' with the Devil, and neither are they. You have the wrong idea. Nobody in there does anything evil. It's working with energy. That's it. I can teach you about it if you want."

"No, thanks. I'm good. Working with energy-is that a scientific fact?"

"Is God a scientific fact?" I said. "I don't need to see God in a physics textbook to believe He's real, Cami. That's what faith is. The least you could do is use the same logic you apply to God to what you saw out there." She gestured to the faded exterior of the resort. "What I saw in there was occult, pagan, witchcra , evil, black magic, brujería, and everything else. Super fucking irresponsible of you, Valentina, and you know it. I'm sorry but you can't compare one of the world's major religions to juju dancing under the moon with drugged-out squatters. It's not the same,"

"No one's on drugs." Not hard ones, anyway.

"Ah. So, the juju dancing and squatters part is fine..."

"You're being judgmental. You want to know why I le the retreat? That's why."

"Because of me?"

"Because everyone's bullshit. I'm sick of having to live up to fake standards that nobody else in the church seems to be able to live up to themselves. So damn righteous. You're doing it now."

"See, the important part of what you just said is that there are standards. There's nothing wrong with standards. Standards give us something to work towards. Goals make us better people, unlike..."

"Unlike what? Who?" I crossed my arms. Wind Cami up long enough and watch her become sanctimonious. "Forget it." She went back to trying her phone service.

"Tell me what you were going to say. That my friends have no standards? That they're losers? That your religion is the only correct one? Nothing outside of it matters? You're only further proving my point, Camila."

"My religion? Suddenly, it's my religion? Your friends? What else is there about you that I don't know? Just so I know who I'm talking to. Or are we back in elementary school, and it's Opposite Day? I forgot?" She cocked her head in that condescending way she did when she got on her high horse.

I breathed calmly. "Listen, there's a lot of misunderstanding here, and that's partially my fault because I haven't told you what I've been going through. You're my best friend, and I should have."

"Finally, you take responsibility."

I held back the urge to defend myself. She was mad. She was allowed to be.

"I know what I'm doing. I've been studying this for the last year, okay? But it's been a secret for this exact reason, because I knew you and everyone would go and judge me for it. There's nothing wrong with learning something new. There's actually some interesting concepts going on in the world of quantum physics and neuroplasticity, if you would just get to know."

"This is because of Savannah, isn't it?" she interrupted, a light dawning in her eyes. "I remember at the start of senior year, you showed me her Insta. I thought it was weird you were so into her feed. I told you she was a practicing witch, that it wasn't just a goth aesthetic, that you should stay away from her. A er that, you stopped showing me her pics."

"Yes, because you said I should stay away from her. What makes you the expert on what makes a person dangerous or safe? Savannah was a nice girl. I'm sorry I never got to know her, because I was too busy listening to your holier-than

thou bullshit."

"I'm sorry for trying to protect you!"

"I'm not yours to protect!"

We stood there, seething at each other.

"It's the same thing with your sister," I went on. "You talk about her like she's so lost. What if Silvie's life is more puttogether than you think? What if being with di erent guys is how she figures out what she likes or who she is? What if, by doing that, she's actually preventing her own divorce in the future?"

Cami sco ed. "This is so..."

"Trust the process, Camila. Stop trying to force everyone onto your path of perfection."

She laughed haughtily. "I knew it was because of Savannah. The Devil works in mysterious ways."

"Stop with that Devil crap already." I smacked the car's hood. "She's part of what got me into it, but I've been curious for a long time. I've never felt 100% at home in the church. I only went to Mass because my grandfather made me, because I would see you and your family there. For me, church is a social club more than anything."

"Okay, so your whole life's been a lie. Our friendship has been a lie."

"No, not our friendship, Cami, I love you,"

At that, she sco ed again, o ering no "love you back." She just turned and stared at the empty parking lot reclaimed by tall grasses sprouting all over from within its alligator skin cracks in the asphalt. "You're just like your father." I bristled. "What do you mean?"

Silence.

"No, you can't do that. You can't just drop a package and not expect people to pick it up. What do you mean I'm just like my father?" I jabbed my face into her line of view.

She was at the end of a proverbial dark hall, turning the corner, begging me to follow. "It's not a secret your dad wasn't big on church. That was a huge point of contention between him and your mom. You know that. Everybody knows that. Even my parents know that..."

Ugh Every last member of our congregation knew his lack of involvement was one of the driving forces that pushed my parents apart. Didn't make hearing about it from my best friend any less awkward.

"My dad went to church to make my mom happy. Over time, he stopped. He wasn't brought up religious. I never had a problem with it. It didn't make me love him any less. What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm saying he explored. He took risks, like you say about my sister, and that wasn't enough to prevent his splitting from your mom. You get what I'm saying?" "No. He tried to make things work with my mom, because of me, so he could be with me and not do the every-otherweekend thing. He didn't want to lose me. That's why he came back to her a er their first separation."

And yet, he le a er their second. I rarely saw him again.

"Vale, he came home because his side didn't like him anymore. She made him choose, just like I told Silvie she should do with her boyfriend. He wanted it both ways. He chose your mom because he was already engaged to her and didn't want to look like a huge asshole to your grandfather."

"He wanted to follow through. How is that so horrible? Whatever you think you know, you don't. Nobody knows the real truth about my parents, except for them. He's not even here anymore to give his side of the story, so just stop talking

about him."

"I'm making a point about how he took risks, and here you are, taking risks."

"What risks? Stop talking like you know something."

She shook her head, as if I'd never understand.

"Are you talking about Macy, because she's half Black, because her mother is Black? Does that somehow make my dad a risktaker?" "I had to laugh. "What year is it again? Don't be racist, Cami."

"Don't call me a fucking racist, Valentina."

"Then don't suggest he was with her because he was a risk-taker. He was obviously in love with her. That's why he was with her."

"I'm saying he took a social risk. He wasn't afraid of the consequences, and you're rebellious-Like him. I'm not saying it's a good or a bad thing. I'm saying I see where you get it. Look, take me back. I'll stay at a hotel and leave in the morning."

"You can take my car back. I'm not leaving."

Her stare could've cracked open sealed Egyptian tombs. "You want me to go back alone...in your car...a er I came all this way to see you."

"I told them I wouldn't leave again."

"And you don't think I should be worried in any way that a bunch of Devil-worshippers you just met are holding you hostage inside an abandoned hotel that touched me."

"It's my choice to stay."

"I see."

"I don't expect you to understand, but we're trying to connect with this place psychically to see its history, figure out lost secrets. Important truths."

"You're ghost-hunting, Valentina." She laughed.

"I knew you wouldn't get it." I could see I wasn't going to teach her anything. "If I go, I disrupt the flow. Take my car."

She stared at me in disbelief. What she was thinking was anybody's guess, but it was safe to say our friendship would probably be over a er this. It would take a huge e ort on Camila's part to understand that she wasn't the center of my universe anymore,

"It's funny..." She fake-smiled. "You talk about Antoni like what he did to you was so horrible. But look at you, messing with the spirit world when the Bible forbids it. What you're doing is a hundred times worse."

"Worse than what? Than a guy everyone thought was so devout taking advantage of me inside a nasty bathroom?" My chest felt like it was going to explode.

"He didn't take advantage of you. He barely kissed you then took care of himself in the sink. If anything, he avoided touching you?" "You should be grateful."

"Grateful??"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Months of unspoken resentment overflowed into the valley between us.

"That's how you feel?"

"It is." She shrugged. "Sorry I didn't tell you before. I didn't think you'd understand. Have fun with your coven." She opened the car door and slipped inside.

"Wow." So, this was how our friendship ended, with a sanctimonious remark instead of a peaceful parting of ways. My best friend, who should've been on my side, should've sympathized with me a er that incident, sat there, smugly ignoring me.

"Also, you lied about Antoni," she said, turning on the engine and starting to drive away. "Everyone knows he's gay."