

Chapter Nineteen

Tears came rough, complete with uncontrollable sobbing. I sat on the floor of the ballroom with Wilky, Mori, and Fae around me. Crow, too, keeping a mistrustful watch from a distance. A fight between Cami and me was bound to happen, but it didn't make it any easier to accept. We'd been growing apart for a year, and though I took full blame for not telling her my feelings, she made it difficult to share.

As for Antoni-I knew. My hands had told me that same day. As if a gay guy couldn't still have a sexual experience with a girl, now I looked like a huge liar. But it did happen. I was there. So, fuck Cami.

Mori gently tucked strands of my hair behind my ear. "Friends break up all the time. It's okay. Sometimes they come back. If they love you, they'll learn to grow with you."

"Sometimes they don't, though. Come back," Fae added, scratching a bit of caked mud o my knee. "They can't handle your awesomeness, which is more than okay."

Looking into all their eyes, I felt so grateful to have them here with me, yet I couldn't shake the guilt that I'd traded one set of friends for another.

I'd have to let Cami go, for now. I wasn't about to run a er her. Wilky rested his hand, palm up, on my knee, an imploring, hopeful gaze in his eyes. I slid my hand into his, eager for a connection, when my vision darkened, and unfamiliar images began to slide through my mind-a young boy with Auburn hair and light skin spitting in my face, calling me racist names. My heart hurt for her.

I let go of his hand.

"What?" he said.

"What just happened?" Mori looked at Wilky, then at me.

"Nothing." Whatever it was, it was personal, plus I had no right to see inside anyone's head without their permission. I grabbed my cross. My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight

"Get rid of that," Crow said darkly from his spot in the corner, smoke curling around him

"No." I cut quickly, glaring at him to the surprise of the others. "It's the only thing I have le of my father's."

"What it represents caused you immense pain today. Today, your whole life, for that matter. Leave it. You'll feel better." His eyes cut through me, intimidating me, but I would not back down-not to Crow or anybody. I was tired of his bullshit.

"Crow," Mori said. "Stop being a dick."

"What, it's true. None of what went on between her and her so-called friend would've happened if it weren't for everything that bauble symbolizes."

"It reminds her of her dad," Fae said. "Are you even listening?"

"I don't care. It's the complete opposite of the work we do here. It's o ensive to me; it should be to you all, too." He stood, picking up his camera to check the settings.

"It's just a fucking charm," Wilky muttered.

"It's holding her back. She needs to pick a side. You all do." He stomped away, pushed out the veranda door, which strained heavily under its weight.

"I don't need to pick a side," I said to myself. "I'm sorry about what happened to him when he was a kid, but not all churches are the same. Not all parents or Christians are either."

"I guess Crow told you what happened to him?" Mori muttered.

"Yeah."

"Be nice to Vale!" Fae told Crow through a broken window. "She helped us!"

A urinal leaked and dripped, the sound echoing across the tiles. Another was cracked like the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold adhesive. Blue light shone through the cracks, rays emanating from the sink, growing brighter with every push.

Antoni stood at the sink, back to me. His right elbow shook, his head tilted back.

His groans were low and prolonged.

The cracks changed to a greenish-yellow color. Then blinding yellow.

I shielded my eyes to protect them. When I reopened them, Antoni's face was an inch from mine. It's true what about you. You're a bitch.

I'm not.

You are. Look what you made me ddie was gripping himself. I looked away.

You're confused, Antoni. That's why you pulled away. That's why you took me to the bathroom in the first place-to "try" me out.

He hissed like a threatened tomcat. I could smell his rancid breath on my cheek. You kept pulling from me, he said, his hand jerking on himself faster now. Why?

Because of my hands. My hands see things! Goddammit, Antoni, leave me alone!Why was he putting me through this? Wasn't it enough he'd used me, even though I clearly refused to touch him?

Fuck you, Vale!His hand moved faster and faster, his eyes began to close.

I couldn't move, couldn't leave this situation. I was stuck in the dream, being forced to watch him climax. I looked for an escape route. Beads of sweat formed on Antoni's brow line, as he worked toward his end, and tears stung my eyes. I was frozen in place.

Antoni's open mouth grew wider, taller. BIIIITCH! The word morphed into an O, and his voice dropped several octaves, a black gaping maw filling my view. His body stretched tall, taller than the ceiling, which dissolved, replaced by a dark sky where a partially eclipsed burnt orange moon created the illusion of a halo around his head.

Nobody will believe youhe said.

Don't listesomeone else spoke, someone not Antoni, who was still screaming, the walls of the bathroom shaking with his entitled rage. Truth always comes to light.

Oversized Antoni fell to his knees to better screech into my face, wind from his cavernous mouth assaulting me. I covered my ears and closed my eyes, begging myself to wake up. Bitterness boiled through me, that this situation still haunted me, that he was still pinning blame on me, that my subconscious was still holding on. The more time I spent at the Sunlake, the more I felt it-rage. Rage for the fucked-up values fed to me, rage over Cami's attitude, rage over Antoni taking up space rent-free in my brain. Rage I'd held in for so long.

I couldn't get away from Antoni's screaming. My muscles seized. All I could do was let his fury come at me. Forcing myself to move. I gave it everything I had and hurled my body upwards to dislodge the sleep paralysis.

Come onnnn...My eyes opened.

A swirling dark mass hovered over me. I gasped, sitting up and shoving my back against the wall. The dark cloud floated closer, curious. Somehow I felt its intelligence. Its consciousness. Whatever it was, it wanted my feelings, all my angeras fuel. A hole formed in the middle of the mass, widening like the aperture of a camera lens, making space for what I quickly realized was me.

Come in.

"Go away," I whispered.

There was a shi in energy. Something approached from behind it, through it, something alive. It emitted hot breath, and the cloud's focus transferred o me onto whatever it was. Finally, I could make out the shape of a dog-a wolf, my wolf-stalking in the gloom. He moved decisively, one paw at a time, closer to the cloud. Lobo led his gums and bared yellowed, plaque-filled teeth, snarling at the churning mass.

The formless fog spun like a slow-moving tornado, floated into the center of the ballroom, making the chandelier's suspended crystals tinkle, and disappeared. I gripped the wall behind me, my lungs pumping breaths of air like they were my last. "Thank you," I whispered.

The clairs were moving in their beds. I didn't want them to wake and be startled by Lobo. I reached out to touch him, but he took steps back onto the parquet floor, claws clicking on the wood.

"Good boy...thank you. Okay, shoo, now."

He stared at me with lackluster eyes, jaw slack, pink tongue bobbing. A drop of saliva dripped as he panted, licked his chops to regain composure, then lolled his tongue again. His silvery eyebrows expressed that he wanted something. "Coming." I scrambled to my feet.

He led me out of the ballroom into the desolate hallway as dark as obsidian with the occasional pewter highlights. I along one wall for orientation, careful to keep my hands to myself so I wouldn't see into the Sunlake's mind.

Lobo stopped at the entrance to the atrium.

"No," I said.

He panted and stared at me.

"I can't, buddy. I don't like what's in there."

You musthe seemed to say.

"That room doesn't want me. It keeps scaring me out." Hearing my words aloud, I knew it was crazy to think so, but from the first day I'd set foot in the hotel, the atrium had wanted me out.

"Who are you talking to?"

I jumped, my shoulder hitting the wall. I saw a tall, shirtless shape in the di used moonlight. "God damn it, Crow." "That's a lot of blasphemy for a child of God." He approached, holding his camera.

"Don't you rest?" I hu ed. "You'll see her when you see her. No way to did the ritual, I'm sure you'll catch a good one of her soon." I was tossing him a bone, I knew, but I didn't want to be here with him. I was going back to bed. "Goodnight."

I started to leave, scanning for Lobo, when Crow blocked my path, showed me the glowing screen of his camera. A selfsatisfied smile crossed his lips. "I did. I caught some good ones of, I don't know, something. There's this mist..." He showed me a tall column of what could've been smoke but also may have been a reflection of light o the glass. "And this one..." The next slide was of a giant orb.

"Orbs are dust, I'm pretty sure," I said.

He smirked at me. "There's great moonlight coming in through the windows upstairs. Figure d take some night shots." He thumbed through at least ten more beautiful low-light photos, and though they were gorgeous, I fought the urge to tell him I'd seen his Lady. "Ghosts keeping you awake?"

"The wolf did."

"Wolf?" He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, right. An extinct wolf follows you around. Let's see if I catch him." Li ng his camera, he took shots of the hallway, turning on his flash to illuminate the darkness, but thankfully, Lobo had skulked o. "What else do you see?"

"Meaning..."

"Since the ritual last night, do you see anything di erent? Do you see her?" He put down his camera and crossed his arms defensively.

I stared at him. I didn't want to lie anymore.

"The lady. The Lady of the Lake," he said. "Do you see her?"

Yes, I was sure I'd seen his grass-covered lake spirit last night during our ritual, unless my newly acquired superpower had simply been an overactive imagination. But considering she was his Holy Grail, we were alone, and he seemed to envy me, I lied.

"No."

Crow stood there, studying me. Once he was satisfied that I might be telling the truth, he sighed and took a few slow steps in my direction.

"Good, 'cause, no lie, that would've frustrated the shit out of me."

I had no choice but to bump against the cracked wall. He was so close. I didn't like how he was looking at me or how his gaze focused on my lips, or the way he smelled. His time living here had finally infected his clothes and skin, and tonight, he smelled worse.

"What are you doing now?" My palms grew sweaty. "Back up."

"I mean, I'm supposed to be the clairvoyant one, right?"

"I said stop."

He reached for my hand. I hesitated. "You're the new one. How would it look to the others if I saw her and I didn't? I'd look like an idiot, wouldn't I? A er everything I've done, the work I've put into saving this place. Imagine if you got rewarded with a full-body apparition instead of me."

I yanked my hand out of his, but he gripped my wrist in a flash, and planted it on his face. His skin felt cold and clammy. "Tell me what you see."

I expected to "see" visions of Crow's childhood or emotional trauma, but only to a pair of seafoam green eyes entered my mind. A woman's face superimposed over his, a slender, cracked nose, beautifully formed lips, curved breasts over Crow's body. I smelled a rank stink in the air, like stagnant swamp water and rotting dead fish rolled into one.

I tried to twist my hand from his grasp. "Don't touch me again."

Crow smiled, his fingers tightening on my wrist. "Tell me what you saw."

"She's all you think about," I said. "And she's going to appear to you very soon."

"Don't lie to me, Valentina."

"I'm not." I had no problem lying if it meant he'd release me. I hated these games. Unfortunately, my voice sounded weird when I lied, high-pitched and unsteady.

He held my gaze with those awkwardly light eyes. I looked away, rattled, ashamed. Shoving my hand away, he said, "That's what I thought," and disappeared down the pitch-black corridor.

In the morning, I leaned against a veranda column watching a large spider build its web. It worked so diligently, even though one of us was bound to ruin it by accidentally smashing through it. Between my fight with Cami, the nightmares, the agonized spirits, and Crow, I felt like a lost soul.

Maybe it was time to leave. I'd done what I'd come to do. I'd helped the clairs. In turn, they'd helped me see life in a new way. For that, I would always be grateful. Was there any reason to stay?

Someone displaced the air beside me, a short body blocking the chirping of birds. I looked. The little boy stood there. Sandy brown hair, bell-bottoms, tie-dye shirt. He ran o so fast, giggling as he bolted, that I felt the icy blast of his wake.

"Hey!" Before I could follow where he went, he disappeared.

I was almost sure it was the same little boy I'd seen in the atrium, staring at the mermaid fountain,

BooA giggle.

There he was to my le, holding a yellow tissue paper flaker by its green pipe cleaner stem. He held it out as an ering, but before I could take it, he ran o with it still in his hand.

"That's not nice." I smiled, happy to know at least one cheerful soul inhabited this wretched place.

He was gone.

But in his place was someone else entirely. I drew in a sharp gasp from the suddenness of it.

A skinny woman. Hospital gown open. Chest exposed. Large flaps of skin pulled apart and pinned to either side, revealing her ribcage and diseased lungs. I stood paralyzed, watching the flesh sacs fill with air and contract, as she stared at me with vacant eyes.

Something slipped out of a bright red incision in her right lung onto the floor. It looked like a ping pong ball rolled toward me. A small, o-white, plastic-looking ball skittered and rolled, snaking its path toward my feet, disappearing before it could touch me.

I think it's workingthe woman said. I feel better. She coughed, and blood flew from her lips, splattering onto her gown.

I couldn't respond, I was so shocked by her image and the odd object that'd emerged from her body.

Somewhere behind me, a real voice cried out from inside the Sunlake. Ripping my gaze from the patient, I turned and ran into the hotel, checking the ballroom first, the main hallway, then every room of the ground floor on the way toward the atrium.

I passed Wilky rummaging through a custodial closet. "Was that you just now?"

He shook his head.

I jogged past the atrium, slowing to stare into it by habit. The chandelier bobbed so ly between its chains. Back and forth, back and forth. No breeze. I braced for the worst. Didn't wish to see the man hanging there again. Instead, an old-timer with wild white hair hunched over a walker stood there, his hospital shi sliding down his frail shoulders. Attached to the walker was his IV stand. Hollow eyes pled with me.

"What is it now?" I muttered.

I can't move.

"Go to the light, sir," I pleaded. "The light has everything you need."

He looked above my head as though the light were there. Mori was right, these souls needed help. And if I had the ability to see and hear them, to help direct them somehow, how could I, in good conscience, leave the hotel?

I can't. The man continued to stare wide-eyed.

I craned my neck to look up at whatever it was he was seeing, terrified. There was nothing, just the lobby's columns with their scaly tails, ocean wave crown molding shimmering in the morning light, and ropes of green Ivy wound around them.

A very real, very loud discussion echoed from down the hall. With a lingering look at the old man, I ran o past the kitchen, wishing I wouldn't run into anyone else not of this dimension. Fae and Mori were in the dining hall, both hunched over Mori's notebook. They marched up to me with a wild look in their eyes, flailing the notebook. "Let's see what Vale thinks."

"I think I'm going crazy," I said, rubbing my temples.

"You, us...it's happening," Mori showed me their notebook. On one sheet, Mori had written LEAVE LEAVE LEAVE LEAVE LEAVE in their scratchy, trance-writing style. The words took up most of the sheet and were punctuated with pencil puncture wounds through the paper.

I shook my head. "You channeled that?"

"That's not the only one. Look." Mori flipped to another sheet with similar scratchy words that read: YOU WILL DIE YOU WILL DIE YOU WILL ALL DIE ALL DIE.

"I watched them." Fae wiped tiny beads of sweat o her upper lip and twisted locks of hair around her wrist. "I watched them write it, and I'm telling you, I've ever seen them do that before. Mori's always calm, Vale. Whoever this was coming through, was not nice."

"Not every ghost is nice, love," Mori said.

Fae insisted. "That wasn't a normal soul. We've been here a year. Mori. When has that ever happened?" "We opened the portal. We might now be communicating with deities, guides, demons..."

"Demons?" Fae chewed on the dried tips of her hair. "I have enough of those on Earth, Mori."

"I'm not saying it's a demon. I'm saying the amplification may have opened another of this building's layers to us where older, non-human entities exist." Mori looked at me, dark circles under their eyes. I wasn't the only one getting shitty sleep.

"Maybe it's a TB patient," I said, thinking of the image of the woman with her chest exposed. "Or a mental patient. Isn't it true that many weren't necessarily mentally ill? In the old days, people were institutionalized for anything-being atheist, believing in angels, seeing spirits, having a vagina..."

"TB patients are usually weak," Mori said. "They don't say DIE DIE DIE DIE." "Then it's someone warning us," I said. "Last night was intake. Die. You guys see anything strange during the ritual?" Mori shook their head. "Lightning, lake water surge, plume of fire...which strange thing?"

"None of those." I checked to make sure Crow was covered in seaweed. "The lady that walked out of the lake into the fire covered in seaweed, looking nearly identical to all the paintings around this place."

Mori and Fae looked at each other. "Ehh...that's oddly specific." I'm not surprised, Vale. You seem to be stronger than all of us combined. Crow know you saw her?"

"I haven't told him, but I think he knows."

With a big exhale, I held out my hand. I had come to the Sunlake to help the clairs, and help I would give, no matter how terrifying this was for me. I had to use my power for good.

Mori handed over the pad, I took a seat on the floor, and they joined me. With the pad between my fingers, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

God, keep me safe.

Within moments, a tall and thin figure walked down a dark corridor toward me. A man, wearing a black and red robe one of those capes that sat only on the shoulders. Broad-bellied, he seemed to float above the ground without feet. His hair grayed like the temples. He wore the Holy Cross around his neck. Where his eyes should have been were sparkling gold coins.

"Gold."

"Gold?" Fae's voice echoed as if from another place.

"A priest," I said.

He moved from room to room, leaving death in his wake, taking what didn't belong to him. Wallets, rings, watches, deeds. He ripped up living wills. He rummaged bags, opened unlocked file cabinets. He took it all. What

What are you doing?

I knew his secret. He was searching for rumored gold, taking anything else he could get his hands on in the meantime.

The priest bristled and scowled at me. Leave.

"You leave," I said. "Walk towards the light. God will decide."

"Who is it, Vale?" Fae asked.

He was supposed to be giving last rites to the dying.

"They have nothing le to give, the priest reassured me.

"Then there's nothing to take," I replied. "Leave it."

The gold coins dropped out of the priest's eyes, revealing two bottomless holes where his eyes should be. You go you with rage in your heart.

His words stung. "I have no such thing," I whispered, but he wasn't wrong. Just by being here, anger had been seeping out of my soul for the last week, though it'd been brimming at the edge of my consciousness for years.

She feels it. She feeds o it.

Who? asked.

He laughed. YOU WILL ALL DIE ALL DIE YOU WILL...

"Vale!" Mori cupped my face, thumbs swiping away tears. I pushed out of my trance and dropped the notebook.

He'd seen. He'd seen straight into my heart.

For so long, I'd worked not to let the rage show, to stay even keeled and neutral to everyone around me. I'd mediated my parents, accepted my grandfather's lack of belief in me. You wouldn't make a good businesswoman, Valentina. Be a teacher. Teaching is a great career for women!d minimized my own hurt to make others feel better about themselves. I'd been the good, Catholic girl. I'd swept pain that was rightfully mine under a rug.

That shit needed to stop-now.

"What did you see?" Fae shook my hands. Poverty, dirt floor, taunting in school, child services coming for her, a family rumor of rich?et Fae had nothing but love for this earth and everyone on it.

"What did you see?" Mori asked.

Describing the priest might make him reappear. I took back my hands. It was too much, too much. Crow interrupted, rushing in, camera in hand, making a beeline toward one of the front windows. "I fucking knew it."

"What happened now?" Mori asked.

"Your friend you could trust?" he said to me. "Obviously reported us."

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