

Chapter Twenty

We peered out the window into the parking lot. A silver Honda was parked. A familiar figure stepped out of the driver's side, hanging onto the door and staring up at the structure.

"It's just Macy," I said, relieved it wasn't a county official.

"Who?" Crow seethed.

"My sister." I made my way through the room, noting Fae and Mori's silent exchange with Crow. I wasn't here to rat them out, yet indirectly, I'd ratted them out.

I hurried down the hall, through the lobby, out the broken auxiliary door. Macy leaned against the car, chin to phone, probably texting me to come out. "Hey," I said, out of breath.

A look of relief washed over her. "There you are. What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Cami came back last night without you in your car, frazzled as frick. I asked what was wrong. She said the two of you had a fight. She said you were in trouble. When I asked how so, she insisted you were hanging around Devil worshippers. I suspected she was exaggerating, but I came to check."

"God." I covered my face. "I know. But, umm... Look, it's none of my business. I just came because I wanted to make sure..."

"That I'm not actually worshipping the Devil?"

"Making sure you're not in any danger." She pushed a strand of my hair behind my ear.

"I'm not." Though in the back of my mind, I couldn't wrap my conviction around it. Since we'd opened the portal, I'd had a sense of impending dread.

"Cami said you're being lured to the dark side, God is testing you, you're failing." Macy gave a halfhearted laugh. "You're sure everything is alright? I've been giving you the space you need, but you're still my family. I would hate for something bad to happen, and I did nothing to prevent it."

I reached out and did something I'd needed to do for a long time—hugged Macy.

Yes, my hands and arms needed to stop touching people and things long enough to clear my mind, but the hug felt good. Besides, there was nothing bad in Macy's soul. Her all-knowingness slid through me, her willingness to help, to know me as a sister.

"Aww, sis," she said.

In the hug, I also saw her past, her pain, spitefulness she'd received from kids who didn't look like her, how having a sibling meant a lot to her. I saw a teen who worked too hard, who wished she could hang with friends instead of burn the midnight oil.

"You can talk to me, Vale. I know you don't know me well, and I know you're holding back."

Those words made me cry.

Fingertips swiped my cheeks. "But I was just like you once, and trust me, I understand the need to make your own mistakes."

I looked up at the darkening clouds, blotting the snot threatening to come out of my nose with my fingers. "I didn't want to worry you or make you think you made a bad decision by letting me come here. I'm not a troublemaker. I swear I'm not."

"You're not. At all."

"Before I leave home, I was driving farther away from everything and everyone, but I had no idea why. Then I came to visit you, and you're just the air I needed to breathe, Macy."

She smiled.

"But on the third or fourth night, I found this place. I met these people. They've been living here, doing spiritual work." It sounded absurd but at least I was coming clean. "They're clair's."

"As in psychic mediums?"

I nodded and explained how it all began, how I got roped in because of how badly I wanted to learn the skills to contact our dad, but how I'd managed to contact everyone but my father. How Cami's visit had been the last thing I needed, because it'd set me back to feeling guilty.

She listened. I appreciated that she wasn't oozing with disappointment. "What spiritual work are they doing?"

This would sound insane. "There's a portal of energy here. The people who built this in the old days believed the land would heal the sick."

"That's how much of Florida got populated," Macy explained, not surprised by my words at all. "Since the Ponce de Leon days, outsiders have been coming here trying to locate healing waters. Always been something alluring about this land. But the vortex, if it's real, makes people nuts, too. 'Florida man' in the headlines?" She snickered.

I was aware of Crow, Mori, and Fae listening in from the dining hall windows. I lowered my voice and aimed it the other way. "So, these clair's can tap into that energy. Well, a few of them can. I can, too, apparently. And because this place might soon be razed, they're desperate to find out all they can. They needed a fifth person to help."

"Find out what?" she asked.

"Stu that took place here. Stu that wasn't recorded. Each of them has something personal to gain."

"Ah. I know all about unrecorded stu." She smirked. "Working for the Department of Tourism, you hear rumors."

My ears perked up. "Like what?"

"Undocumented events, like you're saying. Every state hospital has them."

"Do you know what those are? How can we find out?" If Macy could help me uncover some of the Sunlake's mysteries, the clair's wouldn't have to delve into the dangers of the spirit world to find out.

"I don't know, Vale. Those files are off-limits to me, not an historian for Tourism & Recreation. I just make videos." We stood in silence for a minute. "And that fifth person is you?"

I nodded.

She nodded, too. "I just want to make sure you're getting something out of this, that it's not all for them. I don't want to come to find that you're being taken advantage of."

I thought about that. Maybe I was at first, but since I'd been with the clair's, I'd learned more about myself in two weeks than I had in eighteen years.

"So, something else," I said. "This'll sound crazy..."

"Ah, ah," she warned. "No need to preface anything. Just say it."

I sighed. Macy's superpower was definitely empathy. "Since I was little, I could tell stu about objects just by touching them. For the longest time, I thought everyone could. Eventually, I learned it was just me. And because that makes me sound like a freak, I ignored it, I stopped touching things, stopped touching people."

Then I took a risk with Antoni. He was the first sort-of boyfriend I'd ever had. As terrified as I was of "seeing" things in him, I trusted that God would guide me.

"To the point that people thought I was cold and standoffish," I added.

"When you were just afraid of seeing the truth about them."

Tears leaked out of my eyes. "I've suppressed everything about myself." I'd turned the other cheek at least a thousand times, like my mom had with my dad, like my grandmother had supposedly done with stu. Cuco did behind her back.

"It's okay..." Macy said.

I explained how we were ready to start the ritual when Cami showed up with her surprise visit. "I hated being rude, but I couldn't play hostess. I don't know what she was thinking."

"She was worried about you."

"I get that, but I leave home for a reason."

"Why was she so scared, though? She looked like she'd seen a ghost. Well, a ghost what you just said, I suppose she had." "Macy, that girl can't fathom anything outside her little bubble. I don't mean to villainize my whole community, but the Catholics I grew up with? Even though they're nice and mean well, they cannot see past their noses."

"I wasn't brought up religious, but I know people like that."

Listening to her, I could visualize my dad and Macy's mom's relationship. Dad was probably like me, like Macy was probably like her mom, and if we got along this well, I could only imagine the two of them. Dad must've felt at such ease around her.

We both sighed and gazed around a while. She slapped at a mosquito. "You know what your situation with Cami reminds me of? The Everglades."

I laughed. "Okay..."

"Every summer, lightning strikes from one of these massive storms we get and hits dry brush out there. What happens? The dry brush lights right up-fires. Then people start with the emergency calls. "The Everglades is on fire!"

"Meanwhile, it's normal," I laugh. "Exactly! And so's this, Vale. What happened between you and Cami is a normal brush fire. The land clears the old to make room for the new. It's a natural process. The earth knows what it's doing, and so do you. Trust the process." She jabbed a finger into my shoulder.

What a great analogy. Friendships ended to make room for new memories. Okay, but change still hurt.

Macy sucked in a breath. "Well. It's officially creepy as heck here. Creepy, but beautiful. She withdrew her gaze from the Sunlake and put it on me. "There's another reason why I came to get you. I have someone at home, someone who wants to meet you."

I knew. "Your mom."

I'd seen her when we hugged. The woman was, right now, waiting at the house, nervous about meeting me. I thought about my own mother and the pain she might feel knowing her daughter was being asked to meet the woman my dad had had an air with long ago. But I also remembered how my mom was grateful to Macy right before I leave home for giving me a place to stay.

"Is that okay?" Macy asked.

Despite what my mom would think, I needed to meet this lady, to know what my dad knew, to see the other half of his secret world. I couldn't be the mediator anymore.

"I would love to meet your mom. Let me tell the others."

"They're right there," Macy said.

Mori, Fae, and Crow stood at the auxiliary door, watching us. Mori and Fae gave little waves, but Crow wore his usual scowl and shook his head like I was responsible for the ills of the world.

"Hey, if you guys don't mind, I'm going back to my sister's for a bit. I'll be back. By myself. Promise." to

"Damn right you are," Crow said.

"What's his problem?" Mori growled.

"He thinks he owns this place. Let me grab my stu." I hurried to the doorway in a trot, pushing past the three of them. "Your sister is heckin' gorgeous," Fae said.

"She is." I walked backwards. "Inside and out."

"And intuitive."

"What?" I looked over my shoulder.

Mori smiled but didn't answer.

"You seem to be a magnet for bringing in unwanted guests." Crow followed me through the lobby. "Any second now, cops will be here."

"It's fine, Crow," I said. "Lay off me already."

"I'm just gonna say this. If I don't get my chance in front of the spiritual society about keeping this place up, because of the negative attention you're causing, you'll pay for it, Valentina."

I whirled to face him. "Stop threatening me. It's not like restoring the hotel is your main ambition, Crow. We all know why you're truly here. Since when is opening an energy vortex part of a restoration project? Your only concern is seeing the Lady of the Lake. So just...stop."

"That's not a secret. It doesn't change the fact that I won't get to do what she asked of me. Only by doing what she asked

of me will I get to see her. And only by seeing her I get to ask my question." "The one about Hell," I said, and he nodded. "You want to know if you're headed there, and only the Lady can tell you. Crow, I know if your parents and the church did a number on you, but you're not going to Hell. You haven't done anything to deserve it." I watched a flicker of sadness, or maybe fear, in Crow's stare. "You don't know that, Valentina. Don't bring anyone else here." He headed off.

But I wasn't done with him. "Or what?"

He stopped in his tracks. "You don't want to find out."

"I may be Catholic, but that doesn't mean I won't send you to Hell if I have to."

A wide smile cracked open his face.

Footsteps pounded down the hall, echoing through the lobby. Wilky skidded into the room with his drawing notebook. His words came out in raspy gasps. "I saw someone."

"Who?" Crow asked.

"A real person or a ghost?"

"Both?" Fae and Mori joined us, as we huddled around Wilky who hugged his notebook to his chest.

"I was alone drawing. I heard a scream...I always hear screams. So, I followed it...I followed the scream. Sometimes it disappears before I can locate it, right? Well, this time, I stayed connected. I could hear a man, screaming."

"Both."

"What did he say?" Mori asked.

"I couldn't tell. But the portal is open, guys. It has to be." Wilky breathed deeply to catch his breath.

So, I wasn't the only one.

"The portal is definitely open." Crow hurled a chunk of concrete against a wall, creating a small crack in the wall. "People don't just fly thirty feet during rituals. The changes since last night are pretty evident. In you guys, anyway."

"Where were you again?" I asked.

"I followed the sound...to the atrium," he said, eyes on me. "I saw the man you saw, Vale. The one with the broken neck, the chandelier guy. I stood in the doorway. I asked if he needed help."

I listened, a tight knot in my stomach.

"When he stopped screaming," Wilky went on, "I was able to get a good look at him. He said the lady wouldn't let him pass."

Crow's face snapped toward him. "Lady?"

Wilky nodded. "He said, "The lady won't let me through. I can't get through."

"Can I see what he looks like?" Fae leaned in for a peek at his sketch.

He turned the pad around. I slid in to see it, curious if he would look at all like the ghost I'd seen with those horrible bloated eyes. Instead, the air inside my lungs evaporated. I clutched Wilky's arm. Touching him didn't help—now I saw both the sketch of the dead man and the image Wilky had seen of the same man in his mind. There was no denying either—it was my father.