

Chapter Twenty One

It couldn't be.

I'd seen that same man in my vision, same bulging eyes, same sharp angle of his broken neck, forever embossed on my brain. Blue tone to his face and neck. Shoulders slumped over in defeat. But there was no denying the cheekbones either, high and prominent, chin of a classic actor, the way he styled his hair, flopped over one eye. My mother loved his full head of heartthrob hair. His build, even throughout, was lean and proportional.

Wilky had hashed it all out in charcoal, the likeness was insanely accurate.

Until that moment, no one had noticed my silence. I slipped to the floor and quickly scrambled to my feet when it suddenly felt too hot and stifling inside the breezeless hallway. They hovered around me, while my world imploded, voices alternating from watery to tinny as if from an old-timey radio. Wilky supported me.

I stumbled through the lobby and out of the hotel.

It couldn't be him. How could it? My father passed away of a heart attack. Why would his spirit be at the Sunlake Springs?

"What is it, Vale?"

What is it, Vale?

What is it, Vale?

What if the facts I'd been given about my father had been wrong? What if my dad had died here at this wretched hotel? He'd worked for Volusia County during the separation when he came to meet Macy. Sure, anything was possible, but why would they lie to me?

Outside, the sky had darkened. Macy, who'd been waiting in the driver's seat, looked up from her phone and could see something was wrong.

"Is she alright?" she asked Wilky.

"I showed her a drawing, then this happened." Of what? "Of a man in the hotel. She'll tell you.

."

Had he come here for work? An inspection? Urban exploring?

Admiring the hotel just for fun? It was possible, given his love of Art Deco and Mediterranean style architecture. Had that been him in the atrium all this time, trying to get my

attention?

"Vale, text me." Wilky poked his head into the car. "I'll come back for you, if you need, or want..." Wilky's worry that I might never return a er this was not lost on me.

But I couldn't come back. How could I? Wilky's drawing had just filled in a missing piece about why there'd been a closed-casket funeral for my father. If it'd only been a heart attack, his face should've looked normal. My mother said she'd made the decision to protect me from further damage; she didn't want my last view of Dad to be his death mask. I'd believed her. But here was a new truth, assuming the hung ghost in the atrium really was my father-had he taken his life instead? Was the bloated, blue-faced man at the end of that rope my dad?

Macy closed the door, circled the hood, exchanged more words with Wilky. As we drove out of the parking lot back toward the gate, I fought for words,

"What did he say?" I stared ahead.

"He said you stopped talking a er he showed you a drawing, What happened in there?"

"It was Dad."

"The man in Wilky's drawing,"

"Dad?"

Quietly, Macy drove over the blanket of cracks on the overgrown path. "Dad was the man he drew?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Wilky sketches. He also hears disembodied voices in the hotel. But I guess, since last night, he can see the spirits, too. And the one he just saw looked exactly like dad."

The longer we sat in silence, the more I began to question my own sanity.

"Vale, are you sure about that?" Macy asked. "Maybe it was another man."

"It was him. I don't understand how. Dad died of myocardial infarction. That's what the doctors said. That's what was on his death records."

"You've seen his death records?"

I looked at her, hoping to find some nugget of truth in her face. "No, but that's what they told me."

What they told me.

A vein in Macy's temple twitched. She cracked her knuckles, then her neck. "I think that might be misinformation. When we get home, we'll sort this out with Lucinda."

"Who's Lucinda?"

"My mother."

I felt like a child lost inside of a fun house, navigating the lopsided rooms. My mother had no reason to lie. The doctors wouldn't have lied to my mother either. However, if my father had died of a heart attack, why, like Wilky said, would he have been screaming?

We pulled into the street and up Macy's drive where another car sat waiting. On our way to the front steps, she stopped and took my hands into hers. "It's alright. Okay? Whatever it is, we'll figure this out. I promise."

"Is it, though?" I could barely breathe.

Macy's expression, infused with sympathy, so ened, then we trudged up the steps. I heard dishes and glasses clinking in the sink. Motherly sounds. I missed my own mom at home. We entered the kitchen, where I prepared to see the woman dad had had a relationship with before my parents got married. my

Lucinda Edwins stood at the window, staring into the yard.

"Ma," Macy said. Lucinda turned halfway, a sad smile on her lips.

"There you are."

She was in her late forties, more statuesque than Macy, expressive deep brown eyes, darker skin than her daughter, but there was definitely a family resemblance. She reached for a towel with long, slender fingers, nails painted lilac, and studied me. She wiped her hands dry.

"Lucinda, this is Valentina," Macy said, adding no further explanation.

Lucinda knew who I was. "Hello, Valentina." A sadness broke across her cheeks, and she offered a hug. I accepted. The moment my hands held onto her wide shoulders, I felt a complicated, textured, unorthodox sense of compassion that nearly broke me,

"Nice to meet you," I said,

"Let's sit a moment," Macy said,

The two of us sat at the dinette while Macy brewed coffee and gave her mother a watered-down version of what I was doing at the Sunlake Springs. She made it sound like I was doing research, which I appreciated. Didn't need my dad's ex knowing, during our first minute together, that I was involved in pagan shenanigans.

"I know this is long overdue," Lucinda said. "But I'm sorry for your loss. When Pablo passed away, I wanted to reach out to you, but circumstances being what they were..." She left it at that.

"It's okay. This is weird." I fought the urge to cry.

"Oh. Maybe we shouldn't..."

"No, it's fine. We need to talk about it," I assured her. Outside, the sky was beginning to spill its own tears onto already oversoaked land,

"I know you have questions," Lucinda said, following my stare out the window. "And it looks like we'll be stuck here a bit, so..."

Macy handed me my usual mug. I stared at it-Failure Is Not An Option. When I first arrived here, I'd had visions of my dad while holding this mug, but I'd assumed he was just on my mind. Now I wondered...

Wait

Wrapping my hands around it, I closed my eyes. Confusion over relationships. Agony over not seeing my daughter. Wishing I could repair all the damage I'd caused.

I looked at Macy. "Did my dad live here?"

Macy and Lucinda looked at each other.

Nobody answered the question. I needed the truth. Craved it, like a weary soldier craved home. Macy sat. "In the car," she said slowly, looking at her mother, "we were talking about her dad. Our dad."

Lucinda nodded. "Yes..."

Macy went on, "And I never told her this, but I'm telling her now..." She played with the edge of her mug, sliding her finger around the rim, the way Dad used to do whenever he wanted his whiskey glass to "sing" for me. "I actually met Pablo once before I knew who he was."

I raised an eyebrow.

She measured her words carefully. "He used to rent this house."

"This house," I said.

"Yes. From me," Lucinda clarified.

Fragments of my mind flew all over the kitchen, landing on the floor in sticky, imaginary chunks. "Wait...what?"

"That's how we met," Lucinda corroborated Macy's lost detail.

"Miami-Dade sent him this way for work in Volusia-we're talking years back—and they set him up with a temporary place, since he'd be working here for six months."

"So, you're saying...he stayed here? Like, here, here, in this house?"

Lucinda nodded. "I've owned this property for years. My granddaddy left it to me. I already had my own place to live when I acquired it, so I've rented it out ever since. Helps pay the bills. Anyway, your dad was a tenant. Mostly before you were born, but also during his last months."

I popped up and absently walked around the kitchen, trying to imagine my father, walking on these old pine floors, climbing those stairs, ruminating about life, going about his daily life within these walls.

"He was my first tenant before we started seeing each other. I knew he was engaged, Valentina, in case you're wondering. I suppose I'm guilty for trying to change his mind. It's just he was so unsure about getting married, and I was young and so in love with him."

I listened. She seemed to be under the impression that I was upset about their relationship, but I wasn't. I was upset that he stopped visiting me, but not about her.

She went on. "He would tell me how he wasn't sure he could be the man your mother's family wanted him to be. He was that religious man, more spiritual than religious, but you know that. He didn't make enough money to allow your mom to be a stay-at-home mother, which was very important to your grandfather. Your grandpa was a powerful man. Pablo felt small in his shadow."

"My grandfather had that effect on people," I said. Lucinda was telling me more than my mother ever had. That felt unfair. My mother should've told me this.

"That was the last I saw of him until he came back four years ago,"

Lucinda said.

"When I contacted him," Macy clarified.

I nodded again.

"The house was available, so he stayed a few months before..."

Before he died.

"But that one night he was here...you remember?" Lucinda asked her daughter.

"Yeah," Macy said with disdain. "I met him and didn't know it was him. My mom sent me here to find Ernest, our repairman who was fixing an A/C leak your dad reported."

Lucinda interjected, "I had a feeling he reported it just so I'd come by and see him, but that ship had sailed. I've been married since the moment this girl was born."

So, Lucinda never got with my dad in the years I was alive. That made me feel better, for some reason.

Macy went on, "So, this lady sends me here looking for Ernest, without telling me who the tenant was, right?"

"I wanted Macy to see him for herself," Lucinda explained, eyes welling up. "Maybe there'd be some connection between them, even though I knew Daddy wouldn't like it." She glanced at her folded hands. I missed Daddy was Lucinda's husband, or the man Macy called her father until that fateful day. "How could I tell you, Mace? There was no easy way to do that."

"By Dad, you mean...?" I asked.

"My stepdad, technically, though I don't think of him that way. He'll always be Daddy to me." She watched Lucinda wring her hands and dab her eyes. "After seeing him, I just knew. Don't ask me how. I mean, look at me."

Macy was a beautiful blend of Lucinda's dark skin and my dad's light.

I didn't know what her stepfather looked like, but I bet she had questions.

"The moment I turned eighteen, I did it. I took the test."

"And Lord, did the shit hit the fan," her mother said.

Macy smirked. "Anyway, fast forward, Lucinda and I are good now, but we weren't for a while."

"Too long." Lucinda pressed a napkin to her eyes. "Valentina, I want you to know I loved your father, but I respected his decision to marry your mother, which is why it's been hard for me all these years. I didn't want to keep a secret from you, baby," she said to Macy, "but I didn't have a choice."

"You had a choice, but I understand." Macy turned to me. "That's when I contacted him and told him about me. He told your family, and that's when he came to live here for the last time."

"Until the end."

They nodded.

It made sense. He hadn't just come to Yeehaw Springs because it was a nice town in the middle of Florida-he'd returned because Lucinda was here. So was his other daughter.

"He wanted to meet you," I said, swiping my eyes. "I can understand that. My dad never shirked his responsibilities."

"Right." Macy nodded. I could sense the resentment evident between her and her mother. "And then, the Sunlake Springs took him."