Chapter Twenty Two

"Took him?"

Macy grabbed her mug and drank down the entire thing. "When Cami got here all pissed, saying you were spending time at that hotel, that things were getting dangerous, I wasn't sure what she meant. After she left, I called Lucinda. I wasn't expecting her to tell me what she did. Mom?" She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest.

I knew what Lucinda would tell me.

My father had died there at the Sunlake Springs-not here in the house he'd lived in. And not of a heart attack either. All the time Dad had stayed here, I never knew. He visited me in Miami every other weekend at first, but he never invited me to wherever he was. I always assumed it was because his living quarters weren't up to par. In my mind, I always visualized the sad, empty apartment of a divorced dad, but that hadn't been the case. He hadn't wanted to invite me to Lucinda's house.

He hadn't wanted his two worlds to collide.

"Go on," I said.

Lucinda took a deep breath. "I came by every so often to check on him. We conducted all rental business through email, but he wasn't well, and I wanted to make sure he was alright. Your mother was understandably upset with him. You were upset with him. The whole family was upset. He'd tried staying near you, but your grandfather sent him away. Threatened him if he didn't leave town."

"My grandfather?" I imagined Cuco telling my dad to get the fuck away from his family. He'd always had an overprotective streak. My father and he never got along, but I found it hard to believe that Cuco would outright threaten him.

Lucinda cocked her head like she was showing restraint. "He wasn't nice to Pablo. So, your father figured he'd come here. I suppose this house always felt like a safe space to him. He got a job with Volusia, since he'd done work for them on the side anyway. They gave him a project-at the Sunlake Springs."

"Doing?" I leaned on the sliding door. Every muscle in my core felt weak.

"Surveying, assessing property damage, the usual. Other than that, I'm not sure. I know he was always obsessed with the place since he was a child."

I knew my father was originally from the Orlando area, but I didn't know he knew about the Sunlake Springs, and I definitely didn't know he was obsessed with it. All he ever mentioned was that the Biltmore Hotel in Miami looked like an old favorite of his.

"He never told you about the time he stayed there?"

"What? No."

Lucinda got up and entered the dining room, as I raked my memory for any mention of the Sunlake Springs from my father.

She returned carrying a small box, which she unfolded. What she pulled out made my heart ache in the most agonizing way. In her hands was the little stained-glass sun ornament, the one that hung by his bedside window at home, the one he took with him when he left.

"Where did you get that?" I gasped.

"He left it here. Did he ever show you this?" The next item she pulled out was a yellow flower made of tissue paper and green pipe cleaner for a stem.

My lungs froze. I heard my heartbeat whoosh through my ears.

"He made this as a little boy," Lucinda spoke as though through a tube. Distant and disconnected. The little boy on the hotel veranda had a craft flower that looked just the same. "He was there the night his mother died at the hotel. You've heard about the fire that killed your grandmother, yes?"

"No, I..."

For years I'd heard my grandmother had died in an accident. I never met her. She'd passed away when my dad was little, but it never registered with me. My mom's family was the only family I ever really knew.

Lucinda handed me the flower. "Here."

If I took it, I would see things.

Did I want to see any more? My heart was already breaking.

With a deep breath, I accepted the flower.

Immediately, I "saw" the love my dad had for his mother, her long brown hair in a cascading braid, the halo of sunlight around her head, her blue-green eyes, how peaceful and accepted she'd felt at the Sunlake Springs surrounded by like-minded friends. They'd lived an idyllic life in those last days leading up to her death. Then came the kitchen fire. She, along with several other women, preparing meals for the rest of the guests, were trapped when the double doors locked. She burned to death.

My grandmother was the smiling, waving kitchen ghost.

The flower trembled in my hands, "Why... Why wouldn't he tell me all this? About the Sunlake? About my grandmother dying there?"

"Maybe he did," Macy said. "Honestly, and no offense to you, but maybe you just didn't pay attention. You know how parents talk about family, and half the time, kids don't listen."

No. No, I would've listened. I always wanted to know more about my father's side. He just never wanted to talk about it. He made it seem like there wasn't much to tell.

"Trauma," Lucinda added. "He was there when it happened. The rumor is that he watched his mother die."

"My God." I jumped to the sink, breathing deep to hold down the sickness threatening to come up. Not only did my grandmother die there, but he perished there, too?

What did that mean for me?

"Vale, that place is bad news," Macy said. "Lots of deaths over the years, rumors of malpractice, rumors of arson, the , patients admitted never made it out..."

Lucinda nodded. "Hate crimes, persecution of Black folks..."

"Hate crimes, persecution of Black folks," Macy repeated. "Not that there's a shred of evidence, mind you, because that's being Black in America."

Wilky's quest. His granduncle. The KKK. Visions of torches out by the Devil's Tree bobbed up and down through my mind. Yes, the place had a terrible reputation. Much too much darkness had enveloped the Sunlake Springs Resort.

"The list goes on," Macy sighed, rubbed her eyes. "There's no proof at all?" I asked in the hopes I might bring back a "shred of evidence for Wilky and the others.

Macy looked at me sideways. "Sis, listen to me, the state has done a bang-up job of covering it all up to make Florida look good to tourists. Tourism is our primary industry. If people think of our state as a dangerous, racist, misogynist, hate-filled wasteland, they won't come spend their hard-earned dollars. Smiles, beaches, dolphins, and seashells. That's what people want to see."

I nodded.

"So, when you arrived and asked what was there to do around here, I deliberately did not tell you about the Sunlake Resort. 'Cause I did not want you going into that historic hell trap,"

I needed space to breathe and stepped out, leaving the slider open. The rain was starting to fall in heavy, fat drops. So much I'd never known.

"Vale," Lucinda said. "There's something else. He probably didn't want to talk about it, because your mother's side is so religious. Like I said, he was already on thin ice with your grandfather."

"What is it?" I asked without facing her.

"I heard stories. He told them to me, of course, because I never judged him. He didn't need more accusations of witchcraft hanging over his head than he already had."

Witchcraft?

I searched my brain for the bits of info I had. I knew my dad's mother had been a hippie. I had seen exactly two photos of her in my life, and in both of them she'd dressed like one. I knew my grandparents did not approve of the way my father had been raised, outside of the church, so pagan, practically a heathen. I knew my grandfather had a habit of squashing any belief that wasn't of his own faith.

So, this meant...the little boy running gleefully around the hotel, holding his crepe paper flower, was my very own father-baby Pablo in his happy place where his hippie, New Age mother, had once spent a peaceful summer with friends.

Meditating, moon-dancing witches in their "safe space."

Witchiness ran in my blood.

I sank to the ground and sat there, letting drops of rain soak into my clothes. It felt cleansing. It washed away the blanket of lies. "What else?" I asked. I needed it all at once, so I could absorb it all.

"That's pretty much everything," Lucinda said. "Last I heard, Pablo was visiting the Sunlake every day to take notes. He was adamant the building had to come down. It was unsafe. According to him, it's a time bomb waiting to go off."

"I didn't know that part," Macy said to her mom, glancing at me. "I didn't. I would've told you not to go had I known. Vale, come inside. Please."

But the rain, the rain exposed layer after layer.

"Leave her," Lucinda whispered. "The last time I saw him, I asked why he continued to go there if it was so bad. He said he had to go back. He had to double-triple check the measurements. They changed day-to-day. He wanted to make sure he wasn't going crazy. One day, a wall would be nine-feet-three inches, and the next it'd be nine feet, and that's when it happened."

I swiveled toward them. "What?"

Macy was in the doorway. "Vale, let's take a break from this a bit. Why don't you go upstairs, take a nap, while I-"

"No. I've lived my whole life in a fog. I want answers."

Lucinda's gaze held mine. "He didn't come back after that. I didn't hear from him; he never paid the rent, which he always did on time. When I drove by that last time, his car wasn't here. I told my husband, and even though Bill wanted nothing to do with him, he came with me. Together we drove to the hotel to check on him..."

I bit my lip and imagined the whole thing, silently thanking Bill for his act of kindness.

"We saw his car and went inside." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "It didn't take long for us to find him. He was..."

When she didn't continue right away, I entered the house and sank into a chair. Lucinda came over to me. She rested a hand on my shoulder, but I didn't want to see my father through her touch. I didn't want to "see" what she saw when she entered the Sunlake Springs and found my father dead.

I pushed her hand away.

She sniffed. "We called police. They came out quickly, followed by an ambulance. They took him away."

"Why the scream?"

"What scream?" she asked.

"My friend said, in his vision, that he was screaming. Why?" I insisted.

"I don't know. When I got there, he was already gone. I wish I knew more. I would tell you if I did, but that's all I got." Lucinda fell apart on her daughter's shoulder, as I shattered into a million broken dreams.

So, that was it. My father had killed himself at the Sunlake Springs. In the atrium, no less. So, the man I'd seen had definitely been him. My dead, broken father with the snapped neck and bulging eyes. My father's heart hadn't stopped from stress or heartache or any such bullshit. He'd committed a mortal sin by any Catholic standards -- he'd committed suicide.

Shame upon my family.

An hour later, I stood on the front porch of a little green house in Cassadaga with Macy. I didn't mind her coming along to see Citana. Her story was just as much my story, except from a different side. Our stories had intersected, but we both needed truth.

I kept thinking back. After my father's death, it took a long time for his burial to take place. People kept asking when they could pay their respects. I hadn't realized it then, but I was now sure the church was trying to decide whether or not to allow him a Catholic burial.

Suicide was a mortal sin-an act against God's will. According to our faith, he should not have been allowed into the Kingdom of Heaven. None of this sat well with me. My father may have been upset over the way his family fell apart, but he wouldn't have left without saying goodbye. He would've given me a goodbye. Even if he was suffering from depression.

At my feet, Bob Meowly plopped onto his back for a tummy rub. Macy bent to scratch him. I kept my eye on the peephole.

"Where are we?" Macy whispered.

"A friend's house."

A shadow appeared through the fisheye lens, then the door opened. The old woman stood there, holding a plate of avocado. "Mori's friend! You need more dinner? I need more time to prepare it."

"I'm not here to pick up food, ma'am. I have questions."

"Oh! Come in. Come in..."

"I'm sorry I didn't call first." I stepped into her airy home.

"Nonsense. You're having a crisis." She opened the door wide. I knew better than to ask how she knew I was having a crisis. "Avocado? I just sliced them. They're from my tree."

"No, thank you." If I ate, my body would reject it. "This is my sister, Macy."

"Hello, Macy. What can I do for you girls? You need a reading?" Citana pulled out chairs for us. Macy and I sat, perched on the edges.

My hands were tense, I opened and closed them to relax. "Last time I was here, you said something about my father. I didn't understand it at the time, but something I learned today made me remember it."

"What did I say?" Her eyes searched my face,

"You said my father was with me. That he's always with me."

"He was stepping forward at the time. I don't see him now, though."

"Do you remember telling me that he apologizes for the way he passed? You said something about him apologizing. I thought that was odd, because he died of a heart attack. Do you remember? Please say you do."

She tapped her chin. "I seem to remember him showing me the way he died. Most of them do. But I didn't want to mention it, because sometimes, the living don't know the circumstances surrounding a loved one's death, and you hadn't come for information about your father. You came for a spiritual cleansing."

"But do you remember what he showed you?" I asked, my body trembling. "I need to know."

"Dear..." She sighed. "His neck was broken. I assume he took his own life."

I stared at Citana, my last hope that maybe all this was a misunderstanding. I kept hoping she'd retract her last statement, tell me, No, wait, that's a mistake, tell me my father's heart gave out, just like I'd thought.

Inside, a part of me-the part that believed in miracles and Santa Claus, the goodness in people's heart, and the Universe having my back-withered and died. Macy patted circles on my back.

"And yet," Citana Rose pulled out her tarot cards, shuffled them for focus.

"And yet?" Macy said.

"I'm not entirely sure about that."

The watery swirls in my eyes made it hard to see.

"May I see your hands?" She put the cards back down and stretched her palms across the table.

Oh, God. No. Not her hands, not someone so intuitive. I didn't want to see my father's death in anyone's mind, even if I'd already seen it with my own third eye.

"It's alright," Citana said, slipping her warm hands gently underneath my fingertips. She said a prayer in her language and, with her hand, drew a circle around my head, another around Macy's, and another around herself.

Right away, I saw the darkness, the murky hallways of the Sunlake Springs Resort. Specifically, the atrium where I'd seen the hanging spirit, before I knew it was my father, because my brain couldn't fathom anything different than what I'd been told by my family. "Something else is there."

"At the hotel?"

"Yes. I've told my grandniece many times before. I've never liked her or her friends going. That place has a reputation for the malevolent."

For a moment, I had no idea who she meant. Then, I realized Citana was using Mori's dead pronoun. I forgave her since Citana was a million years old.

"I've felt the same since I got there. Something doesn't want us," I told her.

"Oh, it wants you. Believe me, it wants you. Which is why you must leave, before it gets its wish. It's trapped thousands of souls of other people over its hundred-year history. Same way your father is there."

"But I thought you saw him with me."

"He is with you. But he is also there. He can't cross into the light to his final rest."

"Because he killed himself?" My lip quivered.

"Because the hotel won't let him go."

Macy and I looked at each other. "I don't understand," I said.

Citana's eyelids fluttered. I couldn't see what she saw anymore. I only saw a vast blanket of nightfall covering the resort. "Something prevents him from leaving, the same presence that doesn't want you to leave. It needs you."

"But if my father's soul is trapped there, I have to go back. I have to help him. I have to try. I can't just leave him there." Hot tears rose into my eyes. I couldn't bear the thought that my dad was trapped in an in-between state. "What do I do?"

"Leave."

"But my father-"

"Your father doesn't want you there. He doesn't want anyone there."

"But a black wolf led me there." I was agitated now. "I think he's my familiar or a spirit guide. That's how I got there in the first place. Why should I leave?"

"I'm not sure, dear. I just don't get a good feeling." She rubbed her forehead. After a minute, she reached for my hands again. I could tell she was exerting herself. "At the full moon ritual. You purified yourselves as I instructed?"

"Yes. We did what we were supposed to,"

"You were pure of heart?"

"As much as we could be." Although, I had just argued with Cami an hour before.

"Why, were we not supposed to open the portal? Should we go back and close it?" I couldn't squelch the panic in my voice. "We shouldn't have done it, am I right? Crow kept saying that an entity wanted him to do it. I kept wondering why he was so desperate to please her. She told him that opening the vortex would help him finally see her in the flesh."

"You must close it. Tell the others it was a mistake. She's there, feeding on anger, greed, and hate. I couldn't see her before, but I see it now because you are amplified. She longs to escape the lake. She longs to be human."

"Human? What do you mean?"

Citana started shaking. Her face twisted in agony, like she was seeing something horrible. I slipped my hands out of hers. "She's been banished, cursed to stay there forever. That's why she wants out. The hotel will soon be demolished, and she fears it. She wants to return to the living..." Citana was shaking so hard, the chair was scratching the floor.

"What's happening?" Macy asked.

The old woman's eyes opened wide. She shot her hands out and gripped mine.

And I saw. God damn it, I saw.

The immense inky darkness of the Sunlake Springs, only bleaker than I'd ever seen it, like a world flipped on its axis. Shadows lurking in every corner crouched behind walls, trapped souls parted to let a swirling dark spirit through. The same mass I'd seen throughout the hotel, the one that had woken me up, the one Lobo had snarled at.

With every passing second, I saw further into Citana's vision, the withering patients, the wounded veterans begging for assisted suicide, the doctors who performed them, the women robbed of their babies by doctors who'd deemed them unfit for motherhood, the victims of hate crimes by that awful tree, guests hoping to be healed being dunked into the waters of Sunlake Springs, only to emerge wanting to harm each other.

I saw the Lady of the Lake emerging from the water, long hair fashioned of grass, green, putrid skin eaten by turtles and gators, turquoise eyes covered in algae. She attempted to break out of the lake, fought to become mortal, but she needed more. More what, I wasn't sure,

Energy? Flesh?

Hate.

Where there was hate and anger, there was enough traction to escape her swampy confines. She'd used the corpse of a suicide victim to begin her corporeal reanimation, rotten fingers sliding off bone, feet snapping off as she waded out of the lake, but she was still only a spirit. An entity growing stronger with each death.

"I see her," Citana said. "She is the color of pale aventurine. Sawgrass for hair. She wants you all to die, so she can live. This is what she's done for a hundred years. Feed. You must get the others!"

"I will. But what about my fa-"

"Get them out!" she screamed, "I beg of you!" With a thrust, she let go of my hands and fell off her chair, landing on the floor and shaking on the ground. She looked so frail, every bit her age, an old woman flailing pitifully against the floor.

I felt terrible for coming here and doing this to her.

Macy and I each took a hold of one of her arms. "Citana? Citana? God, please, please..." I prayed she wouldn't be gone. I'd never seen anyone die in person and wouldn't know how to begin explaining this to Mori.

But the old woman's chest rose and fell erratically.

"You give her strength," Citana whispered. "You and Crow both. Crow is a fallen child, and she knows what's in his heart. But he can be saved. Remove him from her grasp. It may already be too late."

I thought of Crow the other night, the way he'd looked when he forced my hand on his face. The Lady of the Lake and Crow had looked like the same person. "I don't know how," I said.

"She will manifest. And she'll do it through one of you."

"You're saying she'll become a woman?"

She closed her eyes. "She's no woman. She's a beast."

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