Chapter Twenty Four

"We can't come back to this room, under any circumstances," I said.

"What about the gold?" Fae puffed up the stairs.

"Fae!" I barked. "A few days ago, you said you'd be happy just knowing where it is. That would be enough, you said. Do not tempt fate."

"Fine. You're right."

We searched the flooded ground floor for the boys, weaving in and out of every room before eventually stealing out through the ballroom exit. They weren't on the veranda either. Rain pelted us sideways, and Fae paced the floorboards, like a dog sniffing out a cut of juicy meat.

"You smell that? It's sewage." She turned up her nose.

"I smell rain, grass, the lake. Nothing bad." I peered into the silver cascade. Surrounding areas were starting to flood, creating mini lakes on the Sunlake Springs property. If the rain continued this way, the hotel would soon become an island.

"What is that?" Fae held onto a column and pointed to something out by the lakeshore. Rushing water spilled out of the lake and poured into what looked like a fissure in the earth, draining the surrounding pooling water.

"Was that there before?" Mori asked.

"I don't think so," I said moments before the air sizzled, and a crack of lightning hit about a half mile away. I covered my ears. Rain washed down my face in rivers that soaked my neck and shirt.

We heard a shout from the distance. Out by the Devil's Tree, someone stood waving. Wilky cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled something incomprehensible.

"What is he doing out there?" Mori asked.

I jogged the length of the veranda. "I don't think he'd be out there unless it was important. He's calling us. Let's go see."

"And go near that tree again? No, thank you." Fae pressed her back against the outer walls. "I'll wait for you here."

Hunkering down, I hustled into the downpour with Mori following close behind. It took us a minute to navigate the land, as we ran around deep puddles and jumped over a few. On one, I lost my footing and fell to my knees. Mori gave me their arm to help me up.

We reached Wilky, and he held out his arms for us to grab to keep from slipping. "Why are you out here?" I chastised. "There's lightning-you're standing by a tree! Come inside," I beckoned.

"Not until I find it." He crouched, raking his open hands through the mud. "Can you guys help me?"

"Find what?" Mori and I screamed at the same time.

"I heard them." His eyes roved the ground. "More shouts. I saw them, a row of Black men, standing right here in this spot, hands tied behind their backs." Wilky's nervous energy was unlike anything I'd ever seen coming from him.

"Wilky..." I knelt beside him with Mori. Together we began digging. "I saw something, too, just a while ago."

"They're here. I know they are." He ignored me.

"Did you hear me? Inside the lobby, inside..." God, I couldn't even say it without feeling sick to my stomach. "The cages. Have you seen what's in the cages, Wilky?" Maybe he already knew. Maybe, by now, he'd filled his sketchbook with renderings of the atrocities but had kept it to himself.

Mori asked, "What's in the cages?"

I didn't want to describe it and hurt Wilky more than he was already. I shook my head at them. Another bolt of lightning within a half mile hit, charging the atmosphere with sizzling heat before releasing its thunderous boom.

"They died by this tree," Wilky said, a maniacal quality to his voice. "They're here, you know. They're here. The screams never stop." He shook his head, as if to dislodge the haunting.

"Wilky, it's not important to find evidence," I tried telling him. "We know it happened. You know it, I know it. You don't need to risk your life trying to prove it."

"Easy for you to say, Valentina,"

"We're in danger here, Citana said we are. Please, can we just go?"

"I'm not leaving. I can't stand the screams anymore. I have to quiet the screams!" Wilky raked aside more and more mud, but it was futile. As soon as he'd make one hole, more water would rush in and fill it.

I saw a certain madness in his face I knew I'd never be able to fully comprehend, not until I'd lived a thousand lifetimes in his skin. I didn't know what it was like to hear the screams of people you were powerless to help, day and night.

"It's not your family." His voice broke. "If you're not going to help me, then leave me alone."

He was right. Of course, he was, I only wanted him to be free of his torment. This was how, though, by shutting the hell up and digging alongside the man. But I did have one last thing he needed to hear. "Who's Bernice?"

He looked up, finally. "What did you say?"

"Bernice."

He stared at me through pained eyes. "My great-aunt. How did you..."

I kept digging, scooping up handfuls of mud. "I think he spoke to me, your great-uncle. He probably knew I could see him. He knew we're all connected now. He told me to tell Bernice he was sorry."

Wilky stared at me, chest heaving. "What else did he tell you?"

I wrestled with his great-uncle's last words to me- I'm nextAnother crack of lightning hit. If I told him, he'd never stop digging, but I realized that even weeks of more of digging would never be worse than not finding closure. "He said he was next."

"Next."

"Next," I repeated.

"Next for...?"

"I don't..." No need to lie. He knew. I knew. "You know for what," I said.

He watched me a few moments longer, as he absorbed the news. Then, he fell onto his hands again with renewed fervor and we dug. We dug until the hole was six feet wide and nearly two feet deep. We dug until our fingers bled, but nothing came up. Mori and I looked at each other but said nothing.

"I need a shovel," Wilky's voice broken.

"There's one in the back of Crow's truck," Mori said to me.

"On it. You stay here."

Mori nodded.

I sprinted off, bounding over puddles, skidding and sliding across mud to get to the veranda, spilling into the hotel, as I left a trail of muck behind me. I ran through the ballroom, soiling parquet floors, cutting across the hallway, blinding my view of the bird cages until I made it to the auxiliary door. Crow's truck was parked away from the covered driveway. I ducked back into the rain.

Reaching the truck, I searched the flatbed, rummaging through hoses and plastic chemical buckets filled with rain. I found a coil of rope that sent a jolt through my mind the moment I touched it.

Fight through it, I told myself.

I curled my fingers around the rope again, afraid of what I might "see." Crow used it to rip coconut palms growing too close to backyard pools out of the ground.

I grabbed it and searched the cab of the truck. Still no shovel. I slammed the truck door and sloshed back to the auxiliary door, dripping into the hotel like a wet towel. Cutting through the hallway into the ballroom, I slowed when I felt another presence, caught a whiff of something putrid on the wind. Shadows flitted in my peripheral vision.

I hurried to the end of the room, to the corner that opened onto the veranda, when I heard a scraping sound. Checking behind me, I saw Crow there when he hadn't been a moment ago. In his hand, he held the shovel.

"Looking for this?"

"Yes." I held out my hand. "Can I borrow it?"

Crow stared at me a long moment, his bioluminescent eyes scanning my muddy clothes, his sweaty face the color of algae. The smell was getting stronger, wafting off of him in sheets. Pooling underneath his feet was lake water with a greenish tint. Goosebumps broke out over my arms.

"What are you looking at." It wasn't a question.

"I'm worried about you, Crow."

"I can say the same about you. Where did you go today?"

"I told you, I had to deal with personal issues."

"You told authorities we were here, didn't you?"

"What? No, I swore I wouldn't."

"It's a matter of time, Valentina. You brought your friend, you brought your sister. I know your sister, by the way, Yeehaw Springs is a small town. She works for the state. Any moment now, code enforcers will arrive."

"She's not going to do that, Crow."

"We'll see."

His skin had taken on a wrinkled appearance like crepe paper in the rain. He seemed taller somehow, his purple hair looked slicker, shinier, gelled with some slimy product.

Citana's warning echoed through my mind. "Crow, I'm sorry to tell you this, but this building is falling apart. As we speak."

"It isn't. It's just water. Water dries. The sun comes out."

He wasn't making any sense. I shook my head. "No, Crow. It's over. The basement is flooded. Chunks of ceiling are falling. One nearly hit Mori, Fae, and me."

"We only have to keep it open long enough for the historical society to approve a restoration budget. We only have to-"

"No, Crow." It's not going to happen, I wanted to say, but felt Crow's cold, dead stare, like a fish after it's stopped gasping for water on the deck of a boat. His feet were bare and red, almost scaly. He lifted one foot and used the toenails to scratch the top of the other.

A beast becoming flesh.

"Okay, we'll talk about it later," I said in the hopes of appeasing him temporarily. I held out my hand. "I need the shovel, please."

"Are you sure you don't need the rope instead?" He gestured to my other hand holding the coil of rope. A wet cough bubbled up in his chest and exited his mouth as frothy foam.

My nostrils flared. He was making fun of my father. "That's not funny."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You don't like my father-daughter joke?" He laughed so low and long, he coughed again. I prayed he would choke on his spit.

"Don't fuck with me. I've been through too much today."

"Only today? Try a lifetime," he sneered.

I wasn't about to have a pissing contest over whose life was worse. We both knew it'd be his. I'd been lied to repeatedly, but I wasn't about to let it turn me into a hateful asshole.

The thought of charging at him and pummeling his face into a pulp ran through my mind, but I knew it was what he wanted-for me to fall apart at the seams, let my rage get the best of me. It wasn't him underneath the exterior. It was half him, half someone else, Crow on emotional steroids. Crow...infected.

"Give it to me." I reached out to snatch the shovel.

He pulled it into his chest. "Come and get it."

"Put it there against the wall." I pointed behind him. "And then walk away."

He laughed. "You don't trust me?"

"No."

"The feeling is mutual."

"Crow, we don't have time for this. The building is not safe."

"You keep saying that, Valentina," he hissed. "As if I don't know. As if I'm new here and just seeing the deterioration for the first time. As if I haven't dedicated the last year of my life," he yelled, "to studying this building. Of course, it's not fucking safe here!"

"Then come with us."

"I can't do that!" His eyelids fluttered.

"Why not?"

"I live here."

"You can leave, Crow."

"I've lived here forever."

I stared into his seafoam green yes, no longer blue. Someone new was talking to me, someone not Crow. I backed away slowly. "She's just using you to get what she wants."

"God, I hope so," he chuckled. A flash of craving in his smile reminded me of Antoni, of the lecherous sneer he'd worn in my dreams. "What do you think my Lady wants?"

"To be alive again. To find beauty and youth. That's what Citana Rose said."

"Citana Rose doesn't understand the complexities of necromancy."

"Necromancy?" I recoiled.

"Communication with the dead."

"I know what necromancy is. And we all communicate with the dead here."

"Not my way, you don't. I don't see' visions like you guys do." His nostrils flared. His handsome smile was back. "I raise the dead from their hallowed ground to ask them important questions about the afterlife."

Wilky and Mori were out in the driving rain waiting for the shovel, so we could dig up God knows what, close a door behind us, and get out of here. It was clear I wasn't going to be able to get Crow to do the same. "Just give me the shovel," I said.

"So demanding. Trade you for the rope." He laughed, extending his arm, and held the tool out to me. I threw the rope at him and snatched the shovel. No lightning bolts shot from his hands, no unintelligible phrases poured from his lips.

I turned on my heels without uttering as much as a thanks and ran without stopping to look back until I'd almost reached the Devil's Tree. By then, Mori and Wilky had managed to dig another food of depth. Forearms caked with dirt, they looked up at me with rivers of water cutting through the grime on their faces and scrambled, devoid of energy, to their feet.

I handed Wilky the shovel.

Necromancy. Black magic. Raising the dead.

Maybe opening the portal had served us in some other way. Revealing truths in each other, exposing the colony of ants simmering underneath the surface.

We took turns with the shovel for the next forty minutes. I still had no idea what we were digging for, but each time my fingers plunged into the muddy soil, I caught a flash of the past. A boot here, a cigarette filter there, a dark-skinned cheek being rammed into the earth.

Laughter.

Struggles for power.

Fear of losing it.

I hated this spot, this tree, I even hated the fine root system that had snaked its way through the earth, making it difficult for us to get the job done. I hated when the shovel's tip cracked into something hard and bony. I hated the way Wilky's fingers curled into the mud to scoop it out. I hated the pain in his eyes when he cradled it to his chest, and I hated seeing the bullet hole in the forehead.

Most of all, I hated that Wilky had to go digging by the Devil's Tree to find a truth he already knew existed, that he'd unearthed his answer, and that he did not seem any more or less satisfied for having uncovered it.

He sat on the ground a long time, cradling the skull, whispering to it. And the rain fell from a gunmetal sky for a long time, washing away his tears.

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