

Chapter Twenty Eight

Some places couldn't help but be miserable. They festered, steeped in the lingering effects of human wrath, fury, and pain. They never should've been born in the first place and held onto their wounds like a pacifier. The Sunlake Springs Resort was one of these places.

And it was ready to die.

I touched my father's charm.

My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight

My little moonshine, dream with the night

As the bottomless tunnel of teeth wrapped around my body, I smelled its foul breath and punched a serrated tooth so hard, my free hand cut open. The earth began to fall away. I heard Lobo cry. The creature spun its head to see what was going on, and my body flew out of its mouth. I swiveled, grasped for the chandelier's chains and hung on. The same object had touched my father.

The walls of the hotel came crumbling down.

Lake water rushed through the halls, and the land and lake merged as one.

I felt a squeeze of muscle around me. The entity tried pulling me off the chandelier chain, but I held on. With a roar, a chasm opened in the floor beneath the atrium. Plants, rocks, discarded benches tumbled into the tunnel. The chandelier swung back and forth, two of its chains loose. I contemplated letting go. To keep itself from falling into the chasm, the creature released me and clung to the chasm's edge instead, roaring angrily.

I heard Lobo whimper. I wanted him gone and safe. Instead, he'd climbed onto a mountain of broken debris and began howling at the creature.

"Lobo, no!" I appreciated he was trying to protect me, but there was no way for him to help.

More of the floor fell away, concrete and tile tumbling, eroding closer to the wolf. The creature swung one of its long, coiling arms toward Lobo, which he artfully dodged as he sailed from one pile of debris to another. The sinkhole yawned open. If I didn't jump now, I'd be sucked into it.

My little starshine, sleep, oh, , so tight

My little moonshine, dream with the night

I swung, gained momentum, then soared through the air, aiming for the other side of the earth's opening. My feet hit ground, my knees cracked, and pain radiated through my leg. When the mercreature saw what I'd done, it tilted its head back and bellowed into the atrium. Glass shattered and showered down.

Lobo skirted the outer edge of the sinkhole. He whimpered and limped.

"Come here, boy. Come on," I called to him.

But the Sunlake gave its last breath. Water and plaster rained all around, as it begged to put itself out of its misery. The creature hung on, blindly grasping at plants, tree trunks, and rocks.

It wrapped a slimy coil around Lobo.

The wolf squealed.

"No!" I screamed.

The last of the standing walls crumbled. The ceiling fell to pieces—plaster, pipes, dust plummeting all around me. Debris smashed onto my shoulders, as I wrapped my arms around my head to protect myself. As the Sunlake Springs surrendered to the earth, its resident evil leapt over the chasm right at me, falling short, holding onto the edge, clinging with the same tentacle that held Lobo.

Calm, golden eyes watched me.

Nothing to fear.

The creature squeezed its coil to gain leverage, shutting the light in Lobo's eyes out forever. My heart filled with rage so deep, my bellows rivaled the mammoth's. It hung off the chasm's edge, pulling itself up with two appendages, flinging them at me in a last-ditch effort to survive.

At that moment, our bodies collided in a wave of heat, followed by a tsunami-like surge swelling high above me, filling me with rage the likes of which I'd never felt before.

It wanted inside me, to consume my anger like it'd done with Crow.

And for a moment, I closed my eyes and let it.

Fuck, it felt good to hand that burden over, to allow this beast to take control of me, releasing me of the obligation to squash it. It was mine to feel. Anger made me real, made me human. There was no denying it. But I wouldn't let it consume me for long.

I opened my eyes and took back my pain, staring into the beast's eyes. "Unlike you, I remember how to love." I grasped the cross around my neck.

Though I hadn't uttered the actual words aloud since the day he died, only thought them in my mind, I sucked in a deep breath and spoke them aloud, giving them power.

"My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight...my little moonshine, dream with the night; when you awaken, Love you will be; my little sunshine Heaven gave me."

The beast laughed, its chest shuddering. Your father is coming with me.

It was a lie. Because that's what demons did.

I imagined the creature surrounded by the same purple light that protected me. "My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight," I repeated. "My little moonshine, dream with the night; when you awaken, Love you will be; my little sunshine Heaven gave me."

I watched it recoil as though I were covering it in acid. As it writhed in pain from my words, the precipice gave way again, a blast of heat shot up from the chasm, and the entity tumbled in, taking my beautiful, loyal, protective Lobo with it.

"Goodbye, little one."

I wasted no time.

Dragging my broken body through busted walls and piles of debris, I trudged out of the hotel as fast as I could, adrenaline coursing through my veins. The earth's crust finally surrendered its hold, and the whole of the Sunlake Springs Resort and adjacent lake cried out with dismantlement.

In a matter of seconds, the entire hotel had plummeted. Gone, swallowed by nature, reclaimed by earth, clouds of ash and dusty memories rising from the newly-formed crater.

The parking lot eroded behind me, as I race-limped across the gray expanse toward the gates. I wasn't safe as long as the parking lot continued to dissolve. I ran, blindly, with everything I had in me toward the highway, slowing only when the rumbling ended, when the land quieted, and something inside my soul told me it was done.

I collapsed on the dirt path into a foot of water. Currents of rain washed my grit, blood, my wounds. Someone licked my knee and nudged my head, sniffed my ears. My fingers dug into so , wet fur. I inhaled the scent of my wolf, my sweet Lobo, whimpering over me.

How had he survived? For him—only for him—I forced open my eyes to acknowledge his presence and unwavering protection.

But my sweet, beautiful wolf wasn't there.

My dad was.

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