

Chapter Thirty

Once upon a time, the smell of alcohol, wiping of blood, or buzzing of needle would've been enough to repel me from ever getting a tattoo. But this felt amazing. Earned, like a badge of honor. I didn't ask anyone's permission. I just did it. I couldn't "see" the tattoo artist's thoughts in my head either. Closing the portal had dimmed the psychometry in my hands.

Macy sat next to me, getting her first tattoo also.

Every so often, I'd snap photos of our progress with my new phone, but mostly, I stayed in the moment, in awe that the last couple of months had led me here. If a year ago, someone had told me I'd spend the summer away from home, getting to know and be accepted by a new family, realize the truth about my dad, all while learning that the seeds of manifestation lay inside each of us, I'd have said they were insane.

It was insane in a good way.

I didn't feel powerless anymore. Our lives were canvases. We could create whatever tattoos we wanted onto that blank slate. This was only the beginning, and this artwork on my skin was a testament to that power, always within me.

Macy got a beautiful, sparkling sun dreamcatcher. Mine was a full moon with tiny hanging crystals, the silhouette of a wolf in the middle. Day and night, solar and lunar celestial energy. One and the same, made of the same stardust. Sisters forever. When we were done, we took a slew of photos and posted them online.

Immediately, I started getting snide messages from friends I'd known in the past, friends who were confused about the new Valentina.

What does the moon mean? Are you a werewolf now?

Funnily enough, it didn't bother me. They were frustrated with their own lives, stuck inside their boxes, unable to break out or make sense of their confused feelings. I felt sorry for them and even sent God a message that night, asking to please help them on their journeys like He'd helped me.

Send them dancing wolves on ceilings.

I thought of reaching out to Savannah, the girl who'd started it all for me, whose IG account I'd become so obsessed with at the start of my senior year. So many of our classmates had written her out as weird or evil. I hadn't known what to make of her then either, but now I understood her more than ever. She was a child of the moon like me.

The next morning, I messaged her.

She replied: Omg a Ministerio buddy? With a laughing face, as if-what were the chances that a classmate from her private school past had reached out to her in this new life?

She'd been living in New Orleans, working at an occult shop and a praline store (not at the same time). She asked if I wanted to come visit. Of course, I couldn't. Summer was almost over. I was about to start college, I told her. Besides, how awkward would that be to just show up in New Orleans and hang with a girl I barely knew?

Then, I remembered-I'd done that with Macy.

And here we were, living in Yeehaw Springs, getting matching tattoos. We'd never learn what life had in store for us if we sat around waiting for things to happen. You had to go to the creaky hotels, explore the haunted woods. Sometimes, you had to touch the Devil's Tree to find out what was buried underneath.

Sometimes you lost friends along the way.

I longed to heal the rift between Camila and me, but the time wasn't right. Like Wilky had said, friends break up. You go your separate ways, and sometimes you come back. Sometimes you don't. Both are okay. Both a part of life. I just never expected that to happen with Cami. I still loved her, and always would. We were just on different paths.

And I loved my new one too much.

The next morning, Mori and Wilky showed up at the house, as I was throwing my bags into the trunk. We stood outside, between the cars, talking about random things, though our underlying sadness was palpable. We were forever changed. You couldn't battle an evil lake mermaid back to the depths of Hell and not be. But we would survive a year apart, no doubt.

I had to go. I had things to work out with my family. I hugged them each and bit back the tears, promising to come back and visit next summer.

"Fae says goodbye." Mori pulled me into another hug.

I smiled. "Tell her I say hi. I love and admire her, more than she'll ever know."

Mori smiled, dimples deep and beautiful. "She knows. Love you, Vale,"

"Love you, too."

Wilky was harder to let go of, because with Wilky, there was so much unexplored territory. Under different circumstances, I would've loved getting to know him, what made those deep eyes so sad, why he made people work for his smile.

He handed me a rolled-up piece of paper. "I made you this."

made those deep eyes so sad, why he made people work .

He handed me a rolled-up piece of paper. "I made you this."

"Aww." I unrolled the scroll, and there, behind a layer of wax paper, was a gorgeous charcoal drawing of The High Priestess tarot card, triple moon goddess for a crown. Instead of a black cat at her feet was a black wolf.

"It's you," he said.

It was my face my likeness, serene and powerful, looked out from inside the dark robes. "I love this, Wilky. I'll treasure it forever."

"Come here." He pulled me into a warm, delicious hug. After a minute, I pulled away from the pounding of his heart, and he tapped my nose. "Stay wild, moon child."

His voice, his smile, his lingering look as he retreated to his car made me think twice. I'd loved every minute of the last two months I'd spent with him. Especially the last four weeks, when he, Mori, and I had tried to normalize by couch surfing, researching abandoned locations with weird pasts, and ordering takeout every day. My leg cast from the hairline fracture I'd gotten wouldn't allow for much else. I couldn't believe I had to drive home after that.

Finally, I turned to Macy. "Guess this is it."

"What am I going to do without you, huh, little sis?" She smiled, holding me by the arms, pulling me into a warm hug.

"Get back to normal? I bet you're like, damn, finally, she's leaving."

"Bullshit," she said. "I wish you would stay. We'll make up for lost time, cross the globe, rule the world together." She laughed, shaking her head. "Right after I finish my work, right? Ah, jobs."

"You could get a new one," I said. "Something more fulfilling than editing."

"I guess so. But for now, paying bills feels nice," she said. "But I like the way you think. Maybe I ought to get back into that world-ahead-of-me mindset, like you."

"Say goodbye to your mom for me. It was really great meeting her." This, I couldn't expand on, though my heart tried. I wouldn't be able to do it without crying. She'd never understand what it meant for me to finally get to know another woman my father had once loved.

"I will. Don't forget your orange juice," Macy said.

"Got it. And the snacks. Thank you. I owe you-huge."

I got in the car, started her up, and pulled out of the driveway, as the three of them stood there, watching me leave. Why did my heart ache so bad? I hadn't known them for long. I shouldn't feel so attached. Not like this. I had been through a terrifying experience this summer-I should've felt relieved I was leaving.

I waved out the window, honked the horn. They smiled. Perfect-I captured them in my memory like potions in bottles to keep my heart beating another year. Heading to the highway with the window open, warm air tangling my hair, I swiped at my eyes.

Yes, I had to check in with my mom, but hadn't I done that over the last four weeks with my calls? We'd talked about my father, his death, and my family's secrets. We'd talked about Abuela and her old school ways. And yeah, we'd talked about my grandfather.

We hadn't gotten to the bottom of things, because let's face it, that would take a while. But we were talking. Healing. We'd started the process.

As for school, I had no clue what I wanted to study. No idea where to go from here. I'd enrolled at FIU at the beginning of the summer, because I hadn't known what else to do. It seemed, at the time, like the right thing. You finish high school-you go to college. You start with humanities. You figure it out. That's what all my family members had done. But there was no reason I had to start right now.

Was there?

The red light at the south onramp waited.

My heart pounded.

What if I didn't go back? What was the worst that could happen? My mom and grandmother would get upset with me? Probably. I'd already jumped that hurdle. The worst was over. FIU would have one less freshman to deal with? Camila would consider me lost forever? That might've been true anyway.

What if I spent the next year getting to know myself? Macy, Wilky, Mori... What if I sent Savannah another message, telling her that would be so great if I could visit her, explore a new city, learn more about the craze? Find new ways of blending my old beliefs with my new one? What if I could finally allow myself to get close to Wilky? Or anyone, for that matter. See what it would feel like to linger in someone's arms?

To kiss. And more.

The light turned green, I didn't move. Behind me, a car honked. I inched forward. It was time-turn onto the onramp. Go home, Vale. Nice thoughts, but I couldn't push fate. I'd already spent enough time here. The car honked again. I stuck my hand out of the window and told them to pass.

The driver went around, like I was annoying him for the hundredth time today. The guy even raised a hand, cursing me, but I had a counter to his curse-patience of steel. New mindset. New possibilities. You know who'd given that to me? My friends. My sister. My father. My coven.

My mother would understand. I needed a gap year all to myself.

I drove through the intersection past the south onramp, a sneaky smile plastered on my face. I would not be driving six hours back to Miami today. I'd be driving five minutes. I did a one-eighty at the next U-turn and headed home to Yeehaw Springs.