

Chapter Four

My little moonshine, dream with the night

When you awaken, Love you will be

My little sunshine Heaven gave me.

When Dad passed away, I started a habit of holding the little cross around my neck while I slept. Touching it made me think of him and the song he always sang before bedtime. When he was done, he'd kiss my forehead and "boop" my nose.

Now it was morning, and my dad's voice faded, as sunlight streamed through slatted blinds. Horizontal lines glowed across pale gray walls onto a colorful geometric tapestry. The bed squeaked lightly when I shifted.

It took me a moment to place myself in the small, simple room-Macy's house.

Last night, after the showdown with my grandmother and mother, I drove five-and-a-half hour north on the Turnpike. I'd never driven this far from home before, especially up a lonely, two-lane road. The whole time, I kept thinking how radical it felt to run away. In movies, it was normal for kids to go on their own when they reached eighteen. Felt like real American life to me.

But as the only daughter in a religious, Cuban-American home, leaving had felt wrong, like I'd carried more than just a du el bag into Macy's house at 1 o'clock in the morning. It felt like I'd lugged in a boatload of guilt and betrayal, too. Luckily, Macy had welcomed me with open arms, after which she'd quickly excused herself, saying she had an all-nighter to work on, but we'd talk today when I woke up. I'd appreciated the space right from the start.

Grabbing my phone on the nightstand, I checked the time-past noon. No wonder my stomach was grumbling. I trudged across creaky old pine floors into the connecting bathroom. In the distance, summer thunder rumbled. I secretly hoped Macy would come work to do, so I could spend time alone. Thunderstorms plus solitude was a combo I didn't get on.

I headed downstairs, careful not to touch the handrail. Didn't want any intrusive thoughts at the moment, especially seeing this wasn't my house. Macy's home was cute, small, and quaint, with moving boxes in every room. Following the scent of fresh-brewed coffee, I found her in the kitchen standing against the counter, staring into her phone.

"Hey!" She looked up with a big smile.

In full daylight, I took her in. She was several shades darker than I was, which made me wonder what her mother looked like. Our dad was pretty fair with light eyes and hair. Hers was medium-brown and curly, up in a poofy ponytail. Her eyes were hazel green, which I knew because of her photos, not from the shy distance I was keeping.

"Hi, thanks for letting me stay. I don't know what I was thinking being so bold to ask you like that."

"What? No. Hey..." She put down her phone and walked up to me to hold my hands. I flinched but let her take them. Her warm, soft hands spoke of a nurturing spirit. Up close, it was like looking into Dad's eyes. "It's okay.

I swallowed a lump and politely took back my hands.

"Listen," she said. "I'm glad you asked. I've wanted to meet you for a long time. Okay?"

I bit my lip and nodded.

"Come on. You want coffee?"

"Sure."

From the cupboard, she pulled a mug that said Failure is Not an Option and poured coffee, setting it on the kitchen table. "Black? Creamer? Sugar? I haven't made breakfast yet. Didn't know if you were the bacon and eggs type, or the avocado on toast type, or..."

"Anything is fine. I know this was last minute. I'm so grateful. I have money for you-for food, bills, and whatever else." I felt like the few bucks in my wallet would never cover the kindness and generosity this girl I'd never met before in person had bestowed on me.

"Valentina..." She paused at the fridge door, looking at me with eyebrows raised. "Your money's no good here. Don't worry, I got you." "Thank you." I took a seat at the table in the outdated kitchen and watched her pull out an assortment of yogurt, strawberries, coffee creamer, and sliced bread from the fridge. I bit back the urge to cry.

I had a sister-all this time.

Pouring creamer into the coffee, I pulled the mug close. My dad's bedtime song echoed through my head again. My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight...my little moonshine, dream with the night. I sipped the coffee and basked in warm coziness.

"I won't ask you what happened." She sat opposite me with a knife

and a tiny wooden cutting board to begin slicing up strawberries.

"After seeing the look on your face when you arrived last night, I know better."

"That bad, huh?"

"Well, I recognize it. That's the thing, I've been there. Remember, I moved out when I was eighteen, too." "I didn't move out. I'm just...taking a break."

"Right, that's what I meant." She passed me a small bowl of strawberries, along with a carton of yogurt. "What I'm saying is, we don't have to get to know each other all in a day. To be honest, I have a shit ton of work to finish for a project, but..." She pointed a spoon at me. "That doesn't mean I'm not here for you. Got that?"

"Yes." I smiled and peeled open my vanilla yogurt, dumping in some of the strawberries. "That means a lot to me." "What? That I have a shit ton of work to do? Thanks a lot."

I laughed. "No, I mean that you're here for me, but not all over me all the time." I realized that sounded rude. "Sorry, what I mean is, I appreciate the space."

"I understood you. No worries. So, listen, I have to go finish a promo video I'm editing. But maybe we can have dinner together later? Sorry the place is a mess. You'd think I'd have my shit together after three months moved in, but...work's got me going twenty-four hours."

"What is it you're editing?" I asked.

"Videos for the state's Department of Tourism website." "Sounds fun." "I push buttons all day. It's a job." "Oh."

"I'm trying to get a full-time position at an advertising firm in Orlando, so I can make commercials for theme parks, but...this is a good first step."

"That's cool. At least you have space all to yourself," I said, gesturing to the cozy little home, a place to call her own. "Very true, Vale. Vah-le, right?"

"Yeah." I smiled. It sounded cute when she said it and a reminder that the other half of her heritage wasn't Cuban like both my parents'.

"I've actually gotten good with a little Spanish. Te gusta las fresas?" she asked, pointing to the strawberries. "SÍ, me encantan. Gracias," I replied.

"Yes, they enchant me?" She cocked her head.

"Means I love them. Sounds a little backwards, I know. So, to do around here..."

"Ah, yes." She straightened, using her spoon to emphasize an invisible list in the air. "Not much, sorry to say."

I laughed. It felt good to have an easygoing conversation with someone, especially one related to me. "Sounds perfect, if I'm honest."

"There's a bunch of Old Florida historic homes, an old theatre, an old state park, a dog park, the beach is about a forty-minute drive from here, lots of lakes and springs, but I guess you meant somewhere you can find other kids to hang out with."

"No, actually, isolation sounds great."

"I hear you. Oh, not far from here is a famous spiritualist camp called Cassadaga. Full of psychics. Also, there's Disney, if you want to drive ninety minutes."

"No, thanks. I just drove six. Besides, we do Disney all the time. I'll probably just hang out. Looks like you have a big yard." I peered out the window.

"Half an acre." "I'm jealous. At home, our houses nearly touch side-by-side." "Zero lot?" "I guess that's what you call it."

She gazed out the window. "You'll love it out there. I haven't had a moment to enjoy it since I moved in. Now I feel like I have no life." Macy stared into her coffee.

"Hey, a job is a life," I said. "It's more than what I've got."

"Yeah, but we shouldn't live to work. We should work to live." She pondered her own words, dumped her garbage, and placed bowls in the sink. "Anyway, explore. Do what you want. I'll be in my office." She grabbed her mug and moved to the kitchen entrance. "Oh, and Vale?" She turned.

"Yeah?"

"I didn't even know a little sister." Her smile filled a space in my heart I didn't even know existed.

For the first three days, I did nothing. Just chilling in my room felt like vacation. Nobody to tell me to wake up, sweep the floor, help empty the dishwasher. Not that I was a slug either. I washed dishes, put away utensils in drawers, even tried cooking a few meals. It wasn't my mother's cooking, but it was enough to show Macy I appreciated her opening her door to me.

Being near her made me think of my dad more than usual. I wondered if it ever made Macy sad that she didn't get to experience the bedtime song, boops to her nose, or any of the dad jokes that would forever stay with me. I supposed she couldn't miss what she'd never experienced.

On the first night, we talked about her mother, how she'd had a falling-out with her five years ago, but over time, they'd managed to reconnect. On the second night, we talked about my college plans, how I wasn't entirely sure, but I may want to major in business. My grandfather always said I wasn't aggressive enough to be in business. I should go into education, because teaching was a "great career for women." Whenever my father heard this, he'd mutter under his breath that I could do whatever I wanted.

On the third night, we discussed the differences in how we were raised. She was raised Baptist and went to church a lot, but over time, stopped and wasn't sure why. I suggested maybe religion wasn't fulfilling anymore, or that we'd outgrown the need for it. Maybe we were meant to find our own answers.

Macy said, "Or, nobody knows who to trust anymore."

She understood what was in my soul.

On the fourth night, she announced it was crunch time, gave me a hug that let me feel appreciated, and disappeared into her "editing cave" to finish her commercial. I headed outside as I had every night after dinner.

I loved the quiet, the vibrant oranges and purples of the night sky past nine o'clock, the number of stars you couldn't see in Miami due to light pollution. Kicking off my flip-flops, I stepped onto grass still damp from the afternoon thunderstorm. A banyan tree loomed in the corner of her yard. Banyan trees always fascinated me with their hanging root systems that resembled damaged paintings dripping in the rain.

The waxing moon was out, bringing good things into the universe. I wondered if that was really true, if the phases of the moon could manifest wishes into existence or banish them. When it came to metaphysical stuff, my heart burned to know the truth of it, whether or not magic really existed, or whether, like I'd talked about with Macy, we just wanted to believe, since nothing else in the world seemed to be going right.

The night was perfect for going back inside, grabbing my tarot cards and palo santo, or hell, even my sage, since there was no one around to judge the smell of it, and sit under this perfect tree that was giving me life.

I was walking back to get them when I heard a sound coming from the other side of the tree. I listened. Not a loud sound, just a vague crunching of leaves.

"Hello?"

Macy had neighbors, but not for half an acre. A small house just over a knoll had its lights on, except for the glow of a TV inside. On the opposite side of the old house, there was nothing but an empty lot that looked like it'd been a playground at one point. Judging from the circle of sand. Behind her property was a stretch of woods that looked denser the deeper it got.

I stood there, listening, heart pounding, the dark night alive with crickets and tree frogs, and a couple of coccuyos I was surprised to see this far north in Florida. The little lightning bugs with the glowing green eyes (actually phosphorescent dots on their backs) flitted underneath the banyan branches, flying in wide circles, searching for a good place to hide. My mother always said they were good luck. My mother seemed to believe in magic at one point, long ago, before my grandparents came to live with us. I closed my eyes and absorbed the nighttime energies.

In Miami, I didn't spend a lot of time outdoors. It was too hot. But when I did, it was late at night when I thought nobody could see me. I liked to lie in the cool grass and sometimes hold my arms up to the sky. I wasn't sure what about that gesture felt right to me, but I always held back a bit, imagining someone like our nosy-ass neighbor, Alicia, spying on me, questioning what the trick I was doing.

Here, there was no one. Slowly, I lifted my arms to the sky. I hugged the expanse of the universe, the sliver of moon that looked like a smile, the banyan tree, and the little coccuyos for their light show. I felt thankful to God for this safe space. I never claimed to live a terrible life. I was privileged by most standards, but my decisions were rarely my own. Here I could make life however I wanted it to be.

Thank you for the breathing room, Universe.

I heard it-the crunching sound again.

When I focused my gaze into the trees, a black wall of branches stood there.