

Chapter Six

It was a dream—it had to be. I quickly reviewed everything that had happened tonight. Dinner, good talk with Macy, peaceful nighttime meditation outside, then a black wolf had led me here, to this abandoned place that wasn't so abandoned.

Sounded reasonable.

"There are no cars outside. I would've mentioned it," a girl said behind Mori. She was a pixie little thing with flowing strawberry blonde hair and a green skirt that swept the floor like an enchanted broom. Around her neck hung a string of colored beads.

"I didn't drive here," I explained.

They were trying to figure out what to make of me, whether I was here to blow the whistle on them, or what. Their faces, frozen in various states of blank expression, stared at me.

I turned to leave. "Anyway, sorry to bother you."

"Don't go," Mori said, rushing up.

"Who are you guys?" I stammered.

"We live here," Mori said.

"Mori," the tall guy who'd been leaving interjected.

I did a visual scan of them each to make sure there were no red flags I should be heeding. No knives, no guns, chainsaws...

There were four of them—the tall, White guy who was on his way out when I walked in. He had cropped purple hair, spiky on top, jeans and a Ramones T-shirt; the pale girl with the long blonde hair and hippie skirt; Mori with piercings on their nose, cheek, eyebrow, and outer lip; and a guy without a shirt lingering in the back who was Black and didn't know what to make of me either. None of them could be older than twenty-three or twenty-four. I was sure I was the youngest.

"What do you mean you've waited for me?" I asked, a nervous quaver in my voice. "I think you mean someone else. I didn't even know this place existed an hour ago."

"You didn't know you'd be here," said the tall guy with short purple hair.

"I don't understand." "You, or someone, is supposed to be joining us soon." "But I told you, I had no idea—"

"We did," the guy said, edging closer to me with his flashlight. As he approached, I saw he had impossibly blue eyes that seemed to glow with a light of their own. They narrowed.

"How?" I asked, taking a step back,

"Through a dream." "I swear, I'm in a dream right now."

"Crow, let me." Mori came over, "So, it's complicated. We knew someone would show up tonight, and then you did. We're taking it as a sign. And....we're big into signs."

They all laughed so ly, which helped put me at ease.

"Sorry if we're being rude," the girl with the long blondish hair stepped up, stopping two feet short of me. She was even more beautiful close up, with bright brown eyes and creamy, freckled skin. Her hair was actually in dreads. "I'm Fae. That's Wilky," she said about the guy in the back without a shirt. About the tall one, she said, "That's Crowley."

Crowley didn't warm up to me right away, but he looked slightly less threatened now that Mori and Fae were handling things,

"I'm Valentina, Vale. I went for a walk and somehow ended up here. Sorry if I interrupted something."

"Just randomly ended up here?" Crow asked. He and Wilky exchanged looks.

"Yes," I said. "I was outside my sister's place. A wolf appeared. He started walking into the trees, and..." I realized I sounded crazy, following a wolf through the woods and ending up a mile or two away on the other side of reality. "You know what? I'm just gonna go."

"Valentina, Valentina," Fae sang, dancing up to me and taking my hand without warning. I cringed. Touching people made me nervous. She stared into my soul. Light brown eyes scanned the particles I was made of and made the assessment that I was no one to fear. "You said a wolf led you here?"

"Yes, you haven't seen one?"

They shook their heads.

"I lost track of where it went. I thought maybe it had a den in here. That's why I came in. I was looking for him. Do you...you do live here?" Were people allowed to camp out in empty buildings?

"Sort of. We're clairs," Fae replied, beaming with pride.

"Clairs?"

Fae reached out for Mori's hand and clasped fingers with them. "Never mind. We've known each other since we were kids. Crow invited us here a er his dream."

"The dream again," I said.

"I'll explain later," Crow said. "We just want to make sure you're the right person. We have a goal we're trying to accomplish, so if you're not, we're going to have to ask you to leave."

"Dude," Mori said. "That is so rude."

He threw his arms out. "It's not. We don't know if she's a clair."

"Sorry," I said, "but...what are clairs?"

Fae twirled. "We see things, hear things. Take Mori—they feel things others can't."

"Clairsentence," Mori clarified.

Clairsentence. I'd heard about that in one of the thousand articles I'd skimmed over the last year.

"Wilky can hear things," Fae said, glancing at the guy in the back, who looked like he'd rather she shut up about his private abilities. "Sorry, but she needs to know."

"Clairaudience?" I asked.

"Yes!" Fae clapped her tiny hands together. "And Crow sees things...well, sort of."

"So, you're clairvoyant?" I asked Crow.

"Not to the level of some people," he replied, pointing his flashlight to a spot on a sleeping bag. "I can sense what's not physically there, but I need my tools."

He was aiming his flashlight at what looked to be a camera bag. I didn't want to pry. I turned to Fae. "And you?"

"Clairgustance and alience." She closed her eyes and took a long sni . "I can taste and smell residual smells a place leaves behind. Doesn't always work, though. Want to see my garden?"

"Later, love," Mori said. "Don't overwhelm her."

I gave an uneasy laugh. A million questions roiled through my mind, even as the deep-rooted fearful part of me told me to go home, stay safe, and stick to the familiar.

"Our gi s only work part of the time," Mori clarified. "That's why we're here, honing and developing them. Getting better. What better place than this, right?"

I nodded.

"Crow came first. He dreamed that four other clairs would join him. So far, three have. We've been waiting for the fi h clair."

A fi h? I shook my head. "That can't be me. I don't have special powers. I wish I did, but I don't," I said. I may have loved reading tarot cards, but that didn't make me a clair.

"Oh, but you do." Fae's whole countenance lit up with an inner light that felt magical and unnatural at the same time. "We all have it. Every single person on the planet. Some never develop it. Others have had it since birth. You've never had experiences that are hard to explain?"

I thought back to times in my life when having super senses would've gotten me out of situations. I never had a clear sense of being psychic, if that's what she meant. I only sometimes got weird thoughts whenever I touched objects or people.

This was a case of mistaken identity. "I think you're waiting for someone else. I'm nothing special."

Mori, Fae, Wilky, and Crowley all exchanged glances in the dim candlelight. Mori's chest shook with laughter. "That's what we all thought about ourselves at some point."

The only research I'd done into my ability pointed to OCD. Intrusive thoughts happened to a lot of people, but I wouldn't call thinking about my grandfather in his o ice when I touched Scary Mary a "power."

"What is this place?" I looked around the ballroom. "It's huge."

"You're not from around here, are you?" Crow pushed his back against the wall, allowing his weight to slide down until he was sitting on the floor.

"I'm not. I'm from Miami."

Fae pointed at Wilky. "So's he."

"Was, a long time ago," Wilky finally spoke in velvety tones, settling into a cross-legged position on his sleeping bag. "I haven't been since I was little. You're familiar with Little Haiti?"

"You're familiar with Little Havana?"

He smiled, a nice smile that brightened his entire aura.

Feeling calmer now, I walked in and began strolling around. "Was this a hotel once?"

"Depends on when you're talking," Mori said. "First, it was the Sunlake Springs Sanatorium from 1918 to 1943. A er that, it was an antibiotic, it became a psychiatric hospital for women until... 1960?" They looked at Crow.

"1958," Crow corrected. "A er that, it was a WWII veteran's hospital until the summer of 1970. It was closed for about five years. Finally, from 1975 to 1979, it reopened as a new age wellness spa—the Sunlake Springs Resort. People have always believed this area to have healing powers."

"Because of the lake," Fae explained.

"The dirty cesspool?" I pointed to the algae-covered body of water I'd almost waded into while following the wolf. Everyone nodded.

"Doesn't look very healing at all."

"There's a special energy here. We all feel it," Mori said, walking over to a blown-out window and looking out into the night. "That's why this area has attracted so many witches over the years."

"Mori," Crow snapped them o with a sharp tone.

"Uh, spiritualists," Mori corrected.

"It's okay. I know you mean healers, psychics, etc. I've been studying," I said.

"No, we mean actual witches," Mori said.

"Mori," Crow again reprimanded.

"So, you are a clair!" Fae smiled, tapping her fingertips together.

"I said I've been studying," I explained. Modern witches were simply anyone with the ability to heal through natural, holistic ways, not green cackling women who rode around on broomsticks. "Why was the building closed for five years?"

"Buildings get bought, sold, or transferred," Wilky said. "The county makes a decision on whether to destroy it for good or give it another chance. That's also why we're here, because Crow has a dream!" Wilky chortled.

"Shut up," Crow deadpanned.

"Let me guess. You'll tell me later?" I asked him.

"You know me so well already." Crow gave me a tight-lipped smile, as he uncapped his camera lens and proceeded to clean it with a so cloth in the beam of his flashlight. "Anyway, you want to stay with us?"

"I..." His question threw me o -guard and presented me with brand new options for my visit to Yeehaw Springs. "There's a portal here. An energy vortex," Fae said, her enthusiasms lighting up the dark. "You can feel it, if you tap in. We could combine forces. We could make ourselves stronger..." She reached out for my hands again.

"No, l..." I didn't want to hold hands with her or anyone. My hands told stories. They messed with my head. "I don't know, guys."

Crowley cocked his head. "Okay, look. We need a fi h spiritualist. We need your help opening the portal."

I stared at him, slack-jawed. I'd never as much as opened a can of black beans without someone's help, much less a portal of energy. The thought made me ashamed of how sheltered I'd grown up but also set my imagination alight.

"Didn't you say you were drawn here inexplicably?" Mori asked, moving in on me.

"Well, yes, but..."

"I was curious once." Mori raised their eyebrows and looked at Fae who giggled and twirled, showing o the sweeping circles of her skirt. "That's how it begins."

"Growth," Mori smiled.

"Alright," Crow interrupted, procuring a lantern out of someone's stash of belongings, lighting it with a lighter. "We can't use his phone who doesn't want to be here. Just let her go."

I immediately felt relieved, but from the sly grin he was trying to hide, I realized it was a scheme to get me to stay. Wilky, Fae, and Mori all exchanged silent communications while I stood there, trying to figure out what I wanted.

On one hand, I wanted the safety and solitude of Macy's house where I could think without four people staring at me. I wanted the familiar. I liked knowing I could hop in my car and go back home if I chose to.

On the other, I liked these people, this assorted crew of weirdos. I wanted into their special club, regardless of who they were or whether or not I belonged. They were nothing like the friends I hung out with back home, nothing like each other. Four harmonious points on the cardinal compass.

"Valentina, we need you," Fae said.

"Tell me again why?" I asked.

"So we can better communicate with this place," Mori said.

"So we can find out what really happened here," Wilky added. The others nodded. "The records don't tell the whole truth. Things happened here that we can't prove."

Fae so ly curled her hand around my shoulder. "We have fire." She pointed to Crow. "Water." She pointed to Mori. "Air." She looked at Wilky. "And earth. That's me." She pressed her palm into her chest. "Now we just need spirit to hold us together."

They were all staring at me hopefully.

Fae smiled. "That's you."