

Chapter Eight

I whirled, catching fragments of light sweeping across the floor, sparking like electricity. Crowley stood in the doorway leading from the central hall, his tall form a darkened silhouette in the illuminated space. His hand, curled around the strap of the camera slung across his body, was tense.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

"Don't worry, I've scared myself enough already." I swallowed the lump in my throat. The sparkles of light were gone. "Do I see who?"

"The ghosts." He strolled through the room with ease, raising his hand in a twirling motion. "Spinning on the dance floor. Waltzing, having a great time."

"No," I said. "Why, do you?"

He stopped six feet from me. "Only in photos." He looked into the old-style camera he was holding and turned it around to show me. A swirl of ectoplasmic mist hovered above the ballroom floor. "See?" "Pretty cool," I replied.

"If I'm lucky, conditions are right. I have a great shot of this one mist, too, actually, standing right here. And I swear, if you look carefully, you'll see two people dancing."

I contemplated telling him all the visions I'd had in the ten minutes alone since I'd arrived but ultimately kept them to myself. I wasn't fully comfortable with Crow and kept scanning the outside I veranda for the others.

"Where is everyone?"

He shrugged. "Scattered. We each have our favorite spots during the day. At night, we hang out more together." Crow's blue eyes really were beautiful; they were just so luminous, it was unsettling, especially when he stared at me as though testing how nervous he could make me.

I cleared my throat. "Why's there a ballroom in a tuberculosis hospital?" I asked.

"Lots of old buildings have grand halls where they'd line up patient beds for fresh air. This was back before there was A/C. They'd open windows; the lake breezes would blow through. It didn't become a ballroom until later." "Because veterans wanted to dance?" I smiled, looking away. "Or because psychiatric patients needed to let a little steam?" Crow fixed a setting on his camera. He aimed the lens at me. I looked away, embarrassed by his attention. "They entertained guests. Some families could only celebrate special events here. They weren't allowed to take their sick loved ones to campus. It made sense to have a space for that. This was a new age resort, too. Maybe my mist's disco-dancing hippies."

"My grandparents used to hate hippies," I said.

"How could anyone hate hippies? They're full of love and peace, man," he said in a Californian drawl.

"I don't know, it's just what my mother said. Her whole side of the family has always been very strict. She grew up with law and order, religion, and yeah...I guess it made sense that they hated 'free spirits.'"

"Hate's a strong word." His eyes fell on the cross around my neck.

"I'm saying they did, I don't hate anyone."

"No one?" Crow moved around me like a shark, his eyes taking in everything about me. It took me a moment to realize he was framing his next shot.

Who I hated or didn't hate was none of his business. Besides, I didn't. Everyone deserved forgiveness, especially family. I wanted my father to know this so bad during the time he was away, I wanted to visit him, wherever he was living, to prove I wasn't mad that he had another daughter. That I still loved him, even though he hurt me.

"You don't talk much," Crow said. "You don't trust anyone with your secrets."

"I don't have secrets." But right away, I knew it was a lie. Memories I didn't want to share with a stranger weren't really secrets, just thoughts I preferred to forget.

"I'm glad you're here, Valentina. So, to be clear, last night, Fae made it sound like we have superpowers. We don't. That's why we want to open the portal," Crow said, moving to my left. "Don't move." He took a shot and then another.

"Why?" I asked.

He snapped another photo of me. I held up my hand, and he stopped. "Don't you ever want confirmation that the stu you experience is real? For just once, like to see ghosts actually dancing in front of me instead of just catching glimpses of them there."

"Maybe there are none," I said.

Crow shook his head. "They're there. Fae gets woken by the smell of blood. Isn't that nice? Mori can feel people's pain like it's their own. Wilky hears screams."

"Screams?" I clutched my cross.

My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight...

Crow stepped up to me, and for a moment, a shudder slid through me. "Screams. Of five thousand patients who died here during the sanatorium and hospital years. Of war veterans with ghost pains. Of God-knows-what. So many things happened here over the years, and not all of them during the open years either."

"What happened while it was closed?"

"We don't know," Crow replied. "That's part of why we want to tune in. Opening a portal can help us find answers." "Maybe the building doesn't want to give up its secrets."

He gave me a tilt of his head. "Why were you in here?"

I tried not to let his proximity or the cloud of weed smell clinging to him bother me. I didn't want him to think he made me anxious. "I was looking for you guys."

"Gotcha," he said.

"Look, I don't care that you're living here. I'm not going to inform anyone, if that's what you're worried about." He stared another few seconds, then blinked, as the corner of his thin lips turned into a grin. "I was wondering, actually. What do think about this place?"

I sighed. "It holds a sad energy."

"What else? Of the building itself?"

I studied the decaying surroundings. "It's in bad shape. It's sad the way it's just rotting out here. Definitely beautiful, though."

His eyes narrowed. "Why'd you come back?" Crow pressed his hand against the wall next to my head, close enough for me to sense his warm breath. He could've been handsome by all typical standards—nice nose, strong chin, sturdy build with a hint of a colorful tattoo poking out of his sleeve—but there was something disingenuous about him that set off my internal alarm.

I stepped aside and jangled the keys in my hand. "It wasn't to snoop." "But you were snooping. We're not drug addicts, or a cult, you know."

"I was just curious. I'm trying to understand why you say you need me. Seems like you have it all under control." "We need the right person. Are you that person?"

I pulled out of his visual grasp. "I already told you I didn't think so, but you seem to think I am."

He looked at my fingers, dabbing at my cross. "Why do you touch that so much?"

I didn't even realize I'd been touching it again. "My father gave it to me."

"Do you see him when you touch it?"

"No. Do you? You're the clairvoyant one." It was a cheeky reply, but I didn't like the way he was drilling me, as if I owed him anything.

"You're being snide."

"You're getting personal."

He stared at me for the longest time. I wanted so badly to tear my gaze away, but I held it. It was a matter of control and showing him he didn't hold sway over me. "The others told me I had Spirit. What does that mean?"

Crow was distracted by something in the reflection of the mirrored wall. He turned and fired off a round of photos. "Spirit is all-encompassing. It's the general sphere that holds earth, air, water, and fire together. Spirit's job is to keep us from killing each other."

So, spirit was a little bit of everybody. "Like a mediator."

"Yes."

I could mediate. If I was good at anything in life so far, it was making sure everyone was happy. Make Mom happy, make Dad happy, make my grandfather happy, make the church happy, make Camila happy. Hell, I could've started my own United Nations with my mediating skills. It was my own happiness I knew nothing about.

The others arrived then, wandering in like dripping puppies from the rain, in various stages of undress, holding their clothes in the crooks of their arms, shaking water from their hair.

"Heyyyyy, she's back," Wilky said with a crooked grin. "Told you she would be."

I was surprised to see his mostly naked body, as he strolled toward his bundle of belongings on the floor and pulled a towel to wrap around his boxers. He may as well have been a sculpture escaped from a museum.

Fae's long blondish-reddish hair coiled down her fair shoulders like rat snakes, covering her small, bare breasts. She smiled at me, but I looked away at Mori who was half-naked as well. Two lateral scars across their chest told me Mori might've once had breasts in a former life but now was perfectly happy in their new shape.

"Are you in, Va-len-ti-na?" Fae enunciated my name carefully, correctly, then strutted toward her stu, dripping on her and a T-shirt a green towel. "The amplification is next week. During the full moon. We kind of need to know."

"Amplification?" I asked.

"Opening of the portal," Mori added, throwing on jeans and a T-shirt. "It's going to be an eclipse, too. Makes for a powerful cocktail."

"Right, so if you don't join us, we have to wait 'til next full moon and eclipse. Pretty rare combination. That's what the Lady of the Lake said anyway." Fae slipped into a brown dress that reached the dusty floor.

"Who?" I asked.

"I'm shocked Crow didn't tell you in the time you were alone with him. It's all he talks about," Fae laughed. Crow shook his head and walked to the windows to look out. She stage-whispered, "It's a ghost."

"A spirit guide," Crow said. "Not a ghost."

"Sorry, a spirit guide" Fae corrected, still stage-whispering. "She's a tuberculosis patient. She jumped from the bell tower into the first year this place was open, crashed right where the atrium is now, where it used to be just a garden. Splatt"

"Fae, be sensitive," Mori scolded.

"Sorry. Now she roams the resort, asking Crow for favors."

"That's not..." Crow shook his head, then looked at me. "That's not how it is. She comes to me in my dreams. I have conversations with her. Sometimes, I think I see her roaming the hotel."

"Is that why you take photos? To try and capture her image?"

"Yeppers," Fae replied. "I can talk for myself," Crow shot at her. "Yes," he said to me.

"What does she say to you?" I asked.

"She predicts the future. She said Fae and Mori would join me, and they did. She said another would show up, a man seeking truth, and that was Wilky."

Wilky raised his hand in silent confirmation.

"She also says she sees the building coming back to life as a grand resort, filled with people, enjoying a new era." "She wants Crow to take the best photos he can," Fae said. "So the historical society can—"

"Okay, okay," Crow interrupted. "She doesn't need to know everything. Not if she's not committed to helping us. What if she goes and tells the county everything we just told her? Then what?" Crow slung his camera onto his back. Disgusted, he walked out of the ballroom.

Fae's shoulders slumped.

Mori shook their head at their girlfriend. "Valentina, it's really simple. We all have something we want from this place. Crow wants to meet his Lady of the Lake, I have my reasons, Fae has her reasons, Wilky, too. Haven't you ever wanted answers?"

I understood what were answered. "Yes, for sure."

"Right. So, if you help us, we get to see better, hear better, feel better. What little abilities we have would become stronger, and maybe we'll finally be fully psychic, and in being fully psychic, we'll find answers. Get it?"

If their abilities were vague, then mine were even vaguer.

Would I still be here next week? I thought about my mother at home, doing her best to give me space but texting once a day to see how I was faring without her. She wanted me home. I wasn't sure I was okay. Macy said I could stay as long as I wanted. But it wasn't like she'd be with me spending more time here than with her? It wouldn't be like she had much time for me anyway.

"Is that all? No other urgency?" I asked.

Mori, Fae, and Wilky exchanged glances. Wilky came clean. "The Sunlake might be demolished soon."

From the other room, Crowley groaned. "Dude."

"Bro, it's not like I'm telling her a fucking secret," Wilky shot back.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Mori's aunt in Cassadaga overheard people from DeLand talking about it," Wilky explained. "And, I mean, just look at the place. It's entirely possible."

"And if it's true, there's a lot we need to know before they tear it down," Mori said, running a hand through their half-shaved hair, flumping back against cushiony bags.

"I'm sure you can find answers with the county's historical society. Researchers, historians..." I suggested. "What do you need to know?"

"I have a great granddad who was a rum runner." Fae twirled in her dress, dancing with an invisible partner. "My grandmother kept his journal. He says he hid money here in the 1920s. That was before the hospital was built, when the Coast Guard was aer him, but his name is in absolutely zero of the historical society's documents."

"Fae doesn't care about her grandfather. She's just a gold digger," Crow laughed.

Fae shot Crow a middle finger. "Have you noticed it's always rich people who talk like money doesn't matter?"

"Everyone to you is rich." "Anyway," She looked at me. "I want to find the stash. Because money, sure, but also so my family can know the truth. Wilky isn't as greedy as I am."

Wilky didn't deny it. He didn't explain his reasons either.

Fae did a squat then launched into a scissor-like leap. The girl never stopped moving. "Mori wants to help the souls trapped here move on."

"They're in pain," Mori explained. "I can't stand to feel what they went through. We all deserve to move on into light and peace. I would want someone to do it for me."

I got that. Once, Camila called me an empath. She said I picked up on the thoughts and emotions of whoever I was around, but I'd never tuned into the pain of the departed before. "What does Crow get from the amplification?"

"I get to be right," he called from the other room. "When the portal doesn't open, and the ritual doesn't work, you'll know it was because we invited the wrong person to help us."

Wait. I was the wrong person?

"What had changed between last night and today?"

"You don't know that, Crow," Mori muttered. "She knew where to find us."

Apparently, they'd talked a little. Apparently, now he wasn't sure of me.

"You don't think it's me?" I asked. No wonder he was drilling me before the others came in.

"Him, not us," Fae said. "He thinks you're full of shit. He thinks a blind clair will show up by next week."

I found myself seething at how much I wanted to prove Crow wrong. But if I did have a clair ability? What if it simply hadn't developed, but with training, I could make it work? I did find them, a little.

"What does he really get?" I whispered.

Fae dropped to the floor in a heap, arms raised over her head like a ballerina. "The Lady of the Lake will show herself to him in person. That's what she told him, so that's what he wants."

"To see his spirit guide," I said.

"He's a little obsessed with her," Mori said.

"Right?" Fae giggled. She turned into a zombie, eyes bugged out, arms straight out. "...am...the lady of...the laaaaake."

Crow returned, throwing his lens cap into his heap of belongings. "You've both told her enough. There's such a thing as being too empathetic, Mori."

"Oh, yes, too much kindness and inclusion. I can see how that might be a problem in today's world."

"When you lose your ability to take on criticism, or the cruelty of the world, or knowing where a limit is, yeah—it is. How about you and Fae shut up already?"

"How about you bite me?" Mori scooped.

"That's enough," Wilky spat. I was beginning to see what their dynamics were. Clearly, Wilky didn't care much for Crow, and clearly, Crow thought himself this group's leader.

"Yeah, Crowley, enough." Mori waved him away and walked out, muttering, "Fucker."

I felt bad for Mori. I may not have known them that well, but the stu Crow said sounded uncalled for. "What do I get from helping you?" I asked.

"That's for you to decide." Fae took me into her arms before I could protest. She twirled me, and I politely stepped out of her generous hug. In her hands, I felt sadness, a life without much to go on, hunger. "Aw, nobody wants to dance with me." She pouted.

"Isn't there anything you want?" Wilky asked.

I wasn't about to tell them I wished I could have a real life, a reason to wake up every day, numbness gone from my life, my own decisions to make, my dad around to talk to...

"Whatever it is...opening the portal can help you find it," Wilky added. "It's like a kundalini awakening for a location's soul instead of a person's."

I didn't know what a kundalini awakening was, but I knew I would search it up the moment I got back.

My brain screamed at me to get back to Macy's. Go home. Go to church. Get back on the straight and narrow path my family had laid out for me. Stop hanging with strangers who dabble with the spirit world. If I accidentally invited something dangerous into my life, I'd never be able to put it back. Opening an energy vortex inside a haunted hotel sounded like a pretty terrible idea.

Suddenly, from the far reaches of the resort, someone screamed. Everyone burst into action. The four of them highlighted it into the hallway, turning on their flashlights. I followed, not about to be left inside the ballroom by myself. Mori led the way, seeming to know where it was coming from.

I heard the sound again, only this time as a cry for help, a whimper. Mori entered a room on the first floor where mobiles of stars and planets hung in the windows. On the wall, a tapestry featuring a seated human silhouette with seven colorful chakras lighting a vertical path along the spine hung askew. In the corner was a seated Buddha covered in graffiti mustache and beard.

"I've sensed her before," Mori said, gasping in the center of the room. Dirty, musty cushions lay scattered everywhere.

"I've heard her, too," Wilky added. "But on the third floor."

I didn't see anyone. And I was pretty damn sure we'd see a person here. That was how clear the scream had sounded. "Who is it?" I asked.

"We don't know." Fae snuggled the wall closest to her.

Crow began taking photos, shot a few, shot a few more, every corner of the room in quick succession like it would all evaporate if he didn't move fast enough. He took great care to frame the shots, adjusted the camera's levels, then shoot again.

We waited for the sound to come again. My adrenaline had shot through the roof, my vision adjusted to new light levels. The rain was dying. Whoever had screamed was not anymore, and a few minutes, the group collectively sighed and began trudging back to the ballroom, discussing the highlight of their day.

But I was rattled.

I saw what the claims meant about their abilities being vague at best. I would've wanted answers, too. If a spirit was scared for some reason, I would want to help them. I was always grateful, in a way, that if my father had to go, he'd gone by heart attack. Quickly, with little to cause him pain. I would've hated knowing he was stuck on the other side. With nothing I could do to help him.

I walked into the house, set my keys by the door, and climbed upstairs. In my mind-numbing state of stress or hearing the disembodied scream, I forgot my no-touching rule and brushed the staircase railing with the palms of my hands. I heard another woman crying, but this one was begging.

I stilled to listen. The crying fizzled away.

"Macy?" I started up the stairs.

I found my sister throwing clothes into a small suitcase inside her room. She smiled and caught her breath. "Holy crap, you scared me. Okay, there you are. I was just texting you. Ignore my last message."

"Were you just crying?"

She looked at me blankly. I checked for redness in her hazel eyes.

"No. Why?"

"I swear I just heard crying coming from upstairs," I glanced into the dark hallway. "Maybe you heard my video? People screaming on a roller coaster? Yay, Florida?"

"I don't think so," I said. It had sounded like begging, pleading not to go. I rubbed my eyes. The hotel, and whoever had screamed, was still on my mind. "What were you texting me about?"

"Ah, so listen. They're having a meeting tomorrow in Orlando about a new project that came up. I'd rather drive tonight than get up early in the morning. Just wanted you to know in case you go back and found the house empty."

"How long will you be gone?"

She searched her drawers for shirts. "No idea. Just keep an eye on the house, garbage goes out Tuesday and Thursday nights, and lock all the doors if you go anywhere."

"I will. Remember I'm from the city."

"Yeah, well here in the middle of nowhere, most people don't. Did you have a good day?"

"I did. I took pictures of that hotel I told you about." Actually, I hadn't taken a single one and chastised myself for lying to Macy. I didn't need to do that anymore and hated the fact I'd been conditioned to.

"Well, be careful if you go urban exploring. Police are handing out hefty fines to trespassers, and that's one thing I can't bail you out of. Not until they give me a raise."

"Don't worry, I won't." It didn't feel right assuring her of something I didn't know for sure wouldn't happen. "Can I ask you something before I hit the shower?"

"Always."

"The other day you mentioned an energy vortex in this area, how people have been coming here for years in the hopes of feeling it."

"It's amazing what people will do to connect with the other side, isn't it?"

"Do you believe? In another side?"

She smirked, folding a white shirt. "I think so? I want to believe. But I honestly don't know. What about you?" She looked at me.

Slowly, I nodded. "I always have. I mean, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is all I ever heard growing up. My whole religion is about ghosts."

She laughed. "Isn't that funny? So true."

"But besides that, I don't think millions of people around the world would lie about their experiences. You know what I mean?"

"That's true, too. You're wise for your age, Vale."

"Thanks." I sat on the edge of her bed, remembering the times I tried to do the same with my mother but inevitably, our talks would descend into arguments over something. I loved that Macy and I could talk about anything. "If you had the chance to open a portal into the spirit world, what would you use it for?" I was nervous asking. Any moment now, Macy would ask what I was up to.

"Use the chance for?"

"Yeah."

She sat on her bed, running her fingers along the texture of her comforter. She looked up at me, and for a split second, I saw my father's smile in her's. I was elated to see him again, if only for a nanosecond. "I'd talk to our dad. Wouldn't you?"