Chapter Two

occasional South Florida sunrise. Summery rays of golden light broke through pink and blue candy floss clouds. Temperatures were not yet boiling. One might even call it comfortable. Herons pecked the sawgrass for dragonfly breakfasts. Seeing Cami again two weeks a er graduation was also a plus. In the car, she rambled about her sister. I didn't mind. It gave me something else to think about on the drive besides my predicament. "I told her, 'Silvie, stop giving yourself away for free. Don't you see that the reason he does this is because you let him? He's a taker; you're a giver. You guys are a recipe for disaster." Taker. Giver. A repressed memory from last summer snaked through my mind, but I pushed it away. "You said that?" I asked. Blurs of telephone poles whizzed past at fi y miles an hour. I couldn't stop thinking about the wolf mirage on my ceiling last night, the way it had danced and leaped and howled for just a moment before disappearing. "Yes, she needs to hear it. Don't you agree?" Cami loved making her older sister out to be a lost soul. I was sure it

The only thing that could wake me up early, besides school, was the

made Cami feel like the mature one, but Silvie didn't need a savior. Silvie was a free spirit, unafraid of living her life through trial and error. So what if things weren't working out with her boyfriend? At least she was living, owning her own mistakes. "I think you should let your sister figure things out for herself." I stared ahead, fingers tightly coiled around the steering wheel. "It's

her life."

at whatever amusing snippet caught her attention. I toyed with the idea of telling her I was heavily considering ditching the retreat, dumping her ass curbside, then going home again. It would mean facing a million questions from my grandmother and mother, yes.

We drove in silence, as she thumbed through her phone and laughed

And I'd have to admit lukewarm feelings about the way I'd been raised. Catholicism was more Cuban than co ee, croquetas, and media noche sandwiches all rolled into one.

Approaching the turn in the road, I slowed. Cami pointed to the

familiar campground sign, freshly painted and adorned with flowerful

"Ay, Vale, you always give her the benefit of the doubt."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

landscaping. "I can't believe we're back. How did a year fly by so quickly?" "We must've been having oodles of fun," I deadpanned. Vehicles were lining up. Cami sat on the edge of her seat, waving at everyone digging out bags from their trunks. Familiar faces in green baseball caps and matching shirts displaying our "Live the adventure!" slogan over a cross made it all too real.

"What?" "You sighed. Are you nervous?" "Nah, I'm good." "Is it Antoni?"

"I already told you no." I sco ed. She asked me this the other night, too. Antoni Piñeda, a youth group leader from our sister church, Sacred

A dull soreness ached in my chest.

"What?" Cami asked.

Heart, joined us on the retreat every year. Last year, I shared a superbrief "thing" with him. A year older than both me and Cami, Antoni and I were somewhat close. We sometimes held hands, talked late at night-innocent stu. We even prayed, always at his suggestion. Everyone said we made a cute couple.

I was curious where it would go.

know we were an item.

wipe.

supposedly.

the red zone.

good name.

ministry."

and got out of the hall fast.

du el bag on the bed.

"In a minute. Cam..."

now, and "

were headed.

whole mood.

with.

"Aren't you going to unpack?"

eyes that made me want to punch her.

Well, we did kiss. Awkwardly. We didn't click at all. Kissing Antoni was like getting my face sucked o by an octopus. To make matters worse, he kept taking my hand and sliding it across his crotch, which I might have considered later on, in a dierent setting, but we were surrounded-by urinals. Not to mention I kept having intrusive flash thoughts of him with a guy. A er a few agonizing minutes of me redirecting my hand and him trying to force romantic alchemy, he pulled away, stood at the sink,

and unzipped his jeans. Then, he...groaned. And relaxed. He was

done. I felt repulsed, shocked, cheated out of a legit experience. The

worst part was the way he then ushered me out of the bathroom in a

hurry, like /was his dirty secret. No regard for how I felt. His needs had

been met. I'd been nothing but an accessory to him, a used baby

"Are you sure?" Cami's voice snapped me out of it. "Because I could

It had taken me a month to tell Cami about the incident. But only

squeaky-clean Antoni was an ass? I never told her about the intrusive

Cami, because who else would believe that charming, beloved,

thought either, because I didn't know what was causing them.

understand. I'd feel weird seeing him, too."

On the last day, he pulled me into an empty men's bathroom behind

the chapel while everyone was out by the campfire singing hymns.

Surrounded by urinals, it felt alien and wrong. I assumed he wanted

to kiss me away from prying eyes. What was the big deal doing so in

public? He was eighteen-1 was seventeen. It wasn't like people didn't

"I'm fine." I was. It could've ended worse. If anything, I was grateful for the experience for opening my eyes to the dual nature of people. Because of Antoni, I was more careful before trusting. Because of Antoni, my feelings about this community had changed. Not that he represented the whole of Catholicism, or even men, but maybe he had. In a way. The little cross hanging from my rearview mirror swung back and forth. I reached out and steadied it then turned o the engine. Cami and I gathered our bags and headed toward the compound, while

If I stayed...fi y of us would pray together, sing together, cook, eat,

would fake moral fortitude. Father José, Father Willie, and Sister

Why, then, did I want to turn and run the hell out of there?

and share devotion to God together for two weeks. Some, like Antoni,

Agatha would run the show. Activities would bring us closer to God-

The greetings began, the hugging, the air kissing, the questions about

how the school year went, the blessings in Spanglish, the assurances

that God would save us. I floated through the motions like a scuba

diver giving the allOK thumb's up, even as my oxygen levels neared

Clutching the little gold cross around my neck, I blinked back tears.

moths frantically demanded exodus from my stomach.

What would you do, Dad? It'd been five years since I heard his voice, but I knew he'd want me to be happy. "Vale!" I turned. "Oh, Father Willie. Hello." With his big-cheeked smile and lumbering gait, the middle-aged priest looked like a friendly friar. I'd loved him since I was a kid. He

was one of the few genuine people le in the church who gave it a

He folded his hands over his belly. "It's so good to see you. I was so

very sorry to hear about your grandfather. I was in Guatemala on

"He was a good man, a pillar of this community, but you already

know that. And so proud of you." He reached out to tap my arm.

"Always with high hopes that you'd lead the next generation into the

If Father Willie could only see the vortex of uncertainty swirling inside

my mind. I heard my grandfather's voice reminding me I could talk to

nonjudgmental and might provide wisdom and guidance. Sadly,

"It's okay. Thanks for remembering him." I faked a smile.

Father Willie, Father Willie was good with kids. He was

missionary work when it happened."

nobody here could understand what it felt like to have the dark side of the universe breathing life into my soul every night, "Bueno, see you at the campfire," Father Willie said, ignoring my inability to form a coherent sentence. "Don't forget your letter." Ah, yes, because someone here might need my encouraging words.

Me, for example, "I will. Good to see you, Father." I ducked my head

In the evening, Cami and Yeni, an elder leader, were busy setting up

their cabin spaces. Yeni was pleasant, if a little overexcited about the

shower caddy she'd bought to carry All Her Things. The moment she

stepped out of the cabin to grab something, Cami nodded to my

I tried. I waited for the right words to come. "What is it?" Her deep brown eyes searched mine. I couldn't even tell my best friend of fourteen years how I felt. "Heyyy," Yeni drawled, poking her head into the cabin with a

scandalous smile. "Did you see who's here? Antoni." She made wide

"Can you give us a minute?" Cami glared at Yeni. Turning back to me,

she took my hands. In her heart, I saw love and understanding. "You

"Do what? The leader role? Vale, it's little more than you're doing

haven't been okay since you picked me up. What's up?"

I shook her hands. "I don't think I can do this."

Cami followed, mystified by my sullen attitude.

"It's not the leader role, Cami."

"Then what is it?" A familiar clanging sound rang, the dinner bell. There were cheers and laughter and lots of movement toward the dining hall, kid voices and adult voices all mixed together. Every cell in my body resisted it. "I'll tell you a er dinner." I walked out.

Then I saw him across the center courtyard, talking to a group of

boys, nodding at whatever anybody said, as though he actually

cared. He was probably imparting advice from his frosh experiences. I

didn't care. In fact, I hadn't heard from Antoni all senior year, further

validating my belief that I'd meant nothing to him. I was quite proud

of the fact that I'd managed to push the bathroom memory to the

I could feel his gaze on my back. I ignored it, as we filtered into the

plans. I heard myself telling Yeni how I was starting FIU in the Fall.

That was true, but that was all I knew. No idea regarding major or

career direction. Everyone else seemed so sure of where their lives

Yet, I remember the exact moment my uncertainty began unfolding.

dining hall-kids, leaders, aged-out member. all talking about summer

back of my mind. I'd done such a good job of it, in fact, that I

sometimes questioned whether it actually ever happened.

It was last summer. I was in bed, casually scrolling through Instagram, looking for inspiration for senior pics, when I saw it-a filtered photo of a little black cauldron, thin smoke rising from its belly. The photo of the tiny iron kettle was framed by chalky sketches of stars, moon, and candles. Cradling the cauldron was a pair of beautiful slender hands with black, pointy, sparkly fingernails. There was something gorgeously enigmatic about the photo. It was a

When I checked to see who in my IG feed would have posted such a

goth-inspired gem, I saw it was Savannah, a recent graduate from

Ministerio High, a girl who, a few days a er graduation, had begun

Savannah was di erent. In Economics, she gave the best answers,

the usual-water, food, shelter. Then, there was Savannah: "Sex."

Everyone either laughed or clutched their pearls. What a complete

badass. I never understood why she was in Catholic school to begin

I dove into her profile to stalk the rest of her gallery and found myself

spiraling down a rabbit hole of bottomless intrigue. Each photo was

more beautiful than the next-crystals, oil burners, bundles of herbs

googling half the words she used in her posts-energy. manifestation,

that she dried herself in a massive armoire. Before I knew it, I was

I began following many of the same accounts she followed, posts

bought a Tarot deck along with several books to help me interpret

attraction, stu that would never fly in my household. We all knew

that God was to thank for any good that came into our lives, not our

them. I began learning about Buddhism, Celtic runes, law of

with hashtags like #witchy #witchesofinstagram and #metaphysical. I

Once, Ms. Halley asked, "What are basic needs in life?" Kids answered

cosmic art of naked nonbinary people.

vibrations, Universal source.

Then, last night I'd asked for a sign.

to make of the wolf, though.

with me.

"What story?"

because of you."

faking?"

"Maybe I am."

loves you."

second?"

"Vale..."

YFJ assistant leader tonight!"

"I'm worried about me, too."

"The bathroom story," she muttered.

me. "Don't be upset with me, but I have to go."

"I should've said this before-I can't do this."

life unfold behind a sheet of glass.

wearing blue lipstick, gotten bicep tattoos, and was making amazing

own powers. Until I made up my mind about how I felt regarding the new information, I kept it a secret. If I was going to worry my family, I'd wait until there was something to actually worry about. So far, I was only intrigued by this mystical new aesthetic. I wasn't about to run o and join a Satanic cult.

The silhouette of a wolf showed up. I believed in signs-always had.

When a double rainbow appeared on a shitty day, I believed God was

cheering me up. When a butterfly fluttered over me in the courtyard

at school, I knew it was my dad checking on me. I didn't know what

At dinner, I felt like an imposter. Like I was watching someone else's

"I'm worried about you," Cami whispered. We were helping wipe

down tables littered with corn kernels and spilled chocolate milk

a er dinner. Several yards away, Antoni stood with another clueless

fool who thought he was so wonderful, trying to make eye contact

"Can you tell me now? There's more to the story, isn't there?"

"It's not about him, I told you." Why Cami couldn't fathom that

She stopped wiping and stared at me. The sponge in her hand

dripped milky water down her wrist. "What do you mean?"

something besides boys might be wrong with a girl was a mystery to

"Do what?" "This. The retreat." "Vale, it's fine. We're going to have a great time. We always do! We look forward to this every year. Come on." She took my hand. Someone greeted us. We smiled. But in her grip, I felt her fear that something was wrong, that I was leaving not just the retreat, but her. I plucked the sponge from her hand and tugged her around the corner of the building. Outside, the sky had darkened to a velvety

royal purple. "Cami, you look forward to this every year. I only came

"That can't be true. You love this. Unless you're suddenly good at

I saw the hurt in her eyes and felt guiltier than I ever have in my life. I

searched the sky for answers. No wolves in the clouds. "Look, I don't

resolve without God's grace. We can talk to Father Willie. Father Willie

know what's going on, but I can assure you it's nothing we can't

"Father Willie can't fix this. Trust me, Cami. My brain's a mess..."

"What am I supposed to tell them? Valentina, they're naming you a

"Tell them I got sick." I took o toward the cabin to grab my bag. I felt like a complete loser for ditching, but it would've bee worse to stay and fake it. "I can't believe this." She lingered in the cabin's doorway. "What am I supposed to do without you?"

you." I kissed her cheek and pushed past her rigid stance.

I shot through the courtyard and out the camp gates, largely

dead body into the unpredictable liberty of the universe.

"Valentina Callejas, what...the hell..."

"We'll talk when you get home in two weeks, okay? I promise. I love

unnoticed, like the ejected ghost of an accident victim, rising from its

I turned and saw him-the impossibly handsome Antoni, lingering in

my peripheral vision. He reached for my arm. "Hey, can I talk to you a

"No. I'm leaving," I said, pulling away before he could touch me. "I'm

"Bitch." I bolted out, chastising myself for apologizing when I had nothing to apologize for. He was the one who took advantage of me in a smelly

worry about it now. Once I was o the compound, the chorus of swamp crickets cheered me en route to my car. I started the engine and navigated the gravelly dark path back toward

sorry." "Wait, really?" Yes, really. bathroom, not the other way around. Talking to him would only call the memory back again. The campers' laughter melted away. One of the leader's voices blared through the megaphone, announcing campfire time. I le it all behind. Explanations would be demanded of me, but I wouldn't

the highway. Once on the road, I let out an exhale and opened my window for fresh hot air. The break wouldn't last for long, though-I was headed home. Thank you for reading! Please remember to vote if you liked it

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