Chapter Twenty Five

Fae had le the veranda but wasn't in the ballroom. We needed to

find her so I could drive the three of them away from the Sunlake

"Where do you think she went?"

Springs. I would try to convince Crow to leave, too, but that would be harder. Regardless of who came with me, I had to go. I'd promised Macy. "Probably in the kitchen," Wilky said. Wilky, Mori, and I hurried down the corridor through the double

doors into the kitchen where we found Fae's flip-flops floating in a

know what he said to me tonight?"

river of rain. Mori bent to pick them up. "Wait. Tell me again why you think we should leave?" "Especially tonight?" Wilky added. "In the middle of this storm? We still have so much we want to accomplish. That skull was just the

beginning." I looked at both of them, still so anxious to begin the work they'd waited a year to do. "First of all, the flooding. Second, Citana warned of an evil presence, and third, Crow's not right in the head. Do you

They both shook their heads. "He asked if I needed a rope. As a joke. As in my father hung himself, so I should use a rope on myself, too. Does that sound funny to you?" "Definitely not," Mori said. "And we know there's a dark presence at

presence has caused, so we can help trapped souls. The only way to

help them is to rid whatever is blocking it." "Mori." I placed my hands behind my head. "To be honest? Had I known there was an evil here, I never would've stayed to help. I know

the Sunlakethat's why we're here. To find out what havoc the

you want to help the spirits of the Sunlake find passage to the Light, but I'm pretty sure this is a bigger battle than we thought." Mori held my gaze a moment then moved to the corner kitchen doors to peer through each one. "Fae?" They ignored my plea to leave the

building, "I was hoping to keep digging," Wilky said. "The more I uncover, the more I might be able to find peace for other families." "I get it, Wilky, but at what cost? It's using us for our pain. That sounds

like more than we bargained for, doesn't it?"

"She's scared, Wil," Mori said.

her family."

have to ask."

reason she's here."

death."

My jaw dropped. "Is that what you think? That I'm being chicken shit? It's not only about what Citana said. It's also about the building. Mori, you saw the size of that concrete chunk that fell from the ceiling when we were leaving the basement. What if that'd fallen on our

heads?" Mori paced into the dining room, and we followed. "So we stay out of the basement. There's other stu you may not have considered, Vale.

I always have a couch to sleep on at Citana's, if it came down to it, but Fae has nowhere to go. Her family's completely abandoned her. We're

"She can stay with my family, too," Wilky said, eyeing me. "You all can." Mori considered it. For a moment, I thought I'd convinced them. "Thanks, but you know her heart is set on finding that gold," they said, sloshing through the dining room's puddles. "That's the whole

"She can stay with me. I know my sister wouldn't mind, though I'd

demolished, maybe we can request a special permit to search the foundation once the rubble is cleared and leveled." "Can we do that?" they asked.

"Mori, if the county gets its way and the building eventually get

state. But for now, we should leave. Isn't it a waning moon? Influences passing, time for goodbyes and closures? We've already done all we can do here. It's time to let this place die a peaceful

Mori thought about it. "Everything has its time," they whispered.

I remembered Macy's Everglades story. "Yes. The old burns down to

"We can try. My father worked for them, and my sister works for the

Fae came running in just then, wild excitement in her eyes. "There you guys are." "Where were you? We've been looking for you," Mori said.

"The basement. I need your help. The concrete foundation connected

to the opening of the death tunnel is cracked. I wonder if there's a

way to open that up more, maybe using the shovel. We should try!"

"Love..." Mori took Fae's hands.

Wilky and I looked at each other.

Come see it!"

what you were looking for!"

chin and exited the room.

meaning of the word dedication."

Catholic Church, the petri dish of fear."

I bristled at Crow's menacing presence.

than the result they seek."

enjoy another hundred-year reign."

soon, it will enjoy a revival."

"You know nothing," Crow hissed.

"Crow? Stop it!" Mori shouted.

already begun."

puddle anyway,

White-red, white-red.

"Cops. Let's pick up and move."

clear space for the new. It's just the natural cycle of life."

"I hate to say this, but...I think you're going to have to settle for knowing that gold is down there. Yes, Vale saw it, but there's no way to get to it, not unless this place is torn down." "No, Mori, Mori, listen... the wall is literally breaking apart from all this

rain. It's like a miracle!" Fae leaped in the air like a ballerina. "Come!

"It's severe structural damage is what it is," I said. More water began

creeping into the dining room from the hallway. "See? For there to be water moving in here, that means the whole parking lot must be flooded, too. At this rate, we might not even be able to drive out of the gate."

"She's right," Wilky said. "This is getting bad. We should go-tonight."

"What? No!" Fae cried. "That's so easy for you to say, Wilky. You found

Wilky paced up to Fae and cupped her chin. "Let's be clear on one

thing. I will never find what I'm looking for. Okay? That skull, that

body we found? That was only the tip of the iceberg." He let go of her

"I agree we should go," Mori said. "The basement's in bad shape. We can always come back a er the rain dies down. A er the property is razed, whenever that is." Fae yanked her hands out of Mori's. "Then, go, all of you." She backed into the hall with tears in her eyes and cheeks red with anger. "I still have work to do here."

"That's the spirit." Through the corridor's gloom, Crow's silhouette

emerged. "Sounds like Fae and I are only ones who understand the

"Crow, we're leaving," Wilky blurted. "Vale says we're in danger."

"Of course, Vale says we're in danger. She was born and bred in the

"Meaning, the building is falling apart as we speak," Mori clarified.

"Of course, it is. That's why we're here, to accomplish goals before it

does. But Vale's been hesitant to help since the day she arrived. There's a cautious energy about her that blocks us from accomplishing those goals. Or has no one else noticed?" "It's called intuition, asshole." Wilky stepped up to him.

Crow held out his arm to prevent Wilky from coming any closer. "It's

called cowardice. The moment you give into your fear, you've lost. A

real witch attracts the result they want by envisioning nothing less

"I don't have time for this." I shot forward and moved past Crow. "We are going to get the county's approval," he insisted in a loud voice. I paused to gape at him. "And then we're going to refurbish this beautiful landmark hotel. And then, people will return from everywhere, near and far, for the healing waters of the lake, for the

splendor of this building's architecture. The Sunlake Springs will

When the lightning illuminated the hall, we could see Crow's arms

had grown scaly and itchy like his feet earlier. His skin was mottled

and veiny. He looked sickly and pale. "Whatever you say, bro. I'll be in the ballroom-packing." Wilky turned and blew past Crow, passing me. "You coming?" "You're not wrong about the waning moon symbolism," Crow said, his head twisted back so I could hear him. "The end of an era brings

the beginning of a new one. This hotel's loneliness is ending. But

"Because the Lady of the Lake told you?" I snapped. "She's lying.

to do her bidding, so she can be reborn into flesh, and she's using

you, Crow. Look at you-you're putrid, like the lake outside. It's

She's only telling you what you want to hear, because she wants you

I felt the air, filled with his stink, reach my nose as he charged at me through the gloom. I li ed my arms, ready to shove him back. I'd never been struck by anyone before, much less a man taller than I was, but I was Latina, full of fire, and pissed as fuck. "What? You're gonna hit me?"

"You...are a liar." He rushed at me, his form growing larger as he

stomped toward me. I hadn't noticed how much taller he seemed to

have gotten since I'd been alone with him in the ballroom earlier. I

braced for the shove, but ended up tripping and landing assfirst in a

Wilky's hands were on Crow in a blur, knocking him into the wall and

li ing a fist to ram into his ace when a white light flashed o the

stopped. Another glint flashed o the bird cages, this one red.

walls, lighting up the Lady of the Lake painting in the lobby. We all

The electronic sound of a voice speaking through a police radio sounded out of place and echoed o the walls. Outside, car doors slammed shut. Crow shoved Wilky back with both hands. "And there they are. Everyone hide your things. I'll handle this." "What is it?" Mori shu led past the lobby.

I'd never gotten in trouble before. Not at school. Not at home. I'd

get arrested for squatting in an abandoned building.

Wilky, Mori, and Fae split o in dierent directions.

been the goodiest good girl the world had ever seen. Leave it to me,

on my first time away from home without my parents, as an adult, to

I followed, or intended to follow Wilky into the dining room, intent on

collecting my things and telling the truth, should a police o icer ask

me why I was here, when suddenly, a muscular bicep curled around to gag me. As I watched Wilky enter the ballroom without noticing what Crow was doing to me, he dragged me, kicking and muttering, down the corridor. "Hello?" Beams of light criss-crossed through the lobby, reflecting o the atrium glass. Crow unlocked a door to one of the small o ices between the grand

rooms we never used and shoved me inside. He navigated the dark,

windowless room with one arm, as he dragged me then pushed me

into an armchair, my mu led screams evaporating into nothingness.

He let go of my mouth, and I sucked in a deep breath. Before I could

scream, he'd shoved a rope, the rope I'd given him in exchange for

the shovel, into my mouth. I heard one of my teeth chip and kicked

blindly in the dark, aiming for his groin. He caught my foot between

"I can't trust what you'll tell them," he muttered, his thick, fish-

smelling sweat falling on my face, as he worked to wind the rope

"Your father came to close this place down, too," he said, testing the

knot around my wrists. "The Lady harassed him every time. Like you,

he couldn't resist the building's beauty either. He'd come back. She

haunted his ass until he couldn't take it anymore. She made it look

I fought against the restraints, but Crow had tied me tight.

around my wrists behind the chair. "I'll be back,"

like a suicide, I'll do the same to you later."

What? NO.

on the floor.

from myself."

I heard talking.

Yes

But in this room, I was safe.

I sank into deep meditation.

In this room.

Snarky wolf.

Kitchen ghost?

they notice his changing appearance?

He le, closing the door.

his knees where he held it still.

I reached out with one leg and clocked him in the knee. He buckled, restrained a cry, then reached out and yanked a good chunk of my hair.

I sat in pitch darkness, breathing through my nose, hearing the police

o icers calling throughout the building. I couldn't tell if they'd found

any of us or not, if anyone was hiding or coming clean. In my mind's

eye, I watched them creep with their flashlights, as they stepped

because of Cami. She had reported us. She was trying to "save me

What would Crow tell the police? Probably how the rest of us were

squatters, and he was here on assignment. I could hear it now. Would

through puddles. Deep in my heart, I knew the cops were here

"Watch my stu," he breathed into my face, indicating a pile of stu

As I sat in complete darkness, I heard the o icers giving each other orders, directing to search dierent areas. The hotel was so sprawling, it would take a while. As footsteps scrambled past the o ice I was locked in, I screamed against my gag, working myself up to the point I could barely breathe. How had I gotten into this situation? From the moment I first arrived, I knew this place-I knew Crow-was bad news and still, I delved deeper

into it every day. Was I so desperate to feel anything at all that I'd

Closing my eyes, I focused on trying to settle down before I choked

envision that I wasn't in danger; I was safe inside this room. In the

His shadow entered my mind before I saw his face, my Lobo of deep

pewter fur, my lupine spirit guide. He filtered into the room quietly

and circled the chair, his tongue lolling. In front of me, he sat on his

haunches and stared. What did you get yourself into?

Hey, I wouldn't be here if not for you.

her waist was a charred apron.

the right moment to germinate.

My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight

My little moonshine, dream with the night

on tears. I breathed evenly, calmly, I worked to clear my mind,

distance, I heard more radio calls, more orders being given.

risked injury, even death, to know what living was like?

blending through the wall. I couldn't deal with another ghost right now, not when I was the one who needed the help. Quickly, it took the shape of a woman with long hair and curvy shape. Her cheekbones were high; her smile told me everything would be okay. I couldn't see her eyes. Half her face was missing. Half her hair. Around

When she reached out and touched my cheek, I felt a love that

met, I'd only seen her in that one photo of her wearing hippie

transcended time and space. My grandmother. Though we'd never

clothing, I knew she loved me. The seed of her adoration had been

Only it was her melodious voice, the same song she'd sang to her

little boy night a er night before she'd perished in the fire, a song

he'd kept in his heart and passed onto me many years later. My

In the light she emanated, I could see what she'd pushed Crow's

laptop bag. Papers slid out. It could've been my imagination-all of it-a

planted inside my father's heart, then passed on to mine, waiting for

Through the darkness, another shape emerged, a dark cloud

grandmother sank to her knees, transformed into a column of twinkling blue lights, and pushed something toward me. When you awaken, Love you will be My little sunshine Heaven gave me

Code enforcement forms.

condemned.

few inches before my grandmother's column of light disappeared. The chair tumbled onto its side with me in it. The fall loosened my bound wrists, enough so I could wriggle my hands out of the knots, Once a hand was free, I was able to pull the hemp cord out from between my teeth. I li ed the papers to my face, adjusting my vision as much as I could in the darkness. I smelled phosphorus, and a flame sprouted out of thin air. Blue-green orange

As a child, my father had given me blank or used ones to play with, to

keep me busy while he worked. I'd pretend I was a code enforcer for

the county, like him. On the forms, I saw words penned in my father's

handwriting-stress cracks, uneven settling of foundation, copper pipe

breakage, floors sinking, etc. Words to decree this building

"How long?" I looked at the spot I'd seen my grandmother, now

vision borne from distress. I couldn't be sure, but the next thing that happened I would remember clearly as long as I lived. A leather laptop bag that toppled from the top of a pile of Crow's stu , was explainable. My chair rising o the floor, however, was not. I rose a at moments, the light hovered, flickered, a ghostly ball of fire to illuminate the papers.

empty. "How long until it collapses?" The ball of flame grew wider, flew straight at me, as if hurled by human hands, catching the edges of the papers, eating its way inward, erasing my father's writing, his memory and hard work, no matter how hard I tried to blow out the flames. The survey was charred, blackened, gray ashes flittering out like dead confetti. A reply echoed from another place and time-my father's voice: Now

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