## **Chapter Three**

my courage to replenish. No sense in delaying the inevitable. I grabbed my bag and made it up the walk, stopping outside the front door. In the silence of the night, I could hear my grandmother and mother arguing through the walls from inside my mother's room.

When I pulled into my driveway, I turned o the engine and waited for

"My fault? How?" Mom fought hard to keep her voice down.

told her about the tarot cards in my room last night. "Claro que sí. Who else's fault would it be?" Abuela said. "You're her mother."

Either she knew about me leaving the retreat, or my grandmother

Keys in hand, I pressed my forehead against the door and let out a sigh. I wished I could steal into the night like some mysterious bird,

fly-fly-away until I could breathe again. But I wasn't raised to run from problems, and despite the fact I was about to get the third degree. I turned the key and entered the house. "She's here," Abuela said. It took less than two seconds for both of

them to appear in the foyer. "Gracias a Dios!" My grandmother saw me and glanced at the ceiling. "Valentina, where have you been?" "Driving home." Mom followed me through the living room. "I called you. You didn't answer."

"I know." "We didn't know if you'd gone somewhere, if you'd gotten into an accident..."

"That's a bit much, isn't it?" I hurried to my room.

"Don't get fresca with your mother," Abuela said. I cast my grandmother a tired look. I wasn't getting fresh. They were overbearing, overprotective parents with no reason to treat me this

way. "Sorry to worry you," I added. "No texting and driving. Isn't that what you always say?" Trudging into my bedroom, I tossed my du el bag

onto the bed, as they followed me in.

Mom and Abuela jammed my doorway. "Explain," Abuela demanded. "They called from the retreat and said that you le ." So, this was about me leaving the retreat. For some reason, I found that easier to deal with than explaining my interest in the occult. "Of

course, they did," I muttered. The trap was set. No matter what I said, did, or felt, it'd be wrong. I chose to play the fool. "I'm fine. Nothing to worry about." "Fine, ni fine," Abuela sco ed. "Why did you leave the encuentro a er

I paid three hundred dollars for it?" "Mami, really?" My mother shot

Abuela a look. I stood by my bed, checking the texts that had come in a er my defection. "Is that what you're worried about? Don't worry, I'll pay you back for it."

My mother attempted to gain control of the situation. "Valentina, why on Earth would you leave? Father Willie said you just up and walked out, right before the presentation. They were going to name you a leader."

"I know, Mom." "What's going on?" Her eyebrows knitted together. I appreciated she wasn't drilling me like she did other times whenever my grandmother

stood directly behind her, puppeteering her with invisible strings.

"Is that how it is now with this generation?" Abuela asked. "You just

leave a commitment when you're not happy? This is what I was

telling you," she said to my mom. "No follow-through. A er she

"I didn't want to be there. That's all there is to it." It felt liberating to say it so plainly.

promised Cuco that she'd lead the youth group."

should've made that decision, not you."

"It's what you always wanted."

"When I was ten, maybe."

"You loved him."

Abuela.

"What?"

walls o ended her.

"Pay me back," she laughed. "With what job?"

"I'll get one. I have all summer."

"No." I glared at her. "I never wanted to make that promise. You made me tell him that." "He was dying!" Abuela said.

"I know he was dying, Abuela. It still wasn't your promise to make. I

"I did love him, but I never wanted to be a youth group leader. I only said that to make him feel proud of me. It's what hewanted, what you wanted. Right, Mom?" I looked to the woman who should've been on

my side here. Yet, all my life, she'd been a mediator between me and

"Forget the promise for a second, both of you," Mom interjected.

"That's not what this is about. What made you leave so abruptly? That's not like you, Vale." "How do you know it's not?"

"How do you know it's not like me?"

"Because I've known you eighteen years..."

might've been a low blow, but there it was. The whole world knew of their marital problems, why not say it aloud? My mother sucked in a sharp breath and started pacing my room. "Is

this a phase? This has to be a phase." "Yes, it's called adulthood."

Abuela stepped into the room disapprovingly, as though the very

"Sabe quien tiene la culpa, no?" she muttered to my mother.

"No, Mami, why don't you tell me whose fault this is?" Mom leaned

against my dresser, seething under the surface. "I suppose it's my

"You knew Dad for how many? Yet didn't really know him." That

fault again?" "Can you guys argue somewhere else? I need to be alone." I sat cross-legged on my bed and took a good look around. I was never more hyperaware that my room was that of a child. I suddenly wanted to tear it all down. "We're not done with you," Mom

said, and my grandmother's condemning scowl said it all. No matter

what I did, I would never please her. Who could ever live up to the

standards set on women by the Catholic Church? Especially women

of my generation? "El progenitor paterno," Abuela said. "The paternal

progenitor" meant my father in code-speak. "He strayed, you let him." "Me?" Mom clutched her chest. "You're pinning him leaving on me?"

"You're one to talk!" Mom blurted, "Where do you think I learned the

subtle art of turning my cheek from my husband's indiscretions?"

"You knew what he was doing, yet you said nothing."

"That's part of being married, hija." "That's part of being abused. I told him to leave, I was angry. Weren't you ever angry at Papi?" "Your father never hurt me like that." I laughed inwardly. Mom laughed outwardly, "That you know of. 23 and Me didn't exist in your time. Besides, you're the queen of denial." I sank my head, stretching the back of my neck. These arguments erupted every so o en, prompted by something I did or didn't do right, but it was rarely about me. "Your father was a model man," Abuela insisted. I glanced at Scary Mary, holding her rosary beads. Keeping crets to prove my grandmother wrong. Something was up the day he wrapped the little lamp as a gi . I was sure of it every time I touched her.

When my father passed away four years ago, my grandparents came to live with us. That's what Hispanic families do-they merge, Mom said it was bound to happen. We take care of our elderly. But Dad passed while they were separated, and it was too much for my mom

to handle, so she invited her parents to stay with us earlier than

planned. Because I needed more to deal with a er my father's death.

I played with the cross around my neck, the one he gave me for my

7th birthday. I immediately saw his handsome face in my mind's eye.

Then, Abuelo died in May, and it became just us women. I hated the

fact that we couldn't seem to hold life together without men in it. I

"Nobody is judging you," Abuela said. Through her Cuban accent, it

sounded like "djodjing." "But you know who is? La vecina de al lado.

Your neighbor, Alicia, has seen you outside doing whatever it is you

would've thought Abuelo's death could've brought the end of

stringency, but thanks to Abuela, the torture continued.

do at night, practicing Santería, or whatever."

"Why would I jump from one to another?"

My mother's curious gaze held mine.

"No. I'll explain later."

mine."

said quietly.

this house another moment.

Mom believes in it anymore. Mom?"

"Of yours," I replied

boxes would save me.

Abuela le for the kitchen.

the center of your universe. Never forget that.".

go screw itself."

"Valentina!"

My mother sco ed. "Your ignorance is ba ling. Let me talk to my

just would've been better to tell us beforehand."

daughter or wait outside." She turned to me and closed her eyes.

"Vale, it's okay if you didn't want to stay at the retreat. I...I get it. It

"There's no talking to you guys. You do see that, don't you? How am I

supposed to tell you how I'm feeling when I'm being judged for every

little thing I do?" It wasn't just my grandmother either. My mother

played an equal part by not setting limits in her own house.

"What?" I barked a laugh. My mother raised her eyebrows. "You're practicing Santería, Vale?" "Mami, where would I even learn Santería in this Petri dish I've been raised in? Besides, Santería is a religion, and the truth, if you really

want to know, is that I'm tired of religion. I love God, but religion can

"Then what are you doing outside at night?" Abuela asked. "What are

you doing in this room? With your cards and your candles? Don't tell

"It's just tarot cards," I explained. "She acts like I'm worshipping the

me you're praying, because I know a lie when I hear one."

Devil." "What do you do outside then?" Mom asked. "I sit. Under the moon. In nature. Listening to frogs and crickets. I burn a candle, a piece of wood, whatever. The point is I'm not doing anything wrong. It's just meditation." "Like yoga?" Mom was genuinely trying to understand.

"Everything you're doing is wrong. Everything." Abuela strolled up to

my little bookcase and pulled out the square basket with all my stu,

my tarot cards, candles, crystals and palo santo. My bundle of sage,

I jumped toward her, clamping my hands on the basket. "Stop, that's

"It is not witchcra. It's for clearing energy. Same thing during Mass

when they ring a bell or burn incense, Same thing!" I implored my

everything. This is our house. Stop letting her talk to me this way."

mother. "Why do you let her do this? You let her take control of

which to her probably looked like a thick-ass joint.

Abuela held up the sage. "Esto es brujería."

"I would understand it if you talked to me!"

"And I would talk to you if I could trust you!"

"I will. Soon. But right now, I need you to trust me."

her by not being her paragon Catholic granddaughter.

"Vale, I have the same concerns," Mom explained. "I'm more than a little worried right now, I don't even know what my own daughter is up to." "If I'm telling you I'm doing nothing wrong, I'm doing nothing wrong. If you're scared of this," I snatched the sage out of Abuela's hand, "it's because you don't understand it."

Her shocked expression was frozen on her face. For a year, I'd been

wanting to talk to her, but she was unreachable. She was dealing with

her own pain in her own bubble of silence. "You can talk to me," she

I grabbed my things, unzipped my du el bag, and threw them inside.

Flecks of ashy sage smudged against my fingertips. I couldn't stay in

"I do trust you, hija," Mom doubled-down, while Abuela continued to

seethe, muttering under her breath about all the injustices I'd caused

"I still believe in God, I just...I don't want to be in the youth group

anymore. I want to learn what else is out there, decide what I believe

in, instead of being forced to follow your beliefs. Do you understand?"

Abuela crossed herself then paced in the hallway. In Spanish, she told

my mother, "You need to put that girl back on the path. This is not our way. Our way is through God, Our Father, Jesus, his Holy Son. Take control of this situation, hija, before you lose her." "Stop talking about me like I'm not here. I don't have to follow your

lifestyle, Abuelo's lifestyle, or anybody's. I'm not even convinced that

"Lifestyle?" Abuela said. "No, my darling, God is not a lifestyle. He is

It was never my mother who insisted we go to Mass, it was Abuela. It

wasn't Mom's insistence I do my sacrament of Confirmation last year

grandparents' a er they moved in, as if forcing me to check o all the

My mother was staring at me, conflict all over her face. Would she

(late, because we were dealing with Dad's departure)-it was my

ever stand up for herself? Would she ever stand up for me? I didn't wait to hear whatever came next. I texted the only other sibling I had, my half-sister Macy. We'd learned about Macy when I was thirteen through 23 and Me. Five years older than me, Macy was the result of my parents' first separation, the second one happening right a er we learned about her, during which time my dad's heart gave out while living alone.

At eighteen, Macy had decided to take the DNA test and found me

and Dad living in Miami. She reached out. I would say the shitshow

then began, but my parents' marriage had already been a shitshow

for a while. Macy had kept in touch with me all these years through

social media. She always asked when I would come visit. She never

No holding back now. I asked if I could come visit her, to which she

had a sister before, but I always held back-because of Mom.

"I'm leaving." I grabbed my bag and shu led past my mother.

immediately replied with an emphatic-Yes! OMG!

"Where are you going?"

"But it's true."

I nodded.

Why is she leaving again?

"To visit Macy in Yeehaw Springs."

"But that's six hours away," Mom said, as though it were the other side of the world. "So? I can't stay here. You and Abuela need to hash it out. Macy has her own house and a job. I can stay with her while you decide who you're going to be loyal to." My mother recoiled as though hit with a dart. "That's not fair, Vale."

Mom's eyes filled with glossy tears. Abuela had wandered into the

"Let me give you money," Mom said quietly,

and shuddered against my shoulder.

kitchen, moving around pots and dishes, while muttering to herself.

I paused in the living room while she rummaged through her purse

into your account, too. Tell..." She couldn't say Macy's name. "Tell

and opened her wallet. She gave me all the cash she had. "I'll transfer

your sister I'm grateful." And with that, she threw her arms around me

I rarely saw my mother cry. This probably felt similar to when she'd lost my father. I hated that, but still, I had to go. "I love you. It's just for a little while. I'll call you when I get there." "Drive carefully, hija." She wept against my T-shirt, then pulled back

and wiped her deep, soulful eyes. "Go before she notices."

She nodded. Abuela stepped out of the kitchen. She caught sight of me leaving, her mouth open, questions at the ready, the answers to which were no concern of hers. What is going on?

Slipping out the front door, I turned back to give her a weak smile.

How can you let her go? I could hear the interrogation now. My mother bravely closed the door. As I threw my bag into the passenger seat and climbed behind the wheel, I heard my grandmother shouting at the top of her lungs. My mother, done with restraining herself, screamed back, "ENOUGH!"

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