

Chapter Five

The quiet beast watched me.

Adrenaline kicked into high gear, as my hearing flooded with a so ringing sound and the rush of blood. A wolf. Not on my ceiling but live in front of me. What were the chances?

I assumed it was a wolf. I suppose it could've been a large dog. Not a massive creature, on the skinny side, maybe a scavenger, definitely without a home to feed him. I assumed it was male, because it just looked like an alpha to me, but what did I know about wolves? Nothing.

It watched me from the shadows. Intently. Golden eyes studied me, nostrils flaring, sniffing the space between us, gauging danger. My brain scanned everything I knew about wild animals.

They're more afraid of you than you are of them.

Don't show fear.

Move slowly.

I had no clue if any of those were true.

"Hello." I reached out my hand, palm down. If wolves were anything like most animals I knew, they wanted to sniff you first. In all honesty, he didn't seem frightened. He didn't even want to sniff me. He simply took a couple of steps back, then sideways, then he faced the woods with his tail pointed at me. That seemed like a bold move for him, turning his back on an unfamiliar human.

What happened next, I can't be a thousand percent sure, but I swear on my mother's life this wolf turned its head back, as if to say, Come. And for some reason I couldn't explain, I knew in my heart it was okay.

Follow him.

First, the usual warnings dropped anchor.

Don't go,

You don't know what's out there,

Don't be stupid, you'll die.

Listen to your mother, your grandmother, God.

For the love of all that is holy, Valentina, LISTEN, for once.

I did listen. For the first time ever, actually.

The wolf waited, watched me. He would lead. I knew this in my soul to be true. I didn't care what any of the other voices said. This animal had something to show me if only I had the capacity to trust my instincts.

Screw it.

I dropped my flip-flops and slid my feet in, carefully stepping on the edge of the property, past the banyan, into the copse of trees. I wished I could say the woods became magical then, like a secret nighttime garden, but they were more like an entanglement of gloom, black and pewter dense canopies broken up in spots. Deeply purple sky peeked through the ceiling. Time fell away in a cocoon of decomposed leaves, dripping moss, and cricket shrieks. Smells of wood and damp foliage assaulted my senses. I'd been a Florida girl all my life but a city one. Walks underneath the cypress and live oaks at night in the middle of summer were new to me, and I lamented the fact, I'd gone biking through mangroves, kayaking in the Keys, splashing at every beach on both coasts, but Central Florida woods were entirely new.

Cocuyos darted into the peripheral, hiding behind trunks, as if clearing the way. Ahead, my lupine guide shifted side-to-side with a slow and steady gait, at times blending with the silhouettes of trees, so much that I had to blink on to make sure he was still there. I stepped over logs and ducked under low-hanging branches, scanning for amber eyes. Every so often, they appeared as if with a light of their own.

We went on this way for what could've been half an hour, though time seemed to cease existing. Eventually, we broke through the woods and came to a clearing where tall grass swayed in the summer wind, and a wide, open sky revealed the quarter moon. If it hadn't been for the wolf veering on to the left, I would've stepped right into what I quickly realized was a body of water, its gentle shoreline sneakily lapping in the dark. A lake about the size of two football fields together stretched before us.

"What is this place?" I asked aloud.

The wolf strode along the shore of the lake, pushing his way through the tall, razor-sharp grasses. Ahead of him, out of the gloom, emerged a structure so looming wide, towering and black against the night sky. I had to stop and squint to make out the wholeness of it. A building. An old building, decaying forgotten on the lakeshore. Most of its windowpanes were blown out like a carnival shooting gallery. Jutting out of the center was a tower of about ten floors with two wings of four stories each flanking either side. From its sagging veranda, I realized I was seeing the backside.

My instinct was to take out my phone and start snapping pics. I would risk my hiding place in the world to send Camila some shots, but I hadn't brought my phone out to moon-gaze in Macy's backyard. Besides, I hadn't driven all this way to stay connected with Cami. I quickly forgot about wanting to share and just enjoyed the moment.

My guide-wolf led me through the reeds and swampy ground. The closer we inched toward the building, the more threatening it became, the deeper my stomach dove. I raked my memory for the places in the area Macy had mentioned worth visiting-historic homes, a theatre, a dog park. Clearly, this was none of those. Whatever it was, it was larger than any of those and reminded me of the fancy Biltmore Hotel back home. If the fancy Biltmore Hotel were dead and gutted.

"Hey, uh...lobo, I don't want to get any closer," I told the wolf, as if wolves could understand either English or Spanish.

The wolf insisted I follow, still glancing over his back to make sure I was on his tail.

We were almost there. From a short distance, I could see a few details-cracks on the side walls, on the columns supporting the back veranda, around double wooden doors and the few windows still intact. Half the side walls were consumed by ivy and moss, the other half with graffiti. Breezes from the lake blew through the broken windows, creating a cooling sound. Whatever this place was, it'd been empty for a long time. Standing there, staring at it, I lost track of time. It could've been nine, eleven, or one in the morning. All I knew was that the quarter moon had arced in the sky since I left the house.

"Is this where you live?" I asked Lobo, deciding the name fit him. Maybe his pack was inside the building, smaller black wolves all huddled away from the summer elements.

Tearing my gaze on the structure, I looked for the wolf, but he'd moved. That was what I got for taking my eyes on him. What if his next move was to pounce on me from the darkness? What if this had all been a ruse to lure me away from human life in order to attack then ration my flesh to his wolfish family?

It'd been hard enough keeping track of him in the woods. Now, surrounded by knee-high grasses, he could've easily been hiding in the reeds. I waded through the sea of grass up to the building's back veranda where old wooden planks rotted in spots. I reached for a two-foot-long splintered piece of wood, twisting it on its frame to carry with me as a weapon. The black, rusted nail on the end looked like six tetanus shots to me.

The building had double entrance doors every fifteen or so feet, about six sets from what I could gather at a distance. A large open space in the middle opened to a courtyard closed off with huge walls of glass. Part of me wanted to touch the walls, run my fingers along the stucco, feel the solidity of everything in my dreamlike state. Should an intrusive thought enter my mind, I could always pull my hand on quickly.

When I tried yanking a door into the building open, it wouldn't budge. Above were cracks from the building's settling, which had caused the walls to put pressure on the framework.

No negative thoughts came to me, but visions flooded my mind.

Whatever this place had been, I could "see" the throngs of people it'd hosted over the years. They circulated through the doors and onto the veranda, greeting each other in vintage clothing, nodding their hellos, saying things like, "Good morning. Out for a bit of fresh air?" I imagined sets of silver being carried around, fresh orange juice, and rowboats along the lake. I imagined a whirlwind of bustling activity. At times, I saw nurses pushing sick people around in wooden wheelchairs.

It was lifeless now.

The third set of doors was open. I peeked inside and smelled the musty scent of humidity and decaying wood, not a terrible smell by any means, just old. When I stepped over the threshold, goosebumps broke out all over my arms, even in the summer heat. As my eyes adjusted to a new level of darkness, I could see the place was trashed. Light fixtures were dusty, walls broken, bricks exposed, and a fireplace I didn't understand (because Florida) was filled with dust and charred wood. Dirty papers rocked in the breeze. Cloth-covered couches sat, longingly awaiting guests. A black plastic binder lay on the floor, its pages glued together with humidity.

The room I was in opened to what appeared to be an even darker hallway, but I wasn't sure how far inside I wanted to explore. I'd seen enough. I should leave and come back another day while the sun was out. With Macy. On the other hand, there was nothing scary about an old building, I reminded myself. My father used to be fascinated by them, telling me stories of when the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables used to be abandoned in the early 1980s before its renovation. This building was just that-an empty shell. A place that time forgot. How often did I have a place all to myself?

I stepped in further.

The long, center hallway was like an artery, stretching across the entire width of the building, the spinal cord from where all the rooms branched out. Where I stood in the south wing, I could see clear across to the middle of the hotel, where vague light seeped in. The northern part of the hall disappeared into gloom. Standing here, holding my breath, my heart began a steady pound.

I sucked in a breath, told myself to chill out. Nothing was here, nothing but a wolf who wanted to play hide-and-seek. Wolves I could deal with. Wolves were already in wolf's clothing, so there was nothing to mistrust. Huge, empty buildings, on the other hand...so many secrets lurking.

Then came the sounds, like shuffling, from somewhere behind me. Maybe I was right, and this was Lobo's cave. Hopefully I'd find a family of black pups all wondering who this intruder was and not the secret home of the surreptitious skunk ape of Florida legend. I was about to turn around and leave the same way I came when I saw the glow. Way down the central nervous system hallway, so beams of light split the darkness, erratically shining in a way only human hands could command. The beams swayed back and forth, cutting through the dark.

People.

I stood rooted to the floor, my pulse inside my throat.

Why was I here again? What on God's green Earth had possessed me to walk this far from the house, not to mention drive so far from home, to venture into complete unknowingness, now faced with the possibility of running into other humans-humans that may or may not be harmless?

On the other hand, maybe they were exploring just like I was. God, I hated that place my mind immediately went to, where any light was a demon, and every noise was the bogeyman out to kill me. I had a whole community to thank for instilling anxiety into my soul,

But I hadn't come this far only to turn back like a wuss. Doing so would only confirm what I'd known all my life-that I was a coward.

I walked toward the glow in the gloom, careful not to trip on anything, using my feet and the piece of wood to guide me. I crossed what appeared to be the center lobby, what vaguely resembled a welcome counter to my left, inside a grand entranceway, dark, broken, battered to shreds. Graffiti covered the inner walls, though I couldn't tell what anything said. It'd be worth another look during the day. In the corners of the lobby were Corinthian columns topped with marble fishtails and ocean waves, and the interior was quite possibly the most beautiful I'd ever seen, decay, vandalism, and all.

Behind me, something stood in silence so deafening, I had to turn around and face it. An enormous glass enclosure stretched into the tower above. An atrium, its broken glass bursting with leafy green plants invading through busted-out panels, foliage growing with no rhyme or reason. Statues of ocean life inside it were overtaken by vines and moss, and in the middle, a tall, dried-out fountain of a mermaid holding the sun in her hands, her hair flowing over her shoulders and stony breasts gave me a start.

Suspended in the center about twenty feet above the ground, stabilized by four cables, was a crystal chandelier. Turned on, of course.

Electricity hadn't made its way here in ages. But somehow, that made the light fixture all the worse, hanging like a dark reminder of a heart that used to beat and a fountain that used to bleed.

I didn't know what it was about the room that gave me chills. I just knew I didn't like it. It almost seemed like someone was, watching me from the dense vegetation. I shuffled away as quickly as I could toward the light beams and my original purpose. I moved slowly, doing my best not to make any sudden noises, just in case I happened to stumble upon the hidden location of drug lords or an angry alien civilization. This was Florida, a place where anything could happen.

But as I got closer and listened, sounds became words, and words became conversations. "I didn't, did you?" someone said.

"Then, who did?"

"I'll go check..."

Someone had heard me. They would walk out and find me here, cowering in the hallway. I hurried to them head-on, so it wouldn't look like I was hiding. I peeked through the open doorway. First thing I spotted was a thick pillar candle glowing in the middle of the floor of what seemed to be a ballroom, judging from heavy green curtains, parquet floors, and more dark chandeliers. In every corner of the room were bags piled together made of modern polyester and drawstrings. Empty cans rolled around. An orange electrical cord snaked its way toward a generator, and books and notebooks sat spayed open.

Human things. Modern things. And the strong smell of burning herbs.

The only moving person was a tall guy in jeans, standing through the side door, while others watched him from scattered, standing positions. In the pulsating light of the candle, three faces turned to me. Cautiously, I stepped into the room.

"Crow..." one of them said.

The guy leaving stopped and turned. They shifted to the center from different corners, stepping from behind walls and a busted piano into the candle's glow, light face, dark face, spiky hair, long hair in dreadlocks, one of them hatted, all young, about my age, maybe older, a mixed bag. One of them, a beautiful genderless person with glowing bronze skin and half a shaved head, stepped forward.

"Hey," they said.

"Hey," I replied, my throat dry as pulverized bone.

"Who are you?"

"Vale," they repeated.

"Yes..."

"Vale."

"No..."

"I'm Mori. We've..." Mori calculated their companion's reactions regarding how much they should tell me. Seemed fine by everyone else. "We've been waiting for you."

"Me?" I said in disbelief.

"Yes." They smiled a beautiful, kin-hearted smile. "A long time."