Chapter Seven

When I was thirteen, my father heard from Macy for the first time. At home, the yelling began, and my parents separated for the second time. The first time was before I was born, while they were still boyfriend and girlfriend, apparently when Macy was conceived.

But I wouldn't know about Macy for another year. A er months of my parents trying to work things out, my mother asked my father to leave. On that day, he stood on the front porch, holding my hands. I could feel his sadness through his skin. Tears streaked down my face. The car engine was on.

"It's only for a little while. Until your mom and I figure out what we want to do," he'd said.

I threw my arms around him, reining him in tighter, smelling the woody scent of his neck. Maybe if I showed him I loved him more, he'd stay. "Papi..." I still called him Papi in those days. A year later, when I'd learned from my grandfather Cuco that my father had another daughter with another woman who was not my mom, it would become Dad.

"Vale, it's okay. I'll drive down every other weekend to see you, okay?"

No, it wasn't okay. I wanted my dad home with me. I didn't care if he and Mami were fighting. Fighting happened. Fighting was normal. It would soon go away. We could be happy again if we just tried. Why did he have to leave Miami?

I remember him trying to pry me o in the most loving way possible, but it still felt like my world was imploding. Watching him drive away. Waiting for him to come back to see me. Only seeing him once a month hurt-he hadn't kept his promise of every two weeks. Work kept him busy, he said. Seeing his closet empty with only hangers in it hurt, too. Seeing the stained-glass sun ornament he'd made as a kid missing from its spot by the window destroyed me.

I thought about this now, as I faced the clairs. I realized why-I was clutching the cross charm, the one he'd given me. I let it go. Maybe I did have an ability.

"Let me think about it," I told them. "I'll be back tomorrow."

That night, I dreamed of a wolf, dark pewter in the moonlight, leading me along, through the forest, around a lake until we reached a massive shell of a building that used to be somebody. In my dream, it'd been alive at one point, this human being of a building. Now it sat empty, a shriveled ghost of its former glory, whispering like the elderly when you lean in close to hear their innermost secrets, as death knocks on their door.

in my dream, the wolf lingered in the doorway between the real world and this other sanctum, a portal to the other side. It asked for my verdict. Was I in? Would I join the others? The wolf needed to know. It was personally invested in my decision. When I told Lobo no, I couldn't, I was too scared, he tipped back his chin and howled.

I awoke.

Macy's guest room again. Sunlight.

I sat up quick, remembering the entire night before. These clairs, this wolf, I had actually seen and met them. Last night. It hadn't been a dream. I'd told a group of people at the Sunlake Springs Resort that I would think about itbeing part of their group-that I had to go for now. Then I did. I le in a hurry back the way I'd come around the lake, retracing my steps through the woods all the way to Macy's yard. By then, I'd expected my sister to be waiting for me, pissed and wondering where I'd been.

But she wasn't my mom or abuela about to unleash unfathomable guilt. She'd gone to bed, leaving me the light on. No note, no texts from her waiting on my phone. I'd felt trusted, old enough to make my own decisions. Nobody to give me a guilt trip felt oddly liberating.

Adrenaline rushed through my limbs. I dressed quickly and flew downstairs, eager to research The Sunlake on my phone, see what the hotel was all about, why it wasn't on Maps when I'd searched the area. Macy was in the kitchen, having brunch in her PJs and working. "Good morning! There's co ee."

"Thanks."

"Did you sleep okay?"

"Yeah. That bed is super cozy. Makes me want to sleep too long. Hey, can I ask you something?" I came to stand by the kitchen table where I could see outside, toward her yard and the banyan tree to make sure I hadn't imagined my nighttime frolic through the Central Florida landscape.

"Shoot."

"Last night, I went for a walk."

She nodded. "I wondered where you went. Find anything interesting? I'm sorry there's not much around here." She flipped through her iPad and wrote notes on a pad beside her.

"Well, that's the thing. I didn't mean to go as far as I did. Thought I'd just poke around, but then I ended up walking farther than I thought." I le out the part about how a wolf acted as my tour guide. "I stumbled into an old place a couple of miles from here. An abandoned building?"

"The Sunlake Springs?" she asked. "An old dinosaur swallowed by trees? Looks like it's drinking from a poisoned puddle?"

I laughed. "That's the one. What was it?"

"Oh. That's an old Florida ruin," she sighed. "Basically, a long time ago, Florida was nothing but swampland. It wasn't even considered part of the South, that's how uninhabitable it was." She laughed. "But when TB got really bad in the early 1900s, people flocked here in the hopes the warm weather could cure them." "TB?"

"Tuberculosis. They believed the fresh lakes had healing powers. I told you about Cassadaga, the little town not too far from here, right? Founded by a medium whose own spirit guide told him to build a camp near the heali waters of Central Florida's lakes. Anyway, before you know it, sanatoriums for healing the sick began popping. all over. That place is one of them."

"Why did it close?"

She shrugged. "Dying breed? A relic of a bygone era?"

"But couldn't someone turn it into a new hotel or something? That's what they did with the Biltmore Hotel in Miami. It reopened a er being closed for, like, twenty years."

"Not all hotels are so lucky," Macy said. "Some close when they lose relevance. Up here, people started flocking to Disney in the 70s. Nobody wanted to stay in an old resort on a lake too small for boating, especially a place with an identity crisis like that one. Sanatorium turned mental hospital, turned spa? The spiritualists at Cassadaga tried turning it into a new age resort for a short while, but by then, people were only interested in theme parks."

It saddened me that The Sunlake Springs couldn't recover from the theme park industry boom, and it was too far from the shore to be a beach resort, too. It was just smack in the middle of swampland.

"What do you consider a spiritualist?" I asked.

"Psychics, mediums, people who see dead people. Why?" "Just curious." I thought of the clairs, how they were looking for a finction spiritualist. If that meant someone who could see dead people, it was definitely not me. "Anyway, it was sad to see, a beautiful old hotel just rotting away in the dark." I didn't mention the clairs. Didn't want her to alarm her. Even though Macy had given me carte blanche since I'd arrived, old habits died hard.

She looked up sadly from her iPad. "Will you be going back?" she asked. Concerned, but not judging.

"Not sure. Do you want to come along?" Though, somehow, I didn't think the clairs would approve of me bringing outside people. I grabbed co ee and a granola bar.

"I wish," she said. "But I'm slammed," "It's okay, Truly." "I feel like I've been ignoring you," she said.

"Honestly. I'm having more fun than I've had in years." I sounded sarcastic, but it was true.

At that, she raised her eyebrows. "Well, you know Yeehaw Springs is notorious for its hair-raisin' good times!" She laughed and collected her things, tousling my hair. "I have to get back to work, sis. See you in a bit."

"Okay." I watched her go and smiled from behind the rim of my mug.

She called me "sis."

It was raining when I le the house. I remembered to bring my phone this time for taking pictures, and an umbrella, too. As late a ernoon thunderheads rolled across the land, my car bumped along an overgrown path, which should've been my first sign that The Sunlake Springs didn't want visitors. When I came upon the metal gate leaning at an angle, it hit me why I'd come through the back way last time.

Where was my wolf when I needed him?

I leaned on my steering wheel, squinting through the semicircular path of the windshield wipers at the hotel's silhouette in the distance. The resort's central tower lined up symmetrically with the center of the gate, and when lightning struck nearby, I caught a glimpse of the building's façade. Even in decay, the old place was beautiful. If I stared at it long enough, I could see cars and ambulances pulling up, dropping o patients, hearses hauling away the dead.

I was thinking how to proceed, if I should get out here and hike the rest of the way, when a robust wind shook the car. Ahead of me, the massive iron gate swung open with a long creak.

"Um...okay."

I squeezed my car through the open space, hoping it'd fit, relieving me from having to get out and widen the gate by hand. My clunker fit fine, and I managed to drive the rest of the way to the front portico. Going around a circular stone path, I finally parked underneath a covered driveway next to a white truck with a pool company business logo.

For a minute, I sat there, too, waiting for the rain to die down, taking in the building's façade. It had definitely once been beautiful, but now needed major repairs. My father would've called this "a Tuesday night special," as he named any badly decrepit building he had the pleasure to inspect. The front doors featured a great, big bronze sun rising out of a body of water and eels or giant fishtails splashing the surface.

I stepped out and ran over to the doors, realizing, once I got there, that they were chained together. "Shit."

I checked every door and window. Locked. Locked again. Spiny droplets pelted my face and body, as I battled with each door stuck to its frame. Eventually, I found an unlocked one that gave way when I tugged at it. I entered what seemed to be the area behind a front reservation desk. It faced a two-story lobby, and I realized that ahead were the columns decorated with fishtails and ocean waves I'd seen the night before. Two huge gilded birdcages sat empty on their metal stands. I hadn't seen those in the dark.

Outside, thunder cracked. I shook o the rain from my shoulderlength mop of hair and stupidly tried using a curtain to dry my arms. Rookie mistake. The layer of dust was so thick, it le dark streaks of grime on my wet skin. Whatever, I was in. And thanks to stormfiltered sunlight coming in through arched windows, I could see. The place had some furniture-old wooden chairs, velvet sofas turned on their sides, a few dead lamps. Walls, columns, and floors served as canvases for gra iti. On one wall, someone had practically sprayed an essay:

The lady lives!

You should go. And...

Punk ass bitch

...were a few of the lovely epithets scrawled in neon colors across peeling wallpaper. The whole place seemed to wallow under a heavy blanket of regret that made an ache throb deep in my chest. Roaming through the lobby, I got a better look at the two birdcages. I loved the ones at the old Biltmore and knew most of the glamorous buildings of the time had them. It must've been a beautiful sight back in the day, filled with finches, parakeets, and cockatiels.

I coiled my fingers around one of the bars to see inside better. A grinding sensation, like the giant propeller of an ocean liner starting up, awoke inside me. My stomach felt like it'd suddenly developed a tumor that pulsed as it grew. I pushed back on the bar and skittered, gaping at the cage.

Note to self: do not touch anything.

I hurried from the room, crossed the hallway, and stood at the entrance to the grand atrium to catch my breath. Once my elevated pulse subsided, I stared at the beautiful glass enclosure rising several floors into the sky. Rivers of rain ran down the sides of the glass, pooling onto the Mediterranean-tiled floor through broken panes. Enormous palm fronds and wild palmettos thrashed wherever the wind crept in. The large fountain's mermaid, hoisting her sun globe, gazed up hopefully. The center chandelier swayed back and forth like a chained monster, fighting its restraints.

I stood there, unable to think of anything but the sense that someone inside the atrium was watching me. But that was ridiculous; no one was there. Once, then twice, I checked behind me to make sure I didn't have a straggler. It's nothing, I told myself. While watching a ghost-hunting show one time, the investigator explained how high levels of electromagnetic fields could make a person feel like they were being watched. I wondered if the storm had anything to do with it, though I'd felt the same last night without a storm.

Standing in the hallway between the birdcages and the atrium felt like I was on the fence between worlds. And I supposed I was, in a way. Everything about this last year had that sense about it-I wasn't a child, but I wasn't a full-fledged adult either. I wasn't Catholic at heart, but I wasn't another religion either. I wasn't fully comfortable with the in-between and knew I had to start making choices soon, or su er a sort of itinerant loneliness.

I strode into the atrium, all the way up to the mermaid fountain, and

placed my hand on the stone bowl. If I had special powers, let it be known. Closing my eyes, I waited for visions to enter my mind, but all I could think about was a little boy. I had no idea what he looked like in my mind's eye, but I knew he was fascinated by this mermaid. In fact, the whole atrium had once been his magical playground.

My hand quivered on the stone. I tried to see the boy better, but the vision had gone, which was just as well, because suddenly, movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention. A swirling green mass hovered in the air, expanding and contracting like a school of silverfish being chased by a barracuda, shi ing and ducking, and... breathing?

I sucked in a gasp and fell onto broken cobblestones. The sharp edge of one cut into the flesh of my palm without breaking skin. Biting my lip, I hugged my injured hand and glanced up at the swimming, swirling mass again that had looked so much like a sea creature for a split second. Upon closer inspection, it was nothing more than Spanish moss hanging o a tree, blowing violently in the wind.

Holy shit, that looked alive.

I held onto my cross.

My little starshine, sleep, oh, so tight

My little moonshine, dream with the night

I had to get out of here fast. If I explored the rooms again, I'd do it with one of the clairs by my side. Rushing into the hallway, I hurried towards the ballroom with mental blinders on, feeling like a total idiot. Way to scare yourself, dumb ass. I willed my heartbeat to slow, my lungs to draw deep, rehabilitating breaths.

"Hello?" I called.

If they were psychic, wouldn't they know I was here? And if /were psychic, I'd have avoided so many things. Touching that birdcage or that fountain, for example. Antoni last summer, for another. I'd have dodged that bullet a mile away. "Mori, Fae?" Wind whistled through cracked panes. Though it was summer with temperatures in the nineties, I hugged myself against a chill in the hallway. The resort did sit on the edge of a lake, a body of water, where breezes were bound to blow, I reminded myself. I was also damp from the rain.

When I reached the ballroom, I stepped inside. Mori, Fae, Crow, and Wilky weren't in. The carpet and wallpaper were a Victorian-era assault on my eyeballs. Bundles of bags and pillows lay scattered around the room. An electric burner, still ticking from recent use, was unplugged from the generator. I hovered over a pile of discarded lunch boxes. A handwritten note was still taped to one

Hope you're hungry! - C.

Something on the dance floor caught my eye. Four white pillar candles set like a square, or a diamond, depending on how you looked at it. In the center of the diamond was a round, black iron receptacle. I would say cauldron, except it was more like a metal dish with a low lip. Inside was a grungy mix of ashes, shell fragments, sand, and an unburned corner of paper.

I crouched to pluck out the paper. In pen, someone had written: Goddess Moon of fertile June, complete the circle and... The rest was burned. I tossed it back in the dish and wiped my fingers on my shorts, squatting for a minute. In the light of day, it was easier to pick up on the building's desolation. A once-majestic hospital was now reduced to a shelter for squatters who burned bonfires inside her walls to try and rouse her secrets.

Crossing the room, I headed for the nearest window, parted the curtains, and peered outside. The rain was just barely beginning to let up slightly. A beautiful small herb garden glistened with fresh rain.

Behind me, someone spoke. "Do you see them?"

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