

CHAPTER THREE

ME. THEY MEANT ME. I'M THE—WHATEVER IT IS . . . SON OF SOME saint I don't care about.

I made it around the corner. My feet stop just after the curb, my butt lands hard on the pavement. My face finds my hands, and I just sit there, heaving. Not crying, not puking. Just rocking as these wild, unfathomable gasps heave through me, send my shoulders up and down, and nothing, nothing makes sense.

I remember standing up, feeling all those eyes on me. I feel them still, like they left sweltering burns across my body. Because I know what everyone was whispering, thinking, laughing about: *This kid who's never around shows up and finds out in front of everyone, the whole community, that he's been initiated.*

How did I not know?

What does it even mean?

It doesn't matter. Not to me. What matters is I have been seen, a thousand times over; all at once, very suddenly, with no warning, the intrusive, penetrating glare of everyone I know landed on me. I

am un-vanished, and I can never disappear again. Never be heard and not seen, never sea espíritu like I'm supposed to.

My name is on their tongues; they're chewing up and spitting out my story, a story *I don't even know*, like it's another tasty morsel of gossip for the mill. And it is, it is. *The kid we barely know and still know better than he knows himself*. That's all I am.

I stood, bristled, burned with shame, embarrassment, confusion. The bright red exit sign seemed to stare back at me from across the room like a beacon. I muttered something to Tams about how she should just keep playing, not to follow me, and then I put one foot in front of the other, blocked out all the blistering whispers as best I could, and got gone fast.

And now I'm here, heaving, on the very curb where . . . I look up. Yep. Somehow, I managed to land in the exact spot where this night first went left. Trucks lay right behind where I'm now sitting, and I stood there, just across the street, and Chela . . .

I put my head back down as another heave trembles through me, then another.

And then a hand lands softly on my back, right between my shoulder blades. It's a light touch, calming. Tams, I think at first, because she's the only person who would run out of the club to check on me. But it's too small to be her hand.

I look up and only barely manage not to leap away.

Chela's sitting next to me, her knees up at her chest, one arm stretched across my back. "I'm not going to kill you," she whispers.

I'm not so sure about that, and my face is probably splattered with doubt, because Chela unleashes the slightest of smiles and says, "I promise."

And I guess if she wanted to, she had plenty of opportunity to do it when I was sitting there with my neck out. Still . . . "Wha . . . what . . . then?" The heaving has simmered to an

occasional tremor, but I still can't make words come out very clearly.

"You didn't know, did you?" It's not cruel when Chela says it. In fact, I'm pretty sure there's sympathy there. Not pity, just . . . she can tell it hurts. I'm not sure how she managed that, because every time I've said those words to myself in the past ten minutes, it's come out like a damning accusation of an unpardonable sin.

I shake my head, blinking. "I don't even . . . I didn't even . . ." Where's a piano when I need one? Even when the world is *not* horrible, expressing things is just about impossible for me. And now here I am trying to explain impossible emotions to an admittedly comforting murderer. Murderess. Whatever, she killed somebody.

"Galanika," she says. It's not even answering my unasked question—I haven't gotten to the part in my processing where I've calmed down enough to wonder which spirit I was initiated to.

"The buff old dude with the jacked-up eye?" I ask, finally finding words.

She nods, that slight smile returning. "Healer."

"How did you—" I stop myself when she looks down, because that's all I need to confirm my deepest fears. "Because everybody knows."

Feels like the floor is falling out from under me again. I mean, I had figured they all knew. It was clear from their reaction. But still . . . her confirmation somehow makes it even worse. Maybe I'd been holding out hope that there was some other explanation, that it was all a mistake.

I scowl. "Except for me."

Somewhere, way in the murky depths of my memory, there's a conversation about this. The name Galanika. Lots of crying. But it's barely there and makes no sense, doesn't pair with any other memory or feel grounded in the reality I know. It's just a shard.

"That . . . figure . . . the spirit . . ." Chela says. "What we saw in the alley."

She did see it too. “Was that Galanika?”

“I think so.”

A moment of silence slides by, but my mind is on fire with all the things that this means. I’m an initiated child of Galanika, the first in ages. I must’ve been made when I was tiny, probably back on San Madrigal.

Everyone knows all this, and I’m here guessing.

“Listen,” Chela says, suddenly sounding exceptionally about-the-business, “what happened earlier tonight . . .”

You mean when you murdered somebody? I almost say, but I manage to stop myself. She may have just killed a man, but she also just came and made sure I was okay even though we barely know each other. And now she’s the one who looks some kind of shattered, head drooped, breath coming in quick, sad bursts, eyes squeezed shut.

Is it weird that I want to comfort her when she’s the one who did the killing?

Yes. But I do it anyway. Don’t ask me to explain.

My hand lands on her back, the same spot hers had been on mine. Her shoulders rise and fall as she gathers herself. “I . . .” she starts. Then she scowls, tries again. “It’s more complicated than what it looked like.”

“It looked pretty complicated, actually.”

She barks a gritty laugh, then shakes her head. “I don’t know how to explain it to you.” Chela looks me full in the face; the streetlights send an orange sheen across her brown skin, her eyes glisten with the fury of everything she’s going through, all that just happened. The night seems to slow around us. The faraway rumble of the city goes quiet; all that’s left is her voice: “But I want to try.”

I would like that very much, I think but don’t say.

Please, I think but don’t say.

Because there is calm even in her turmoil, like we’re both sitting

within the eye of her terrible storm, both our storms, and somehow we're safe here.

"Mateo?" Another voice ruptures the moment, and I'm already standing by the time Tía Lucia has finished her question. "¿Pero qué tú haces aquí afuera?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" I demand, launching across the street toward her. "Why didn't you . . . ?" The words get stuck again in that forever traffic jam in my throat, and I just stand there blubbering for a moment.

"What is this about, m'ijo?"

"I . . . That's what . . ." I glance back. Chela is already gone. The empty spot where she once stood is the empty spot where Trucks once lay.

Tonight has been too much, and somehow I feel like it's only just getting started.

"When were you going to tell me?" I demand, glaring down at Tía Lucia's defiant face.

"Tell you *what*?" Tía Lucia growls back. "Mateo, ¿qué—"

"That I was initiated!" I yell. "Without my permission! Into a tradition I barely understand and didn't have a say in! Because I was just . . . a baby!"

Tía Lucia's eyes go soft, her whole face unclenches. "Oh, Mateo . . ."

"Don't!" I insist. "Don't *Oh, Mateo* me!"

"Pero—"

"I had to find out from *Anisette*! In front of *everyone*! I'm sixteen! Were you waiting for me to hit voting age? To be a senior citizen? *Then* would it have been a good time for me to know what happened to me?"

"Mateo," Tía Lucia says, firmly now. "Tranquilo."

"I *am* tranquilo," I growl extremely untranquilly. Then I take it down a notch or two. "Considering the circumstances."

Tía Lucia pounces. “Oh, ¿sí? And what are the circumstances, mi corazón? Dime, por favor.”

“Well . . .” My voice trails off because she’s right: I have no idea what happened or why, and those, I guess, are the circumstances. “I don’t know. And that’s *exactly* the p—”

“Point,” Tía Lucia finishes for me. “No sabes. But I have tried—”

“Problem! I was going to say *problem!*” Two can play the interrupting game. “The *problem* is I don’t know. I didn’t know that I’m—what? Initiated? Without my permission? A child of some spirit I don’t know and don’t care about?” I’m trying not to yell—people are finally minding their own business, or at least pretending to. But the words coming out of me keep getting louder and louder. “Did my parents know?”

“Of course! I wouldn’t have—”

“Well, when were you all going to tell me?”

“It’s that, I tried,” Tía says quietly.

That takes some wind out of my righteous sails. “Huh?”

“The first time was when you were four or five, I think. Then again when you were eight.”

Uh-oh.

“I think the last time I brought it up you were ten or eleven. You just didn’t want to hear it. Cut me off as soon you realized what I was talking about. Finally, your parents told me to give up, so I did,” says Tía Lucia. “Of course, they weren’t happy about it happening in the first place, but they understood it had to be done.”

“I don’t . . . I don’t understand.”

“The initiation was done to save your life, Mateo. The letters that fell for you were explícito—you were going to die. Initiating you as the first son of Galanika in generations . . . it was the only way to save you.” Tía Lucia smiles sadly, her eyes meeting mine. “You are a healer, Mateo. Es tu destino.”

I shake my head. “I’m a musician. A kamero. *That’s* my destiny.

Mom and Dad are healers. People getting hurt makes me puke.” I try not to think about Trucks, but the image of him falling, forever falling, returns. And somehow, I was being comforted by his killer. I shake my head. One thing at a time. “I just want to play music.”

“Things are happening very fast.” Tía Lucia’s expression sharpens. “You can’t afford to get stuck in your own head anymore. You have a role to play in this world, Mateo. En esta comunidad. There is nothing more dangerous than a power denied, left to fester. It’s gone on long enough. You are a healer, and you must heal.”

“I don’t . . . I don’t *want* to learn to heal, Tía.” I’m sure I sound like a little kid. I feel like one. Suddenly, all I want to be is off in some boring hotel room, studying music, far, far away.

Tía Lucia takes my hand in hers and she’s smiling, but her eyes are sad, full of a hundred secrets, and all I can think about is a destiny that was forced on me, and all those glares and wandering thoughts back in the club. “Escucha,” she says lovingly.

I pull my hand away. “Tía, stop! Stop telling me to listen! I don’t want to listen!”

Tía Lucia steps back like I slapped her.

“*You* listen!” I say. “This . . . it’s not me. You don’t get to decide *my* destiny. I don’t want this.”

I think she’s going to scream at me, curse me out. Instead, she just watches me sadly as I turn away.

And that’s much, much worse. I feel like all my insides are crumbling. I’d been expecting her to bite back. We’d argue until we were tired of it and then calm down and figure out some way to make up and keep going. This is different. I just feel empty.

What have I done?

There’s a yell from inside the club, the sound of breaking glass. More yells.

Someone stumbles backward through the front doors—it’s Arco “El Gorro” Kordal; he’s a year above me in school. He lets out a

stream of curses, backstepping as he goes, both arms raised, and then Big Moses comes barreling out and plows directly into him. Both tumble into the street with grunts and curses. Before they can rise, a whole flood of people burst out of Tolo's club, fists finding faces, feet skidding and stumbling across the pavement.

At the far end of the intersection, I see the cops from earlier. They glance at each other, then just turn and walk away, shaking their heads.