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My First Moon

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MY FIRST MOON

GUADALUPE GARCÍA MCCALL

Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2016

Dedication

To my sisters, Alicia, Virginia and Tina, because strong women prevail.

MY FIRST MOON

by

GUADALUPE GARCÍA MCCALL, BA Theatre Arts (1989)

MASTER'S THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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Critical Preface

In his book, *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall states that a “Story’s role in human life extends far beyond conventional novels or films. Story, and a variety of storylike activities, dominates human life” (8). This quote illustrates how important writing and writers are in our society. This idea resonates with my deeply felt need to create meaningful work, work that will make its way into the fabric of our social structure, work that will improve and elevate life for humanity and the world our children will inherit.

One thing that is always of utmost concern to me as a writer and which I try to address with my work is the need to add to a body of work that is sorely lacking, namely diverse stories, own voices, and multicultural books. According to recent findings published by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center there were 3,400 books for children published in the United States last year. Of these, 166 books were about Latinos, and out of those 166 books only 101 were written by a Latino author.

My First Moon is important in that it adds to that very small percentage of books written for and by Latinos in America. In fact, it is even more significant considering that this percentage is even smaller for my specific culture because the American Latino population is widely diverse and books for and by Mexican Americans are significantly fewer. One would say they are minute. To this end, I try to create works that depict the struggles Mexican American women face, specifically as they pertain to life on the US-Mexico border, where old world values are often in conflict with modern and American influences. *My First Moon* attempts to elucidate the complex issues surrounding common misconceptions and perceptions of female courage, strength, and value. The oppression, neglect, and abuse of women, as well as questions of female

identity and self-worth, all of which are social issues directly associated with the culture of life on the border.

The idea for *My First Moon* came to me after hearing of an incident in my neighborhood of a small child being run over by his young mother. There were numerous rumors and stories swirling around about the logistics of the tragedy. Two of my sons, who were home from college at the time said they'd heard the boy's young aunt, a girl not much older than them, had been taking care of the child. However, she had become distracted and let go of his hand on the porch. The boy had run out into the driveway and been run over by his young mother, a single parent, who was leaving the house to go to work.

The discussions surrounding the incident and my own imagination sparked horrible imagery and nightmarish thoughts. My own personal experiences with my younger sister, two young mothers trying to make it on our own by taking care of each other's children, filled me with questions. How does a young woman forgive herself for being careless and inadvertently causing the death of her nephew? How does one recover from such great loss? And, more importantly, how does one salvage the relationship she has with her sister? Can such a relationship survive the heartbreak that comes with losing a child? These were the questions that I asked myself as I started to work on *My First Moon*.

As the project progressed, I began to see that I was crafting a Bildungsroman or coming of age story. This came as no surprise, as that is the genre I have been working with for most of my writing career. However, as I continued to work on the piece, what started out as a contemporary young adult (YA) novel evolved. Somehow, on the way to resolution, the story shifted and began to develop paranormal elements until I saw that the piece was more of a gothic novel. For this reason, I would have to say *My First Moon* is a subtle gothic novel in the vein of

works marketed toward older young adult readers set in the borderlands of Texas. It toys with common elements in gothic novels prevalent in classic, literary stories like *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* while at the same time introducing my exploration of the concept of what some call “South Texas Gothic.” This novel draws its gothic undertones from the fascination Mexican Americans have with the paranormal and supernatural elements so prevalent in our stories.

In *The Perpetual Orgy*, Mario Vargas Llosa states that “Every novelist re-creates the world in his image and likeness, corrects reality at the prompting of his demons; in the fictional reality” (5) and, although he is speaking about *Madame Bovary* as it pertains to high modernism and the realistic novel, I find the quote to be fitting of all writers attempting all kinds of literary works. One more thing I attempt to do with my own work is to create new spaces where I see gaps in representation of Mexican Americans within specific genres. If finding books in the library by and for Latinos is hard, it is even harder to find books with Latino protagonists in fantasy, speculative fiction, and paranormal books, and even harder still to find something that is specifically set in the borderlands of South Texas.

My First Moon is creating its own space within the landscape of the New American gothic novel, nudging its way in by subtly blending some of the iconic gothic elements with the nuances and flavors of South Texas, specifically the rich culture of the people living along the US-Mexico border. Some of the traditional gothic elements present in my novel are the virginal maiden, the older, foolish woman, an atmospheric setting, night ventures, ghosts, madness and the psychological overlays in one or more of the characters.

My novel is also very much a gothic Bildungsroman story as much as the classic gothic novel *Jane Eyre* in that both protagonists, Grace (*My First Moon*) and Jane Eyre, are young, pure, innocent, kind and sensitive “Virginal Maidens” who very early in life begin to resist the

restrictions and pitfalls of being female in their communities. In a flashback we see that Grace thinks her Guelita Rosa's comadres are abandoned, miserable, empty shells of themselves. Frustrated by this, she discusses her desire for a better life with her younger sister, Lici. The only way Grace sees out of such a fate is through education and travel. For this, however, she feels they must divest themselves of the burden of home and family. So, they make a pact to never marry, a sacrifice for the sake of their self-preservation and sanity, a worthy endeavor in their opinion.

Jane Eyre's own coming of age is evident when she begins to grapple with the constraints set upon females in her society. She says as much when she states, "Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex" (Bronte 96).

Another prevalent character featured in classic gothic novels which is present in *My First Moon* is the "older, foolish woman." There are several, classic "older, foolish woman" figures in Grace's life, some of who are the comadres she sees in her neighborhood and around her grandmother. Her own Guelita Rosa is a foolish, older woman in that she presents herself as a hard-nosed no-tengo-pelos-en-la-lengua kind of person, but yet she is very dependent on pills to get through life. Her relationship with her granddaughters is pointed by misinformed, convoluted advice about female sexuality.

On the other side of the border, Grace's maternal grandmother, Guelita Estela, is yet another older, foolish woman who is even more detrimental, as she is violently abusive toward Grace during one of the most difficult experiences Grace endures in the novel. Guelita Estela and her caregiver, Lucia, echo the relationships that Grace has with her paternal grandmother and her sister in a darker, more severe manner. In a way, they represent the conflicting world views concerning female sexuality on different sides of the border and the role she plays in how society sees her, her responsibility in the social perceptions of femininity, value, and worth. The suggestion Guelita Estela makes to Grace's mother in a surrealistic flashback, advising her to kill herself, is very much like the advice Mrs. Danvers gives the narrator of *Rebecca* when she states, "It's you that ought to be lying there in the church crypt, not her. It's you who ought to be dead, not Mrs. de Winter" (du Maurier 246).

Classic gothic novels always have a dark, atmospheric setting. Most of them are usually set in a castle, an abbey, or some other religious edifice, and it is murmured that this building has as many secrets as its owner. This gloomy structure, a decaying, ruined home, implies that there was once life and joy inside its walls but that joy has been tragically lost. In the classic gothic novel, *Rebecca*, the narrator and protagonist of the novel describes Manderley as it stands at the beginning of the novel by stating, "The house was a sepulcher, for fear and suffering lay buried in the ruins" (du Maurier 3). Grace has the same thoughts about her environment on more than one occasion. Her father's house in Eagle Pass is not a castle by any means, neither is it old and decaying, but there is neglect there, specifically in the old furniture, the car Lici drives, and the disregard of the yard, with its weeds overtaking the neglected hulking pile of rocks which were brought there by her despairing, wounded father the night he became a widower.

Guelita's Estela's house in Piedras Negras, the place Grace runs to when she wants to escape the disappointments of youth, is a much darker, more atmospheric place, especially at the end, upon Grace's return to visit it with her sister, Lici, when its true visage is revealed. When Grace sees the ruined, abandoned estate, with its naked windows, a wretched, cobwebbed interior, and a desiccated, forsaken garden, she realizes the surrealistic experiences she had there ruined her life in a more devastating, life-altering manner than she ever imagined.

Night journeys are a common element seen throughout gothic literature and they are as important in *My First Moon* as they are in *Jane Eyre*. Because her grandmother is nocturnal, Grace is forced to move about Guelita Estela's estate at night. She must experience her grandmother's nightly journeys because Lucia, her caregiver, has left the house to visit her own family and it is up to Grace to take care of her grandmother. Much like Grace, Jane Eyre also has night journeys. As a small child, she finds herself traveling to Lowood at night, and she leaves Thornfield at night after she dreams of her mother. Then, there is also the iconic scene where she saves Rochester from a fire in the middle of the night.

Ghosts or the semblance of them are an important element in gothic novels. They are a main concern in the novel, *Rebecca*. At one point, Mrs. Danvers asks the narrator, "Do you think she can see us, talking to one another now? Do you think the dead come back and watch the living?" (du Maurier 172). Grace expressed the same sentiment at the end of *My First Moon* when she asks Lici, "Do you believe in Ghosts?... They're here, Lici. They're with us, living their lives, in the same way we live ours. Day by day..." (219). The ghosts and apparitions that haunt Grace in the novel are representative of the old-world concept that women have much to lose as mothers and daughters when they attempt to empower themselves through education and progressive thinking. Alexander, Grace's deceased nephew, represents the loss of innocence and

the neglect of home and family. He is trapped in the house, mainly in Grace's room, much like Grace herself is trapped after high school graduation. She cannot leave for college, move on with her life, because she is punishing herself for neglecting what society dictates should have been the most important thing of all, the care of a child.

Gothic novels also tend to deal with madness and psychological overlays in one or more of the characters. When Jane Eyre describes Rochester's wife, her ghastly, untamed apparition, she describes her as more like a feral beast than a woman, stating that "In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face...the hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet" (Bronte 257). One of the internal conflicts Grace tries to resolve in *My First Moon* is the idea or belief that something was wrong with her mother, that she might have had a mental illness. We see this in her reluctance to talk about her mother's personality flaws, her strange episodes, and her eventual death. It is not until the end of the novel that Grace is able to discover the truth about her mother through a surrealistic scene wherein she remembers the events of the night her mother committed suicide.

By diversifying the genre, taking the elements of a classic gothic novel, works which were written for adults a very long time ago, and juxtaposing them within a contemporary piece meant for a younger audience using a culturally rich setting very much in contrast to the original works, I feel I am challenging young minds to visit the original classic works of literature that informed this story. I also hope these gothic elements, their history and importance in literature, elevate the story and enrich the text in a way that sheds light on the conflicts and struggles young

women must overcome to establish their identities and self-worth in a contemporary setting fraught with cultural, social, and political restrictions. It is only by shedding light on the dark, oppressive corners of our world that we can begin to talk about how to make positive changes for our young women.

I wrote *My First Moon* mostly at night, como lechuza, in that intermediate space between sleep one and sleep two, which is when my mind is most fertile. It is in the middle of the night that I find myself most productive because I am most open to the suggestions of the spirit, most susceptible to wound and pain. At night, too, is when my mind is still and quiet enough to be able to listen to my protagonists, in this case, Grace, to see her struggles, hear her thoughts, and play her story out like a film in my head and subsequently write it out.

In *Letters to a Young Novelist*, Mario Vargas Llosa states that the “problems or challenges that those who set out to write fiction must confront may be divided into four major categories,” namely narrator, space, time, and level of reality (*Letters* 42). I made the conscious decision to use the first-person singular point of view throughout the entire manuscript because it is the most common and true to form in contemporary coming of age novels. It is also important to note that the first-person narrative allows me the opportunity to bring the novel’s themes and conflicts closer to the reader, to intimate with her and, in that way, raise awareness to the greater social issues embedded in the novel, namely but not limited to the oppression, abuse, and victimization of women in what many call a rape society. It was important for me as a writer to have my narrator be on familiar, personal terms with the reader, so that these issues become part of the reader’s experiences. I believe this is what Vargas Llosa was attempting to say when he wrote, “the closer the narrator keeps to the limits the spatial point of view imposes, the stronger the power of persuasion” (*Letters* 54).

My First Moon is written in past tense for the reason which Vargas Llosa intimates to the young novelist when he states that a “narrator may situate himself in the past to narrate events taking place in the present and the future” (*Letters* 63). This is important because there are secrets and mysteries that must come to light in their own time in the novel, secrets that can only be revealed through what Vargas Llosa describes as spatial or temporal time shifts, and I felt like the past tense was the best place from which to cast the spell the reader must fall into if they are to be surprised by the twist at the end, namely the paranormal elements as they are exposed in the third and final act of the novel.

This is where the most challenging element of all comes into play, the levels of reality in *My First Moon*. According to Vargas Llosa, the “ability to persuade us of ‘truth,’ ‘authenticity,’ and ‘sincerity’ never comes from the novel’s resemblance to or association with the world we readers inhabit. It comes exclusively from the novel’s own being, from the words in which it is written and from the writer’s manipulation of space, time, and levels of reality” (*Letters* 86). In order to conceal and then reveal the details of what happened the night Grace’s mother died, a revelation she must face on her own, I had to play with time and use different levels of reality, spatial time shifts wherein Grace experiences in surrealistic episodes what another key character experienced in the past without being aware of what is happening until the very end.

A very important part of my process as I develop a long piece like *My First Moon* is to attack and dig into intangible or difficult scenes in poetic form. Poetry is how I access the imagery and the structure of a moment that might otherwise overwhelm or elude me altogether. It is easier for me to access the natural, organic elements in the fiction if I allow myself to explore what Emanuel Swedenborg referred to as the correspondences in *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell* when he wrote that “all things that have existence in nature, from the least to

the greatest thereof, are correspondences. They are correspondences because the natural world with all things in it springs forth and subsists from the spiritual world” (81).

When I look to nature and the spiritual to access imagery and a deeper understanding of the story in its poetic form, I am reminded of what Federico García Lorca said in reference to his love poem “Sleepwalking Ballad,” when he remarked that, “If you ask me why I wrote ‘a thousand glass tambourines/ were wounding the dawn’ I will tell you that I saw them, in the hands of angels and trees, but I will not be able to say more” (Hirsch 5). This explanation to me is in conversation with Swedenborg’s thoughts on correspondences because they are both speaking to the intangible and mysterious nature of inspiration.

One of the most intimidating scenes for me to write was the rape scene which begins on page 148 of *My First Moon*. It was intimidating because of the nature of the project. I knew I didn’t want to write a graphic, violent scene. That is not my style or what the novel calls for, in my opinion. I also knew that I needed to write that scene in a way that showed Grace’s rape for what it was, an ugly, deplorable act, the destruction of beauty, the trampling of everything that is feminine and lovely in women. Because this is such an important theme in the novel, and for other, more personal reasons, I decided to approach the scene in a more literary manner. I followed my natural instinct and pattern for writing poetry, which is much different than my pattern for writing prose. To this end, I sat in sunlight on my porch and looked for the scene in the correspondences of the natural world. The poem that follows is the first interpretation of that scene as I attempted to capture it in written form.

Guadalupe Garcia McCall
March 25, 2017

IN THE GARDEN

Madly he breaks through the gladiolas,

pushes untamed locks of hair out

of his eyes. She stumbles, almost falls, but
catches herself and jumps over the bed
of lilies. He smashes pumpkins, crushes

tender vines, and corners her
between the young jacaranda trees

and the high wooden fence. Coarse hands
graze her cheeks. Knuckles scrape

the length of her face, fingers wrap
around her stilted neck. She arches
back, blinks at the brightness of periwinkle

light bouncing off the heady blossoms,
so beautiful, so soft. Her lips

move, make sounds she does not recognize
as she cries out, and, weeping, prays—
implores as he explores—begs, but he is not

listening. She grabs at a thin branch,
pulls, tugs. The green of pinnate leaflets

gives way, collapses, and strips off
in her hand and she grips the purple blossoms,
presses them against his face, shoves them

in his nostrils, pushes them inside his mouth
to cleanse the foul kiss with the perfume

she holds in her soiled hand. Her tears
are salt. His voice as he begs forgiveness
is earthy loam, the grit of grime and muck.

The process of writing the scene as it first appears in this poem is in conversation with the poetics of both Swedenborg's theories on correspondences and Lorca's belief in *duende* because it aligns with the concepts of accessing the mysteries of inspiration and giving it structure and form on the page by means of a very personal, organic awareness, a poetic awakening. Once the poem was written and I had a good sense of the imagery, tone, and mood in

the scene, I turned the poem into prose. I didn't have to contend with the challenges of finding the narrative voice in the scene, since the narrator of the novel had long since been established as Grace. I did, however, have to shift the point of view from third-person omniscient in the poem to first-person singular.

Another challenge I addressed as I infused the poetic rendition of this scene into the novel was time. Although many contemporary YA novels are set in present tense, I made a conscious decision to write *My First Moon* in past tense for the simple reason that it allowed me to play with what Vargas Llosa refers to as spatial and temporal time shifts layered into later chapters when more and more secrets and revelations come to light in the storyline. For this scene, however, all I had to do with time was change the verb tenses from present to past to stay true to the structure of the scene in the novel.

For the sake of consistency, I changed the flora and fauna to match the setting of my novel and refined the tone and mood to create a more perilous atmosphere to resonate with the rest of the novel and its complex, layered themes, mainly the consistent oppression and abuse of women in our culture. The following is a sample of these changes, which I reworked to layer in the darkness of the scene and illustrate all that Grace has lost:

“I blinked at the brightness of periwinkle light bouncing off the lavender blossoms of the thrift phlox, so beautiful, so soft against my bruised skin. My lips moved, made sounds I did not recognize as I cried out, and, weeping, prayed—I implored as he explored—but he was not listening. I grabbed at the thin branch of a flowering shrub, pulled, tugged. The green of pinnate leaflets gave way, collapsed, and stripped off in my hand, cutting through skin and flesh as I gripped the purple, blood-soaked blossoms, pressed them against his face, shoved them in

his thick nostrils, pushed them inside his gaping mouth to cleanse the foul kiss with the perfume I held in my wounded hand.

My tears were salt. My voice as I begged for my life was muffled breath, his kiss as he silenced me was earthy loam, the grit of grime and muck. As the periwinkle light faded, dimmed, the scent of purple blooms overwhelmed me. I couldn't feel my body. I couldn't hear my blood roaring in my ears anymore. The tears were dry in my eyes. My throat burned. But the purple scent, the smothering perfume, lingered in my lungs. It was the last thing I remember before I lost consciousness" (149).

In *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall asserts that story in all its creative art forms, the novel, the poem, etc., is not a dying art form as some would have us believe, but that in fact story is thriving and more popular than ever before in its newly evolved, more functional forms. While poetry has found new form in song, and people carry around hundreds of poems in their playlists on their cell phones, prose too has evolved and is more in demand than ever before as evidenced by the addiction of modern audiences to video games and reality programming (180-3).

I believe this to be true, that story will continue to survive because of man's ability to revolutionize it. Vargas Llosa said as much when he stated that "The novelist adds something to the reality that he has turned into work material, and this added element constitutes the originality of his work, that which gives autonomy to the fictional reality" (*Perpetual* 4). It is because of theories such as these that I am satisfied in the development of this project as it is shaped by my experiences and evolution as a writer and artist as much as I am shaped by the process of producing it. I hope someday this book, or a higher evolution of it, finds its way into

print and that it elicits conversations that bring about social, legal, and political changes in our society that make this world a fair and safe place for all people, regardless of who they may be.

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Chapter 1

There was a fuzzy black caterpillar sitting still on the wooden railing of the porch that morning. I stared at it, wondering if it was alive. The sun filtered through the leaves and a ray of sunlight pierced through the branches and I winced and looked away, back to the caterpillar. He was still in the same place. Maybe it was asleep, too tired to move another inch. I looked up at the chinaberry tree growing so close to the house the lower branches were within arm's reach, and I considered taking the caterpillar and placing it on the nearest one.

A school bus came down the street and La Viuda came out of her house, pushing her two children, a boy and a girl, out in front of her. She let her screen door slam behind her as she hurried after them, walking them all the way to the waiting bus door. She wore a sleeveless floral dress, snug and fitted against her stocky body and stood with her arms crossed over her ample breasts, her naked forearms lay one over the other like two thick legs of lamb. My paternal grandmother, Guelita Rosa, had taken to saying she had "brazos de luchador."

La Viuda was not old, but she had changed considerably since her husband's abandonment. Instead of getting thin, like my grandmother said might happen, La Viuda got bigger and bigger. He was dead now, her husband, killed accidentally by one of the machines in the oil field where he worked at the time. I wasn't too clear on the story. My grandmother didn't know much about it, and even her comadres were foggy on the details. He had left his wife the year before, to be with his new girlfriend because she was pregnant, so nobody talked about him. His death had been unexpected, especially to his girlfriend, who tried to sue La Viuda for the insurance money she collected after the funeral. My grandmother, who knows everything about everyone in the neighborhood, said the insurance didn't acknowledge the new girlfriend or the baby and gave the full payout to La Viuda, who used the money to bury her estranged husband

then paid off her house and her car. She put the rest in the bank in her children's names because it was blood money and she wanted nothing more to do with it.

The school bus started down the street again and La Viuda pushed her tinted red hair out of her face and waved at it. The dimpled skin under her upper arms flapped with the motion. Then she turned around and rushed back into her house, letting the screen door slam shut behind her.

"Looks like it's going to be a scorcher today," I said, when my younger sister, Felicidad, or Lici, as everyone calls her, joined me on the porch.

"Do me a favor," Lici said, pushing her purse high up on her left shoulder. "Try to keep Alexander inside until I get home, okay. I don't want him running around in the heat of the day. He could get dehydrated."

"I will," I said.

"I mean it, Grace," she warned. "Don't get all caught up in your daydreaming, scribbling away all day, ignoring him. Watch him carefully. You know how he likes to get into things."

I rolled my eyes. Lici didn't respect anything I did. To her, my stories, the poetry I created when I looked at nature, was scribbling. She didn't know the difference between a metaphor and a simile, but she knew how to get a boy to pay for her gas at the local truck stop with one little smile, and so she had no respect for my *scribbling*. "What's it good for, all that writing," she said. "It doesn't get you anywhere, Grace."

When we were young, when she was still my best friend, my ally, Lici used to believe what I said about school. She used to buy into this thing called education. But then puberty struck, and she went off the rails, and straight into Jose's arms.

I can still remember the night it happened. It was at one of those quinceañeras we were forced to go to because one of her friends was turning fifteen and she needed us to be part of her entourage, to be two of her damas. Lici always enjoyed these affairs. I hated them with a passion. Who wants to dress up in taffeta and crinoline and play ugly sister to some wanna-be Cinderella every few months? I couldn't wait for all her friends to grow out of that stage and move on with their lives. I knew most of them would end up moving right into another white dress by getting married and having a bunch of babies in a few years. I just didn't know Lici would be one of them.

She was fourteen years old, just a few months shy of fifteen, when she met Jose, and it didn't matter to anyone but me that he was eighteen and way too wily when it came to finding ways of getting her out of school so they could "see each other." Nobody, not my father, not my grandmother, not even the school counselors cared one bit until she was getting sick in school, running out of class and straight to the bathroom to throw up. That's when everyone got involved. That's when everyone cared. But it was too late. She was four months pregnant by the time we found out.

So, what did my father do? How did he make it right? He went back and forth between the courthouse and customs signed a ream and a half of papers so they could get married, just so he didn't have to look like a fool.

"Seriously?" I screamed when I got home from school that afternoon and my father told what he'd been up to all day. "You're making her get married? Are you nuts? You're ruining her life! You know that, don't you?"

"She ruined her own life," my father said. "She didn't need me for that."

“He’s going to leave her,” I said. “He’s going to get that green card and then he’s going to leave her. Because that’s all he wants! That’s all his mother ever talks about, about how when he gets his green card he’ll be able to work here legally. How everything will be better for everyone because he’ll make enough money to support a family and even send her a little.”

“Hello? Are you listening to me, Grace?” Lici asked, snapping her fingers in my face. “You can’t leave him alone for even one second.”

Lici droned on while Alexander, barefoot and oblivious, sat on his haunches, leaned over and picked up a bristly black caterpillar from the ground. It rolled itself up into a semi-circle in the palm of his tiny hand and remained there, still as obsidian rock. Each segment opened, separating the black spine, exposing the tender brown flesh one dull layer after another, smooth and naked as belly flesh.

The morning light pulsed and wavered, making each bristle of dark hair glint and bounce back light clear as raindrops shimmering on freshly polished black patent leather shoes. A light breeze filtered through the dead leaves of the brown honeysuckle branch, and the caterpillar’s bristles trembled. Every spike quivered, as if something inside it were pushing through. Spotted wings, like white oleander blossoms, burst through the caterpillar’s flesh and almost as quickly desiccated and dropped off.

Delicate yellow sprouts broke through the tender brown segments of brown flesh, spiraled upward and outward, spikey horns that grew and grew. But then the flesh darkened and dulled, and one after another the black bristles fell off and lay glistening on Alexander’s hand like poisoned wet pine needles. Hundreds of tiny, starving maggots, thin and spindly as grass roots crawled out, devoured the moist innards, so fast, so swiftly, I feared they might attack Alexander’s flesh, so I slapped it out of his hand.

Alexander shrieked and shrunk away from me.

“Grace!” Lici shouted, pushing me away and reaching for Alexander. “What the hell’s wrong with you!”

I looked at the decomposing caterpillar, but it wasn’t rotting. It writhed and squirmed on the ground in the far corner of the porch floor, lifting its head and lolling it side to side, while Lici clicked her tongue at me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I thought it was dead.”

“This is what I’m talking about, Grace,” Lici said. “You can’t do shit like this. You can’t zone out and then freak out because he’s doing something you don’t approve of. You’ve got to be present. Watch every move he makes.”

“Okay!” I said. “I get it!”

Lici handed my nephew over to me. “Play with him,” she pleaded, caressing his dark hair and placing a kiss on his forehead. “And for God’s sake, stay inside.”

"You hear that Alexander?" I said, hoisting my nephew onto my hip. "No *'side-'side* today. Okay? We're staying indoors, like Mami said."

Alexander was twisting in my arms, pointing at something on the ground. I turned away from Lici and saw that he’d been watching intently as the black, fuzzy caterpillar inched itself across the porch floor away from the railing. I wished Lici wasn’t so against going outside while she was away so I could play with Alexander in the back yard. He was adventurous, always pulling away from me, wanting me to let him loose, so he could look for insects on the ground and cardinals in our crepe myrtles.

"Okay, I'm off. Give Mami a kiss," Lici said, pushing the purse high up on her shoulder again so she could lean over and kiss Alexander. Then, unable to help herself, she took him from

me, held him snugly against herself, and squeezed. She buried her face in his neck and growled, brandishing him with loud, Momma-bear kisses. Alexander squealed, pushing and pulling at her in glee, until she handed him back to me with a satisfied grin on her pretty face.

She started to go, but then turned around and reached for me. She wrapped her right arm around my neck, pulled me in close, and planted a loud kiss on my cheek. “Thanks for watching him this summer,” she said. “I love you, Manita.”

“I love you too,” I said, and pushed her away. “Now go. You don’t want to be late again.”

I watched my little sister step off the porch and walk toward her car. At seventeen, she was way too young to be a full-time mother with a part-time job at the ice-cream shop at the mall because that’s the best she could do with a GRE certificate.

She looked worriedly up at the sky, then, turning back to me, she pointed to a group of white clouds drifting to the east of us. I shook my head, and rolled my eyes again. There was no chance of rain. She was worrying for nothing, like always.

I held Alexander tightly in my arms, but he kicked and fussed until I put him down. He liked standing on his own two feet—two tiny feet wearing bright red Nike basketball shoes Lici found for him at the bottom of a deep bin at the pulga, the outdoor flea market out on the highway, toward Del Rio.

When we purchased them, the scarlet shoes were brand new, still bound together by a plastic fastener and the discounted price tags glued onto their black rubber soles. Lici couldn’t afford the shoes that day, so she haggled with the viejita until the old woman accepted the ten bucks she offered.

"Mira, don't think I'm falling for your tricks," the old lady had said, giving us the evil eye. "If you can too buy lipstick, you can too buy shoes. But your face, with all that gunk on it, is not my business. I do this—I give you good price—for him. For the little one. He needs good shoes to learn to walk right."

"He's been walking for a while now," I'd said, and Lici had ribbed me, shoving the red sneakers in my hands and telling me to help her put them on Alexander, who was already clamoring for them. He loved those shoes so much, he wouldn't leave Lici's bedroom in the mornings without having one of us put them on him.

"Here, hold my hand," I insisted. Alexander stood still beside me and watched Lici getting into her '75 Nova, a baby blue beast with a white roof and gray interior that smelled of long ago smoked cigars and flavored coffee stains. The rust bucket was left over from Lici's abusive relationship with Jose, the ex-husband from Hell, who got drunk and beat her, para *sosiégarla*, and remind her that he was the boss in *his* house.

The Nova was the only thing Jose ever gave Lici that was worth anything besides Alexander. But even with the car that never quit needing work and the stigma of being an abandoned teenage mother, I think Lici still felt blessed. Alexander was her life. She'd quit school her junior year to have him, and she'd never gone back afterward, preferring to work at the food court to keep herself and Alexander fed and clothed.

"Wave—Mami?" Alexander asked when he saw Lici buckling her seatbelt inside the car. I nodded, watching him lift his chubby little arm for the big goodbye that had become part of his morning ritual that summer. Things were going to be different in the fall. Once Lici and I started community college, we'd each have to take turns watching him while the other one attended classes. I just hoped she could handle it all and didn't drop out. So far we were good to go. She'd

gotten her GED and filled out all the papers at the annex, so she was ready to start classes in August with me. It was nice how everything was coming together for us. How, even though she'd taken a major detour, Lici and I were going to start college at the same time.

When Lici looked away and started the car, I squatted down beside Alexander and shooed him away from the caterpillar, giving the tiny creature room to make its way off the porch. "Don't touch him, Papis." I said. "He needs to go home."

"Go, go?" Alexander asked.

"Yes," I said. "Go, go. Like Mami."

Alexander stood beside me as the caterpillar moved away. It's back arching up and then coming back down, making ground inch by inch, like a miniature locomotive. There was a whole world of purpose in that caterpillar's life. I was sure of it. He was determined to get off that dusty porch and down to the dark rich loam under the Chinaberry tree. "See there," I told Alexander. "He wants to inch his way through that moist earth, past the dry fallen leaves and the rocks and debris to climb up to that tree and find a beautiful, green leaf to eat before he starts to weave a shroud around himself and start changing, transforming, growing wings."

"Go, go," Alexander repeated.

Guelita Rosa opened the door, and I turned around. She was struggling with her walker, trying to get it out past the screen door.

"Graciela!" Guelita hollered, as she pushed at the screen with her walker. I turned around to help, taking hold of the door and then prying her walker loose.

"Hay, no!" Guelita cried, waving her hand in my face, trying to get me to stop. "El niño! Graciela, mira! El nene! El nene!"

At her demented screeching, I turned sideways, looking for Alexander, but he wasn't beside me anymore. Guelita pushed me then. She put her hand on my shoulder and shoved me away from her, away from the door. I straightened up and turned around, scanning the porch, the stairs, the driveway, but I couldn't see Alexander anywhere. My mind swam and reeled in circles as I searched frantically for him.

"Alexander?" I called, my voice high-pitched, foreign with a nervous bravado.

"Alexander!" I called out again, but he was gone. *Where did he go?* I kept asking myself.

Suddenly, he was there, traipsing across the driveway, rushing off, running toward Lici's car. The impact was harder than anything I could have imagined. I ran and screamed. Like a madwoman, I ran and screamed. But I was too late.

Lici backed out of the driveway in the same crazy, violent way which she did everything else in life. There was nothing I could do to help Alexander. There was nothing. Nothing. I could do nothing.

She screeched the car to a halt after she ran him over. I froze and stared at the brake lights burning bright, like red hot pokers. On the ground, before me, I saw Alexander's left shoe, and I leaned down and picked it up. Lici was out of the car by then, and her wild eyes were two question marks.

"What is it? Was it the dog? Did I hit Chucho?" she kept asking.

I couldn't talk. Clutching the red shoe against my heart, I could only cry. Looking first at the shoe then into my eyes again, Lici's face twisted. She looked confused for a moment, but then she began whimpering.

"No—No— No!" she kept blubbering, even as she ran around the car looking for Alexander. Then, when she couldn't find him, she dropped to the ground and started screaming

for him. "Alexander! Alexander!" she kept crying, reaching under the car and coming up empty handed every time.

"Don't!" a voice yelled, and I saw the new neighbor, a red-headed guy I'd only spotted once before, come running towards us. "Stop!" he insisted as he reached Lici's side. "You're not supposed to move him. Please, listen to me. You shouldn't touch him."

"Help me," Lici was saying. The guy wrapped his hand around Lici's elbow and tried to help her up, but Lici pulled her arm out of his grasp and stayed on the ground, leaning forward, looking under the car.

Then, she stopped flailing around and lay very still, her eyes fixed on something hidden under the shadows of the idling car. "I can see him you know," she finally whispered. "He's right there...but I can't reach...he's too far...my arms aren't long enough."

"We need to wait for the ambulance," the neighbor said, his voice soft but firm. "My mother's calling them. They'll know what to do."

Chapter 2

When we were small and my mother was still alive, my father used to like to stay home and spend all his free time with us. I remember the summer between first and second grade, before my mother lost all common sense and killed herself.

But that warm, sunny day before her suicide, our parents taught me and Lici how to fly a kite. Unlike me, Lici was a natural. She ran around the yard with her bright yellow kite soaring high up in the air with my mother laughing and trying to keep up with her, while I sat on the porch steps with my kite sitting sideways, abandoned on the ground before me.

"What are you doing, *m'ija*," my father asked. "Don't you want to fly your kite? See. Look at Lici's kite. It's nice."

"No," I said, when he tried to put the kite back into my hands.

"Why not?" he asked. "What do you mean, no?"

"Kites are stupid," I said, thinking about the book I'd been forced to put down so I could come outside to play with my sister. "Can I go in now?"

"Of course," my father said, sliding the red spool off the floor and holding it between his hands. "Are you sure, though?"

My mother stopped chasing Lici. She stopped smiling, put her hands on her hips, and looked at us. "What's the matter now?" she asked.

"Nothing. She's just tired that's all." My father's hand tightened around the red spool.

Lici's kite lost momentum and started taking a dive and my father threw my red spool aside and ran off to help her. My mother put a hand over her brow and looked at the kite struggling against the wind. That's the last memory I have of my mother, her shoulders rolled

back and her face turned away from me. That night, she walked away from me, left me alone in the car, and we never saw her again.

My father wasn't the same after my mother's death. Something inside him had shifted, and a strangeness came over him. After her funeral, he dropped us off at the house and drove away. He was gone the rest of that day and most of the night. When he drove up, at three-fifteen in the morning, he drove his truck off the driveway and into the yard, making his way around the house and parked in the backyard.

I sat up and pushed the curtains of the window aside and watched him get out of his pickup and pull down the tailgate. The bed of his truck was full of rocks, big, giant rocks the size of bowling bowls, but too jagged and rough to roll off on their own. Looking around, my father settled on a spot along the fence and he started taking the rocks, one at a time, using both hands to haul each one off the truck and pile them up together. It was a long, tedious process, and halfway through it, the sun started to break through the horizon. I could see dark sweat stains on his brown shirt all along his collar, under his arms, and in a ragged stripe down the length of his back.

When the sun was finally up, I reached over and tried waking my sister. But Lici was tired. Sometime in the middle of the night, she'd crept across the hall, snuck in to my room, and crawled carefully into my bed. When she'd started whimpering, I'd laid my arm over her and she'd fallen asleep crying into my neck.

"Lici? Manita," I whispered. "Are you awake?"

She pushed me away, mumbling something about needing to sleep, so I jumped out of bed, put on a pair of jeans, and pushed my feet into my old tennis shoes. I walked outside as my

father was walking to the far end of the yard. Without saying a word, I stepped up to the pick-up and reached for a rock.

“What are you doing?” my father called out.

I pulled the nearest rock toward myself, intent on helping him finish his work so he could go inside and take a shower.

“Leave it alone!” my father yelled as he walked back toward the truck. “Go on. Get outta here.”

I stopped and turned to him, my hand still on the rock, its jagged edge biting into my fingertips.

“Go!” he yelled, and my eyes were suddenly prickly, hot. “Goddamn it, Graciela! Get in the house. Now!”

I let go of the rock, rushed into the house, and ran straight to my room, halfway expecting him to follow me, to come find me, to say he was sorry for yelling at me. But he didn’t. He stayed out there for a long time, piling up rock after rock against the fence, until they were all out of his truck and piled high up on the ground in a giant massive pyramid that he never touched again. Lici slept through the whole thing. If she was confused about where the rocks came from, she never mentioned it.

Day after day after day my father ignored that pile of rocks. Pretended it wasn’t there. He ignored the rest of the yard too, even after the weeds got taller than me. They grew so tall, they hid the pile of rocks, and if you hadn’t been there the night he piled them up you wouldn’t even know they were there.

After the funeral, my father ignored me and Lici too. He'd come and go, in and out of the house, up and down the stairs, back and forth into the laundry room to collect his clothes, in and

out of bed to sleep, wake up, take a shower, and get back out again. We saw him every day, but he wasn't really there.

Our house, our home, became more like a hotel room for him because most of the time he took his meals down at El Cazo, the truck stop diner out on 57. Although, when he was in a hurry, he'd just get something from under the heat lamp at the gas station. I knew because Maribel, the cashier, an older woman with a gold tooth who worked there, had a crush on him.

"Hi, Grace. Your Daddy was in here today," she'd say, her frosty lips curled up into a smile that made long lines creased down from her over-made-up eyes all the way down her pink powdered cheeks where even longer, deeper laugh lines creased her long, thin lips, making her look like an old marionette. "He had two of those spicy chicken tornadoes and a bag of kettle chips, sea salt, in the black and white bag there. I told him I wouldn't mind making him my famous pot roast if he ever wanted to come over for a home cooked meal one of these days."

"We make food at home," I mumbled, as I paid for gas while Lici waited for my signal to start pumping. Maribel always had a way of making me feel self-conscious. Not that I cared if my father decided to go have anything Maribel was cooking. I wasn't interested in his eating habits. Although, why he chose to pick up over-cooked, processed junk food from convenience stores was beyond me. He could have been eating at home all those years. I used to cook every day.

Chapter 3

When my father found out about Alexander's accident, he left work and joined us at the hospital. He stood beside me and Lici in the waiting room, by the soda machine, shifting his weight from one foot to another with his hands in his pockets, swiveling around every time someone new entered the room. By the time the emergency room doctor came looking for us, the silence between us all had grown so stale it had sucked the air out of our lungs. We were suffocating and could barely breathe much less speak when we stood up to talk to him.

"I'm so sorry," the young, Hispanic doctor whispered. "We did everything we could, but I'm afraid there was just too much internal damage."

Lici dropped her purse and started running, pulling off her high-heeled shoes and tossing them aside as she darted down the hall. "No. No." Lici's voice sounded hollow, like it was coming from inside a dark, empty well.

We ran after her, catching up to her at the locked double doors of the emergency room. She pounded on the heavy metal as she screamed, "Alexander! Alexander! Where is he? Where's my son?"

"Felicidad—M'ija—por favor, controlate," my father begged, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her toward him. But Lici collapsed. Her eyes rolled back and she fainted.

My father put one arm around her torso and the other under her knees and lifted her like a child as the metal doors opened to us. She was small, so it was easy for my father to carry her past the doors and into the emergency room, where she was given the nearest bed. When she awoke, she started tearing at our clothes, trying to get out of bed and crying out for Alexander; the doctor had no other choice than to sedate her.

Two days later, when our red-headed next door neighbor and his mother came around the fence to pay their respects, the boy was soaking wet. He stood on our porch that soggy morning. He was either eighteen or nineteen years old, not much older than me, in a white dress shirt and tie, holding a dark umbrella over his mother because her hands were full, carrying a red covered casserole.

"Hello," the mother said. "I'm Bonnie, from next door. This is Connor, my son...we brought some chicken alfredo..."

"Oh—Thank you. Come in. Please," I said, when I came out of my fog long enough to realize I was supposed to take the casserole and let them in. Our living room looked smaller than usual with the older couple who lived across the street, two of Lici's co-workers, my father, Abuela Rosa, and I, all crammed in together, sitting side by side either on our sofa or on one of the mismatched chairs my father had pooled together.

"Thank you for coming," my father said, shaking their hands. "I am Gregorio Torres, and this is my younger daughter, Graciela. My other daughter, Felicidad, Alexander's mother, is...indisposed."

Lici was in her room, laying down for a nap because she'd taken a couple of Guelita Rosa's baby blue pills again. Finding something to help ease Lici's anxiety was easy. Thanks to her many doctors, both in Eagle Pass and across the border, in Piedras Negras, my grandmother had a wide variety of medications at her disposal. She had three rows of brown and white bottles lined up all along her dresser in her room. Plenty of them were prescribed, but a whole lot of them were herbal supplements. There were all kinds of vitamins among them too, large and small, in all sizes and colors, I had no idea how she kept up with them, but she did. Every day, at every meal, she would take her pink saucer from the center of the table and put together an

assortment of pills on it. She would eat a bite of food, swallow, pick up a pill, put it in her mouth, and drink it down, letting it settle in her stomach for a few minutes before taking another morsel of food.

Bonnie sat down beside Guelita Rosa on the sofa. "I am sorry for your loss," she whispered. My grandmother nodded, her eyes unblinking as she stared at the coffee table in front of her. She'd been on the phone with her comadres all morning and was all talked out.

"Me too. I'm sorry," Connor said, shaking my father's hand and then nodding to me before stepping back and standing directly behind his mother, his hands on the back of her chair, as if to hold himself up.

It was customary, I knew, to sit around eating and reminiscing about the deceased, in a sense, celebrating his life. But Alexander was so small, his life so brief, that there was not much we could all talk about without bringing up things nobody else in the room knew anything about, which would have been awkward. So instead of talking we sat around silently drinking coffee, taking turns going over to the window to watch the rain pound against the glass panes and pour out of the gutters at the corners of our house.

It rained the rest of the week, so that by the time we buried Alexander, the ground was so soaked the three-inch heels on Lici's shoes kept poking through the grass, sinking deeply into the dark earth beneath it as she walked across the cemetery to Alexander's grave site. I watched the tendons on the back of her feet tighten as she struggled to pull the heels completely out of the ground with every step, again and again, as she walked ahead of me, clinging to Jose's arm. I followed her, with my distant father walking behind me.

With the heavy rain pouring over us, and the wind whipping our black umbrellas and clothes about, the graveside service had to be cut short. After the service, I waited for Lici beside

the black sedan that had transported the immediate family to the cemetery, but, somewhere along the way and unbeknownst to any of us, Jose must have convinced her to ride back with him because she cut across the cemetery with him and got in his car. They sped away before I could ask her what she was doing.

When I got home, I handed Guelita Alexander's memorial prayer card. She took it between her trembling hands and kissed it, closing her teary eyes even as she murmured a small prayer. I couldn't bear another moment of pain between us, so I went to my room and waited for Lici to come home. She hadn't talked to me since the accident, locking herself away from everyone while she waited to bury our Alexander.

Lici finally came home in the middle of the night. I looked out the window and saw Jose get out of his car to hug her before she went inside. He held her for a long time, and then, as in the old days, back when they were dating, he leaned in to kiss her, but my sister stepped back and away from him before he could touch his lips to hers.

I closed the curtains, turned off the lights, and slipped under my quilt. From the darkness of my room, I could hear Lici getting ready for bed in the room beside mine. I heard her turn on the light, open the creaking top drawer of her dresser, wrestle with clothes, and move around the room, back and forth, to and from the bathroom.

Without knowing what I was going to do or say, I got up, opened my door, and sort of stood there, gripping the door frame of my room, waiting for her. Lici slipped out the bathroom and walked by me, but she didn't make eye contact with me. I pushed myself off the doorframe and followed her down the hall, to her room.

She whirled around. "What do you want?" she asked, her eyebrows raised, but she wouldn't look at me directly.

"I just...thought...that maybe...we could..."

"What?" she hissed. "Spit it out, Grace."

"I don't know..." I began again. "I mean— I thought we could—you know... talk?"

"No."

"Lici, Manita..." I reached out to her.

"Don't call me that." Lici stepped sideways into her room and stood staring at the doorframe with her arms wrapped around herself. "I can't talk to you yet."

"But I need to talk to you," I whispered. "I wanted... to say that I'm sorry....for—for—"

"Stop." The word was a soft, helpless plea coming from Lici's lips.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, reaching out to her, trying to hug her.

"Stop torturing me!" Lici screamed, pushing me out of her room so she could close the door.

"Please, Lici, please," I begged, tears rolling down my face. "Please understand. I didn't mean to let him go."

"Leave me alone!" she screamed, her eyes reddening. "Don't you see? Sorry won't bring him back, Grace! Nothing will bring him back!"

"Please. Don't shut me out," I begged, as she locked the door.

I was still in the hallway, pressed against the wall outside the bathroom, letting the hot tears roll, wondering what I would ever do to make things right between us, when my father came out of his room with his Bible in his hands. He halted long enough to pat my shoulder. He turned away and kept going. He stopped in front of Lici's room and knocked on the door.

When Lici didn't answer, he bowed his head, leaned forward, placed his right hand on the handle, wiggled it, and called out to her, softly. A few moments later, my sister cracked her door open and looked at him.

I pressed myself flat against the wall, wanting to make myself invisible. She stood there, the cracked door barely open.

A long, dead silence extended between them, and then, lifting the Bible up so she could see it, my father said, "I ear-marked some passages I thought you might...want to read."

"I have a Bible," she said, and when my father didn't say anything else, she slowly closed the door between them and locked it again.

My father stood there for a few more seconds, looking at the door. Then he pressed his Bible against his chest and walked back down the hall, past me, and into his room, leaving me standing in the empty hallway with no one to talk to.

I thought about going to Guelita Rosa's room to talk to her, but she'd already gone to bed. So instead, of waking Guelita up, I went back to my room and laid down. But I couldn't stop thinking about Lici. In the silence of the night, I listened to her every move, wishing I could go to her room, sit next to her, hold her.

I turned away from the wall between us and stared at my closet door. I must have fallen asleep, because, suddenly, I awoke and shot straight up in bed, taking in a deep, painful breath. In my dream, a massive boulder, was pressing me into my bed. It was so big, it crushed my sternum. My chest collapsed into itself, and I felt my ribs crack and pierce my innards and then my lungs stopped working and I stopped breathing.

After a while, I got up, went to the bathroom, and then came into my room to start cleaning. I pretended Alexander came in behind me and sat on my rocking chair like he used to

every morning. His hair was tousled and he was rubbing his sleepy eyes, but he was smiling because he knew he could come in when Lici was still asleep and play in my room without being asked to be quiet and go back to sleep. Like me, he was a morning spirit.

He liked to tinker about the house when everyone else was barely on their first dream. Most of his toys were strewn all over the house, but his morning toys, the ones he liked to snuggle with are in my room. He liked to pick up Teddy by his leg and drag him across the room to the rocking chair by the window which he climbed so that he could look at the sunrise. I pulled the cover off my bed and went to sit with him. I gathered him and Teddy in my arms and wrapped us all in warmth as the sun kissed the horizon. Alexander looked for the birds singing in the trees, and pointed when we saw a car whiz by and said, "Mommy?"

"No," I whispered. "She's not up yet. Let's go get her, shall we? Let's go get Mommy out of bed. We don't want her to be late for work."

Suddenly my door flew open and Lici stormed in. She stood before me, scanning every corner of my room, looking for something to attack, like a rabid dog.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Shut up. Don't talk to me," she commanded. Then she started to whirl around the room picking up all of Alexander's belongings. She took his teddy bear from the rocking chair, where it had been resting all week, and picked a yellow Lego off the floor and shoved it in her pocket.

"Lici—" I began, but she cut me off.

"I want his things," she said. "All of them." She tucked Alexander's red fire truck under her arm, and then rummaged through my laundry basket. She threw my clothes all over the floor before she finally dug out a stray blue sock with white non-slip dots on its sole. "You can't keep his things here anymore. I don't want his things in this room, ever again. Understand? From now

on, everything that belongs to him stays in my room. Not here, not in the living room, not in the kitchen. Just my room! Mine! Understand?"

"Okay," I said, but my voice was a wisp of air.

Chapter 4

We had a system in place in case Guelita Rosa needed our help. When she needed something, she would pull on a chord resting beside the headboard of her bed, and it made a bell move on the other side of her wall. When that bell rang, Chucho, would jump out of his bed in the corner and do a couple of victory laps around the living room, then he would sit back and start barking, again and again, until one of us went in to check on her.

Chucho was her dog. She bottle-fed him when he was a puppy, and wrapped up his rear leg and tended to him both times he got run over by the mailman. He was old and ugly and scraggly, but she'd had him for almost 18 years. "That's longer than most marriages, and he's never taken off on me, not even once. Now that's love," she'd say when anyone asked her why she wouldn't have him put down.

Five days after the funeral, Guelila's bell rang and I was in the living room before Chucho could start barking. He scrapped to a halt two feet before plowing right into me, sat back on his haunches, and cocked his head sideways, looking at me like he wanted to know why I didn't let him finish his morning run.

"What? You think you're the only one who can hear around here?" I asked, grabbing the loose skin under his chin and tugging on it lovingly. "Well, you're not. I don't have big floppy ears, but I'm wide awake, my friend."

As soon as I let go of his beard, Chucho shook his head, flapping his ears until they clapped against his head, then he did that taste-testing thing with his chops that sounded like he was trying to figure out if he had bad breath.

"Oh, someone needs a breath mint," I said, turning away from him. "Come on. Let's go see what she's lost today." Chucho trailed behind me as I rushed across the cold linoleum floor in my bare feet.

"Oh, good. You're awake. I can't reach my shoe." Guelita was sitting up in bed, already bathed and dressed, her thin, hair slicked back against her scalp like a white, silvery helmet. "It's under the bed, I'm sure. It couldn't have gone anywhere else. Is it down there? Can you see it?"

"Yes," I said, soon after dropping to my knees and reaching far under the bed for it. "There you go."

"Thank you. What am I going to do without you, Graciela?" she asked, as I wrapped the little black slipper over her thin elevated foot with its crooked pinky toes. It wasn't a real shoe, but one of those soft footie-things with rubber pads for soles that were almost worn out, but she insisted on wearing them every day, in or out of the house, even in the garden when she looked in at the day lilies she kept in the rock flower beds all around the house.

"Call Doña Flor," I said, referring to her usual caregiver, who came over and stayed with her during the regular school year since she'd fallen and broken her hip the year before.

Guelita Rosa left her house in San Antonio and moved in with us right after my mother's funeral. She wasn't very motherly, in fact she was anything but maternal, always blunt and telling it like it is because she has no hair on her tongue she says. But she cooked and cleaned and washed our clothes and made sure we didn't go astray in the summers.

"Ay, si, but she is getting too old," Guelita whispered. "Soon, she'll be in a walker too, and then we'll both sit around waiting for the other one to get up and cook for her. What will become of us, I wonder, just sitting alone with each other? Starve together?"

"She's not that old," I said, as my grandmother pulled over her walker and used it to stand up. I saw her through the door of her bedroom and then walked ahead of her, making my way towards the kitchen. "I'll get your coffee started."

I rushed ahead with the intention of starting her eggs to boil first, but when I entered the kitchen, Lici was standing at the sink, looking out the window, with a cup of coffee in her hands. I looked at the stove, and saw that she had already started Guelita's usual breakfast. A pot of water was simmering on the stove, and the lone egg sat next to it, nestled on a yellow, square potholder, waiting to be dropped in and cooked for exactly six minutes.

"Oh," I said, watching the steam rising out of the small pot of water. "You didn't have to..."

Guelita's walker clanked against the floor as she made her way inside the small kitchen, the space was suddenly smaller, confining, with the three of us in it.

"Felicidad! You're up," Guelita said, her eyes softening as she looked at my sister. "Buenos dias."

Lici whispered something incomprehensible against the lip of her cup and took another sip of her coffee. She held the cup with both hands in front of her, keeping it close to her face, while she continued to stare out the window.

"Thank you for setting up Guelita's breakfast," I said, crossing the kitchen and standing in front of the stove. "Can I get you something? Some toast—an English muffin?" I asked remembering Lici's penchant for having something light in the mornings. "Are you going to the...to see..."

"Work!" Lici said, interrupting me.

"Work?" Guelita asked, shocked at the sight of Lici dumping the rest of her coffee down the drain and setting the cup in the sink.

"Yes, work," Lici said, as she walked past Guelita. We watched her walk into the living, pick up her black, patent leather bag from the coffee table and practically run out the front door.

"She shouldn't be going back to work so soon," I said, after the door closed.

Guelita took her morning pills out of her pockets and set them on her saucer. There must have been at least twenty colorful pills dancing on the saucer. "We can't tell her what to do," she said, watching the pills tremble and then settle down until they were just sitting there nestled up against each other. "It's up to her and what she thinks she can handle."

I walked over to the breakfast nook and drew back the old lace curtains and peeked out the window. At the sight of Lici getting in her car, my stomach tightened. Lici drove nose first out of our driveway. She didn't have to reverse the car because she'd been parking it far away from the house, backed up against a cluster of scraggly huisaches at the edge of the property.

I went back into the kitchen and used a spoon to submerge Guelita's egg into the boiling water, and turned the dial on the timer. Guelita made her way to her usual spot by the bay window in the breakfast nook, sliding the saucer and the trembling pills toward her. I served her coffee and then sat down beside her, resting my head in my hands and staring at the empty driveway in our front yard.

"No llores," Guelita said, reaching out to touch my face. Her trembling hand on my cheek made me realize, I was crying, and I swiped at the tears.

Guelita grabbed my hand and slapped it. "Come on," she said. "It'll be all right. Your sister's up and running again; things could be worse, you know."

"How?" I asked, watching as Guelita took a drink of her coffee and picked out a pill.

"How?" Guelita asked, toying with the pills, taking one in her hand and weighing it as she thought about what to say. "Are you sad because your sister's gone, or are you sad because you're still here?"

"What?" My stomach knotted some more. "I'm sad because... because...well, you saw it, didn't you? She won't talk to me. She hates me, Guelita—Lici hates me!"

"Oh, she doesn't hate you. She's your sister. She's not allowed to hate you." Guelita popped the orange, transparent gel-pill in her hand into her mouth and used her saliva to swallow it down.

I thought about it for a moment. *No. She hates me. My baby sister hates me.*

"Can you check on my breakfast?" Guelita Rosa asked.

I got up, turned the fire off, and pulled the pot off the stove. Taking it over to the sink, I drained the hot water out and then turned on the faucet to let cold water run over the egg in the pot. After a few seconds, I put Guelita's egg on a small plate, walked it over to the table, and placed it in front of her, sighing as I pushed it toward her.

"Oh, stop that. She'll be back tonight," Guelita said, placing her fingertips on either side of the plate and turning it counter-clockwise several times, until she had made it go full circle twice, an act that never failed to mesmerize me, even though she'd been doing it every day since she'd come back from the hospital after her fall. My father said she'd had a mild stroke and she'd never be the same again.

"Tonight?" I asked, thinking about that near kiss I'd witnessed between her and Jose. The idea that she might meet up with Jose after work and stay out all night the way she used to when they were dating turned my stomach again, and I decided I couldn't have any breakfast.

Guelita picked up the egg, hit the rim of the plate with it, shifted it, and hit the rim, going through the same motion again and again until the entire shell was broken in her hands, waiting to be unwrapped, layer by fine layer. "Where else is she gonna go?" she asked, absently peeling the egg. "This is her home. It's not like she's left for good."

I thought about Jose again, and all the nights she'd slipped out of the house to go see him Jose. How happy she was the day she packed up and went to live with him in his mother's house in Mexico because she was going to have a baby and she didn't care about anything else. How naïve she'd been. "No. But she could," I whispered, speaking more to myself than to my grandmother.

"Nonsense," Guelita said, putting her egg back on the plate and reaching over to toy with her collection of pills. She picked a huge yellow oval capsule and popped it in her mouth.

"You don't understand," I said, reaching for a napkin and wiping my eyes with it. I didn't want her to know I was on the verge of tears. Tears was something my grandmother couldn't understand. She was tough as a black crow. I'd never seen her cry. Not once. "How... how... am I ever going to make it up to her?"

"What do you mean, make it up to her?" Guelita asked.

"It's my fault Alexander died. He was my responsibility—"

"Oh, no...no!" Guelita shook her head and popped another pill in her mouth, taking a swig of water to make it go down before saying, "It is most definitely not your fault. It was a tragedy. A tragedy."

"But I put him down," I continued. "I let his hand go."

"It was unfortunate, I know," Guelita said, putting a hand under my chin and making me

look in her eyes. "But people die every day, Graciela. It was just Alexander's time to go, that's all."

"That's a horrible thing to say!" My body trembled as I hurled the words at her. "You don't honestly believe that do you? That Alexander's death was predestined, that God intended it that way?"

My grandmother stared at me. Her dark eyes settled on me for a moment, unwavering, still as the pills on her saucer. My words didn't faze her. It wasn't the first time I'd raised my voice at her. I used to do it all the time when I was a child.

Guelita dropped her eyes and went back to toying with her pills. She picked up a couple of them and popped them in her mouth. She sipped her coffee and then bit into her cold egg. "That's not what I meant," she finally said. "You're twisting my words."

"Agh!" I pushed myself away from the table, stood up, and left the kitchen to go back to bed.

Chapter 5

In the days that followed, I tried not to think about Guelita's *words of wisdom* too much. Although she didn't repeat the sentiment again, the memory of her words infuriated me. But there was nothing I could do about Guelita's belief system, other than keep taking care of her daily needs. She was, after all, the only grandmother I had. It wasn't like I could go out and get a replacement one. She wasn't a broken vacuum cleaner.

Every day I woke up in hopes that Lici would speak to me. But as the days wore on, she became completely engrossed in her own life again. By her second week back at work, she took on double shifts and was hardly ever home. I kept tending to our grandmother, completely aware that, soon, August would be upon us, and so would a brand-new school year. We were perched on a precarious branch, my little sister and I, all set up to enter a brand-new season of our lives together, and I was dreading it. Lici and I had not had a chance to talk about school since the accident. We hadn't talked about anything, so I had no idea if she was going to go through with it. What would I do if she changed her mind? How could I ever move on without her? I didn't want to go to community college without her. I needed her to make good on her promise.

As the weeks went by, Alexander became more of a fixture in my room. He was always there, playing with his toys on the floor or sitting at the rocking chair. Most of the time, he acknowledged me with a smile, but sometimes she prattled on, asking me questions about his mother.

"Where's Mami?" he'd ask when she didn't come home immediately after work. "I see her?"

"Yes," I would say. "You'll see her. When she gets home. Okay?"

"I wuv you, Grace," he would say from across the room. I wanted to reach out and grab him and hold him tight and ask him to make ojitos at me the way he used to when he was alive, but I knew he wasn't there. I think he knew it too, because he never reached out for me, never asked me to pick him up or carry him to bed the way he used to before the accident.

A few weeks into July, the doorbell rang. Our neighbor, Connor, stood just outside the door, smiling widely, holding a wide basket covered with the checkered table cloth, and looking as cleverly sheepish as the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood. When I didn't answer, he brought the basket upwards a bit and gave it a little shake. "I brought you some cornbread."

"Cornbread?" I asked, my left eye twitched, and I put my index finger on it, trying to make it stop, but even under the pressure of my fingertip, I could feel it convulsing nervously.

"Yeah, well, I didn't make it. My mother did. She bakes when she's trying to figure out a new painting, and she's got a new project that's not quite ready for the canvas, so she made too much. Anyway, I thought you might like some."

"Graciela, mija, where are your manners?" Guelita asked. "Let the poor boy in before he keels over from heat exhaustion."

"Come in," I said, pushing the door open and then stepping aside to let Connor through.

"Did you say you have cornbread?" Guelita asked, and when Connor shook his shaggy red head, she grinned. "Well, come on in. Come into the kitchen and let's take a look at what you've got. We'll need some milk to go with that cornbread. I like to dunk mine, but Graciela likes to cut hers up into little squares and just drop them in one at a time, watches them float, and then just before they sink, she spoons them up. Do you float or dunk?"

I had to stop myself from groaning and rolling my eyes as Connor followed Guelita through the living and into the archway that led to the kitchen, all the while listening to her

jabbering on about other cornbread days gone by. I was more than a little embarrassed to have my cornbread eating habits disclosed to a perfect stranger, but my mortification didn't phase Guelita. She even told him about the time I was seven and surprised her by trying to make cornbread muffins from scratch, "With corn from a can! Can you imagine?"

"I didn't know about corn meal. Here, let me put these away so you can take the basket home," I said, taking the container from Connor and transferring the cornbread squares into a red serving platter that we used to set out the pan dulce from the panaderia down the street.

"Oh, you don't have to give the basket back just yet. I can get it later, when I come back," Connor said, taking the basket out of my hands and placing it on the counter, next to the oversized platter.

I looked from the red platter to the slices of cornbread, each adorned with a tiny little painted sprig of summer light in bright yellow and orange swirls. It was obvious his mother had taken great care in preparing the display, filling the large basket with perfectly cut cornbread squares. Or had Connor done that? Hoping he wasn't developing a crush on me, I quickly grabbed the basket again.

"No. You should take it now," I said, putting the rest of the cornbread hastily on the platter. "That way, you don't have to come back for it."

Connor took the basket from me. I smiled as I rested my left hand on the counter for support. Then, because Guelita was staring at me with that knowing lift of her left eyebrow, my hand slipped off the counter and I almost lost my balance. Connor reached out to me, but the basket got between us, and I recovered it before he could put his hands on me.

"I'm alright. Counter's slippery. Must be time to clean it up," I said, shoving my hands under my arms and righting myself as I moved towards the wide archway that separates the

kitchen from the living room area. "Well. Thank you for bringing these. I'm sure they're delicious."

Taking his cue, Connor said goodbye to Guelita, as he walked towards the front door with me. Chucho came over, wagging his tail, hoping for a little affection from Connor, who reached down and petted him before moving past me, through the open doorway.

"Well, I'll see you then. Enjoy the cornbread. Let me know what you think of it," he said, tossing the basket about, side to side as he made his way backwards, down the porch, like someone not really ready to leave.

"Thank you." I closed the door and sighed as I leaned against it.

"That boy's come a courting," Guelita said, when I went back into the kitchen.

"Quiere noviar—he wants to be your boyfriend."

"Don't be silly," I said.

"Nothing silly about that. He's a healthy young man, with a young man's hopes and dreams. You're the pretty girl next door. It's natural," Guelita said, setting her coffee cup down.

"Well, I'm not the pretty girl next door," I said. "Lici is... Anyway, boys are not interested in me."

"And what makes you think they aren't?" Guelita seemed shocked to hear me say that.

"I don't know. Boys are just stupid," I whispered.

"What do you mean, stupid?" Guelita frowned.

"They're like little gnats, always buzzing around your face, trying to get your attention. At least, that's how they always acted around Lici, and they serve no purpose, no purpose whatsoever," I said, thinking first about La Viuda's cheating husband and then about that sleazebag, Jose, trying to kiss Lici on the porch after the funeral.

"What do you mean, no purpose," Guelita asked. "Boys have their purpose. I don't have to remind you of what that is, and I'm sure, pests that they are, there's a purpose for gnats too. Somehow, somewhere in the eco-system, gnats have their purpose."

"Well, I don't have time for gnats."

I stared out the window at the porch steps and wandered if Lici and I would ever get back to that place where we were still sisters, that place where we more than friends, when we loved each other more than anyone else in the world. We'd made a pact, she and I, long before Alexander was born, long before even Jose came into the picture. She was only eleven years old, but I was twelve and on the verge of going to middle school. No matter how much I tried to reassure her, she was upset because I was moving up in the world without her. She was scared I would leave her behind, scared that I would make new friends and ignore her like so many other big sisters did when they grew up.

"Look at them." I had leaned in close to her that day on the porch steps so I could whisper in her ear. "They're all miserable. Every single one of them. Miserable."

She looked at the women coming down the street in groups of three or paired up as they walked home from El Sagrado Corazón, the Catholic church up the hill, one street over from our house. There were seven of them altogether, and not one of them walked with her husband. In my neighborhood, most women didn't have husbands, and those that did wish they didn't.

La Viuda remarried a year after her husband died, but that one drank as much as the last one, so she divorced him and ended up working two jobs to pay the bills and keep her children fed.

Doña Pepita's husband was still alive, but he lived with his Mexican wife, in Nueva Rosita, Coahuila. Doña Pepita didn't mind. As long as he stopped by every weekend, brought

groceries for their four teenage boys, and cut the grass, she didn't care if he went back home to his other *mujer* on Sunday nights. "Let her take care of his *other needs*," I heard her tell my grandmother one day when they were chatting over the fence. "It's one less thing I have to worry about."

"Martina has a new boy," La Viuda whispered to our next-door neighbor, Lourdes Villanueva, as they walked by our house.

"Martina always has a new boy." Lourdes said, as they stopped to peek around the corner at the black Camaro parked discreetly in the alley down the street from our house. "How does she do it? How does she hook them? I can't even get old men to look at me."

Irene Sanchez, who lived caddy corner to us, waved her hand in the air. "Ay, no. She's crazy," she said. "Who needs a *peladito* in bed. I'm too old to be training *mocosos*. I'll stick to my Andres. At least he knows what he's doing in that department."

They'd lowered their voices when they caught sight of us sitting on our porch, listening to their conversation. I'd braided both my arms around Lici's left arm and put my chin on her shoulder. "Let's never get married," I said, and then I kissed her cheek. "Okay?"

"Aren't you afraid," she'd asked.

I pulled back and made eye contact with her, "Of what?"

"Of ending up like La Viuda or worse, Doña Pepita?" she'd asked.

"Old and abandoned?" I asked. "Or just alone? Because you know what they say is true, *mejor sola que mal acompañada*."

She thought about it for a moment. "Of being miserable?"

"We won't be." I played with her bangs, pushing them out of her eyes.

She sighed. "But how can you be sure?"

“Easy. We won’t get married,” I whispered into her ear.

“And we won’t have children!” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

I grinned. “We’ll get out of this town. We’ll go to Paris and New York. We’ll go to Guatemala.”

“Guatemala?” she asked. “What’s in Guatemala?”

I had laughed then and wrapped my arms around her neck. “Nothing! Nothing and Everything! Life! Liberty! The world!” I’d said, kissing her soundly on the temple.

“Freedom!” she’d yelled, and giggled.

“We’ll have go to college and get careers,” I’d said. “Then we’ll definitely get to travel.”

Lici had lifted her arms in the air. “We’ll buy luggage at Bloomingdales and wear pearls to breakfast like Audrey Hepburn. We’ll put silk scarves under our coats because it gets cold where we’re going!”

I reached over and wrapped my arms around her waist. “And no matter what happens, we’ll stay together, always!”

Lici lifted her hand, offering me her pinky finger. “Always,” she’d said.

I’d hooked my pinky to her and tugged. The bond was solid. We were solid. We didn’t need a mother. We had each other. We’d stayed on the porch a bit longer that afternoon, watching the broken women wave good-bye at each other and disappear into the shadows of their houses. When the clouds moved away and the sun started beating down on us, we’d started sweating.

My father hadn’t made the dating bench yet, so there was nowhere else to sit in the yard. We went back into the house to do what girls do when they’re in elementary school. We’d played with our Barbies and then we’d put them back in the toy chest and scooted it back under

our bed, where we kept all the things we didn't want Guelita Rosa to find and use against us when she called us chifladas.

Chapter 6

When Lici and I got older and moved up to high school, we'd stay up late and talk about going off to college together, Sul Ross State University, because our old neighbor, Luis Miguel, went there when he left home. After he became an FBI agent and had traveled to exotic places, he came back to visit his parents in Eagle Pass and told us that there are small towns everywhere in the world. He even said in some places people liked living on the border. He said people with college educations can live anywhere they want. Back then, Lici and I used to imagine ourselves living in a nice new apartment, free of nasty, creepy-crawler insects like scorpions and brown recluse spiders, in a city where everybody minded their own business and men didn't rule the world.

When I was fourteen years old, Lici kept complaining that something was buzzing and moving around in her ear. It just about drove her insane. She kept poking things into her ear, shoving pens and pencils, even pointy fingernail files. One morning, I finally took a flashlight and made her lay down on her bed so I could take a look, and sure enough there was a baby cockroach hiding in there, wiggling around, trying to inch itself out, butt first. It took me almost an hour, but I finally pulled the miserable thing out of there with a pair of tweezers.

If the dream of going off to college with Lici had dimmed when Jose came into the picture, it certainly died that terrible day I let go of Alexander. How could we make plans to go to university, when Lici wouldn't even look at me anymore. Every day that summer, I woke up, opened my eyes, and stared at the ceiling as I listened to my father walk quietly out of his room, turn on the truck, and take off, leaving me trapped in the house with my grandmother, like that ignorant cockroach, packed tightly into a dark, foreign place without hope of ever seeing the light of day again.

One hot afternoon, I was fixing dinner, when Lici came rushing in through the front door after work. From the open archway of the kitchen, Guelita and I watched her as she dumped her purse on top of the coffee table and tore through our old couch, lifting the seat cushions, pulling out the sofa bed, peering under the thin mattress, then shoving it all back together.

When she was done giving the couch a thorough body inspection, she went through and checked the rest of the furniture in the living room. Then she went into the kitchen and noisily rifled through every drawer. She even got on her hands and knees to look under Guelita's old china cabinet in the breakfast nook. When she was done going through every piece of furniture in that area of the house, she stood with her hands on her hips, breathing heavily.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, mustering up the courage to talk to her. Instead of ignoring me like she'd been doing for weeks, Lici turned around and looked straight at me. Her eyebrows were deeply furrowed and her mouth looked pinched.

"Where's Alexander's book?"

"What book?" I asked, thinking of the small, plastic bin of used books I bought for two dollars from the fire department at their rummage sale right before Christmas. As far as I knew, the bin full of books was still sitting in the corner of Lici's room.

"No te hagas tonta," my sister's eyes glistened, and she blinked, like she was trying hard not to get emotional. "His favorite book! The one he carried around everywhere, the one with his name on it! Which other book would I be talking about?"

I thought about it for a second, and then, suddenly, I understood, and it wasn't a surprise to me why she wouldn't want to call out the full title of the book without breaking down. "I haven't seen it. Not since—"

"Shut up! Just—shut up—you're useless! Useless!" Lici threw her arms up in the air and let them fall against her sides like she just gave up on me.

"I'm so sorry. Lici. Do you want to talk about it?" I asked, watching as she put her left hand up to her eyes, placing her index finger and thumb against the bridge of her nose, pinching her tears away. Then, without saying another word to me, she stalked out of the kitchen.

"What did you expect? You're crowding her," Guelita Rosa said when she saw what happened. I hadn't seen her standing there, in the frame of the kitchen door until she spoke to me. "She needs her space."

I have to admit that after that incident I was worried to see Lici spending less and less time at home. She worked late hours and often came home so late, I was nervous that she might be overdoing it. But she seemed fine, sleeping soundly more and more often, not crying herself to sleep anymore.

I kept myself busy too. Determined to do more than watch her sit around swallowing pill after pill, I helped Guelita Rosa de-clutter her closets, sewed and hung new curtains in the kitchen, dining and living rooms. And because he wasn't around to stop me, I went into my father's room and listened to his old records on his turntable during the day and translated the lyrics of old Spanish songs into English, trying but not always succeeding in keeping the musicality of the verses.

One evening, as I was going through the clutter inside my grandmother's china cabinet, sorting old papers, stacking everything into piles, and tracing the faces of my grandparents in faded pictures, I came across a picture of Lici as a baby. She was small and plump, and her eyes were big and shiny as pinacates, those round black beetles I used to pull out of Alexander's

hands because he liked putting them in his mouth. The fact that their pee stinks didn't stop him either. He just spit them out because they tasted bitter.

In the picture, Lici's hair was as curly as Alexander's, and I thought about taking it to my room, but with the way she'd been acting I knew that wouldn't be a good idea, so I held the picture against my chest and closed my eyes instead. When I opened them, Alexander was there again, standing on his tippy toes, clinging to the bay window in the kitchen with his tiny hands, his chin propped against the windowsill. His bright eyes were focused on the cardinals flittering between the red and pink crepe myrtles in the back yard.

He turned around and smiled. "Under da' bed," he said in that funny little voice of his.

"Under the bed?" I asked, speaking out loud to him. "What's under the bed?"

"Ma' book," Alexander said, letting go of the windowsill and running out of the kitchen. I sat there motionless for a moment, and then, I jumped up and ran after Alexander. He wasn't in my room, of course. But the book *was* under my bed. I couldn't figure out how it got there, but I didn't have time to think about it out because the doorbell rang at that very moment. Guelita was sitting in the dining room, looking out the window, when I came out of my room to answer the door.

"That boy's coming around again," she said, keeping her eyes on the porch.

"What?" I asked, looking around for Alexander.

"You're going to have to deal with him sooner or later," Guelita said, pointing out the window. "He's not going away, you know."

When I opened the front door, Connor was standing on our porch with a handful of packages in his arms. He was smiling so broadly it made me cringe, and I almost closed the door on him.

"Can I help you?" I asked, stepping outside to talk to him.

"Hi," Connor said. "I was just wondering if you wanted to go to the post office with me. I have to mail these prints for my mother. She's an artist you know... sells things on-line. It's nice, her stuff. She gets lots of orders. She usually mails them off herself, but she's got to finish a big project and well, um... Wanna tag along? It's a nice day for a walk."

"No. I've got stuff to do," I said, crossing my arms.

Connor blinked, his brown eyes roamed my face, as if he was trying to figure out what I was thinking. I looked at the window, into the dining room. Guelita was *busy*, crocheting a white doily, but I knew she'd been watching us.

"Okay. Got it. Maybe next time," Connor said, stepping backward, taking each downward step carefully as he went along. I felt bad, but I couldn't help it. I didn't want him to think I was interested.

That wasn't the last time Connor showed up at my door that summer. The second time, I just didn't answer the door. Guelita teased me for days afterwards.

"Pobre muchacho, you're breaking his heart," she said, every time she saw him in his yard, throwing the ball up in the air while he glanced again and again at our house. "Mira, he's playing all by himself. Why don't you go outside and talk to him?"

I ignored Guelita's teasing as often as I ignored Connor, but I spent a lot of time talking to Alexander. He'd pop up when I least expected him. Usually he just sat on the floor and watched television with me in my room or sit on my rocking chair and look out the window.

One time, he freaked me out, because I was almost asleep when I felt the bed move and when I opened my eyes he was laying curled up next to me. "Nite, nite?" he asked, like it was the most natural thing in the world that he should be sleeping in my room.

“Yes,” I’d whispered. “Nite, nite.” Then I’d closed my eyes and pretended he wasn’t dead. Although I didn’t dare to reach over and touch him, I swear he felt real to me. He was alive and well and living in my room, but I wouldn’t dare tell anyone else about it. I didn’t want them to think I was losing my mind.

Before I knew it, the summer was almost gone, and, suddenly, without explanation, Lici was happy again. One bright sunny morning, I thought I heard her humming to herself as she moved about her room getting ready for work. I opened my door, stepped lightly over the pattern of white orchids on the faded linoleum floor and pressed my body against the wall, listening to the sounds of joyful verses coming from her lips. When she stopped, I bolted down the hallway and dashed into the kitchen where Guelita was having a cup of coffee in the breakfast nook.

"What's with you?" Guelita asked. I shrugged my shoulders and stared at the raggedy fingernails on my right hand, thinking I should stop biting them. I didn’t want to look like a cannibal, eating my own hands, all through freshmen year of community college.

"She was singing," I whispered, after a short pause.

Guelita Rosa placed the pill in her hand back in the saucer, where it trembled next to its colorful neighbors. "Mira," she said, nodding at something outside.

I leaned over and looked out the window, confused. Some strange guy had pulled into our driveway, and he was sitting in his idling car, just waiting. I couldn't quite make out his face, but he had big biceps that burst out of his shirt.

We heard Lici come out of her room, and, before I could get up the courage to ask her what was going on, she'd flown out of the house in a sleeveless bright red dress I'd never seen before. The skirt was short in the front, but the back was long and flowing. When she ran down

the porch steps into the driveway, it floated off her calves, billowing behind her, a sun-kissed scarlet blur, a bright red kite just floating freely in the breeze.

Chapter 7

The summer went by fast and, before I knew it, it was time to start our first semester of college. I had the horrible feeling that losing Alexander had derailed Lici completely. She never talked about starting community college anymore. We had planned to do the college thing together, to plan rotating schedules, take turns watching Alexander while the other one was in class. We'd talked about sitting in the student center watching the giant screen television set and munching on French fries in between classes.

Even though Lici and I never talked about it, I did what I had to do to make sure she was all set to go if she suddenly decided to attend. Unbeknownst to anyone, I picked up two of everything when I went to the office of admissions. I filled out two of every form, always making excuses about how my sister was at work but I would take it to her and get it signed for them. Since a lot of it could be done online, at the library, where no one knew what was going on, the student advisor never caught on.

In fact, she did her best to make sure both mine and Lici's paperwork was filled out correctly and there was nothing else Lici or I would need to get financial aid. Lici and I were good at forging signatures. We'd been forging my father's signature on all our school forms since we hit middle school because even though he was perfectly capable of reading English and filling out forms, my father hated doing it and would much rather leave it up to us to get "all that nonsense done right."

I toyed with the idea of letting Lici know that I was filling out forms for community college for her so many times. I'd walk across the hall in the middle of the night with the printed confirmations in my hand, trembling like maple leaves as I held them in front of me. I'd stop in front of her room and considered rapping gently on her door, but I just never could. I considered

slipping the print outs under the door but then changed my mind because the act seemed even more cowardly than standing night after night holding those papers in front of her door. The whole thing was too burdensome, too emotionally draining, so I just kept doing things on the sly and hoping she'd understand when the time came to start attending classes.

The weekend before school started, I began to wonder how in the hell I was going to tell Lici that she was enrolled in 12 hours at South Texas Junior College. I sat on the courting bench my father built when he decided Lici was of age and thought about what I had done. How would Lici take it when she found out I'd gone as far as picking out her schedule for her? Would she be angry because she'd rather take more mathematics classes than get a good balance of her basics first as her schedule seemed to do? She'd always loved math, and, unlike me, she was good at it.

As I sat there, pondering how to approach Lici about starting school, Guelita and her comadres rambled on and on, getting the last of the weekly gossip done in one long, productive Saturday afternoon with her cronies under the shade of the mesquite because she wouldn't see them on Sunday. Sunday, her friends went to church.

Most people's grandmothers are nice. They bake pies and cookies and drink iced tea as they rock back and forth on their porches. Not my grandmother. My Guelita is a mean urraca. Every afternoon she perches herself on a wooden bench under the mesquite surrounded by her comadres: Doña Sofia, La Nena, and Las Gemelas, Luisa and Olivia de Leon, twin sisters with twin bulbous moles trembling on the side of their lips like old, prunish figs as they chew and spit tobacco juice into the tin can in their laps. Guelita says the twins never got married on account of those moles. I say they were too busy digging into other people's lives and sharing it with the neighborhood to find someone to marry them. Who wants a tobacco spewing chismosa for a wife anyway?

“You know what I think?” my Guelita asked, looking at me as the comadres closed the gate to our fence and parted ways, each going toward their respective homes. “I think Luisa’s right. That new woman next door, Bonnie, is up to no good. Luisa said Bonnie walked into the Walgreens yesterday and picked up some of those contraceptions, you know for putting over the man’s penis.”

“Grandma!” I said, blushing at her words.

“What?” my grandmother huffed. “Oh, please, don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. Contraceptions are nothing new. Those things have been around for centuries. Cleopatra used to use them, you know.”

I shook my head. “They’re called contraceptives, not contraceptions,” I said, sighing and looking down the road toward the intersection of Williams and Brazos Street. Conner’s mother couldn’t have been buying condoms. She was new in town and as far as I could tell she was a shy woman who kept to herself. She had no need of contraceptives. I kept my eyes on the horizon. The church was on the next block. I could see the steeple from where I sat. How many years had it been since we’d set step in that church for anything other than a funeral?

“Well, it’s true. That’s what they’re for!” Guelita said. “It’s shameful, really. Back in my day, women didn’t need such things. We just crossed our legs and kept our goodies to ourselves. We didn’t go around looking for chile the way women do now.”

I put my hand on my forehead and closed my eyes. My grandmother didn’t have pelos en la lengua. She always said what was on her mind, even when I didn’t want to hear it. “Please, Guelita!” I said, shaking my head and shifting uncomfortably on the narrow courting bench my father had made when Lici had started dating Jose seriously.

“Your mother was like her, you know,” she said. “That poor girl, God rest her soul—was always looking for man trouble. Starved for affection, she was. From what I understand, she made eyes at every man that crossed her path before she met your father. I told mijó about her, but he didn’t care. He was besotted with her.”

“That’s not true,” I said, horrified. Why hadn’t I ever heard of this? Was my grandmother getting even more senile? I’d heard her say weird things for years. It seemed the older she got, the stranger her stories grew, but this was beyond anything I’d ever expected from her. “You’re lying!”

“No, it’s true,” she insisted, fixing her cloudy, old eyes on me in a way that made the tiny hairs on my arms stand on end and I shivered with a strong chill. “That’s where your sister gets it.”

Now there was a stab between the ribs. There was no denying my sister, Lici, had a problem with her hormones. She’d been spending more evening out than in since she’d gone back to work, and she always had somewhere to go after work. Even more disturbing was the fact that lately a different car was bringing her home. She had so many male friends now, I couldn’t keep track of them all. It was hard to tell if they were co-workers, platonic friends, or actual love interests because she acted the same with all of them. Night after night, she threw her arms around their necks and kissed every one of them before she got out of their cars. But it wasn’t just the dating that was bothering me. There was something else going on.

One evening, the week before, I watched Lici get out of an older man’s car. It was a nice car. Big. Expensive. I didn’t know makes or models, but I could tell by the fancy hood ornament, the gold handles and trim that it’s either a Caddy or a Lexus. It didn’t matter. It was what happened next that was important.

Lici walked around the car and met the bald man with the crooked red tie pull out a bundle of mall bags and handed them to her. He'd pulled her in and kissed her as she'd taken them and twirled them in her left hand, freeing her right hand and putting it out, palm out, between them.

It was dark, after midnight, but I could see them clearly in the moonlight. The man smiled and shook his bald head, but then he pulled out his wallet and gave her a few bills out of it. She stared at the money sitting on the palm of her hand and raised an eyebrow at him. He shook his head again and pulled out a few more bills from his wallet. He pretended to put them on her hand, but then he pulled them back, pushed her hand away, and leaned in to kiss her.

She closed her hand over the money and put her free arm around his neck and leaned into the kiss, dominating him. He shoved the money past her nice dress top and into her cleavage. His fingers lingered there and I closed my eyes to keep from throwing up. I closed the curtain and slipped back into bed. She came in then, all quiet and innocent, like a domesticated cat making her way back home after a long night of biting and scratching up the opposite sex.

I lay in bed long after she'd come in and stopped moving around in her room, putting up her wares in her closet and drawers, hiding her treasure, afraid I might want to borrow something, completely unaware of just how repulsed I was by her. But no matter how hard I tried to ignore what I had just seen, I couldn't reconcile it in my mind, so I'd opened the door and walked right into her room.

She shot up in bed and pulled a fuzzy, red sleeping mask off her face. "Grace!" she'd screamed. "What the hell is going on?"

"What's going on?" I asked, my breath coming in great big huffing gulps. "Look, Lici. I'm your big sister, and it's my job to set you straight."

“Don’t be ridiculous. Get out of my room!” She waved the stupid looking sleeping mask in the air, toward the door. “Now!”

“Look Audrey Hepburn!” I tore the sleeping mask out of her hand and waved it in front of her face as I said, “I don’t care how smart you think you are, what you’re doing is wrong and I’m not going to stand by and watch you throw your life away!”

“Give me my mask back,” Lici said, and she held her hand out.

I tossed the stupid mask aside. It smacked against the closet door and Lici opened her mouth like she was going to say something, but I didn’t let her talk. “I saw you,” I said. “I was right there, watching you from the window. I can’t believe you, Lici. Taking money from that old man. It’s disgusting. It’s, it’s...immoral.”

“You’re spying on me, now?” she asked. She pushed the bedcovers aside and got out of bed. “Why are you spying on me?”

“Because that’s my job,” I said. “I’m your sister. Your big sister. And I can’t just stand by and watch you become a prostitute. What if you get caught? Huh? Have you thought about that? It’s illegal, what you’re doing.”

“They’re gifts, Grace!” She crossed the room, slid the door to her closet open, and pushed and shoved at the clothes, showing me the tags on the clothes hanging on the rack. “See? There’s nothing illegal about getting gifts from men. I go out with them and they buy me nice things. I can’t help it if they like to buy me nice things. It’s their money, they can spend it on their stupid wives or they can spend it on me. I say they spend it on me.”

“So you’re for sale now?” I asked. “Is this what you’re going to do from now on? Instead of going to college with me like we planned you’re becoming a prostitute?”

Lici picked up a Gucci purse and traced the golden letters on its clasp. “I’m not a prostitute!” she whispered. She sounded so small, so young, I reached out for her and touched her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” She slapped my hand off her shoulder and pulled the huge purse up to herself, holding it against her chest, hugging it like it was a baby. “I hate you! Get out of my room! Get out!”

“Lici, please,” I whispered. “Don’t push me away! Let me help you. Can we talk, please? We need to talk about school.”

She shook her head. Tears were streaming down her face and she wiped her nose with the sleeve of her pajama top. “No,” she whispered. “You ruined everything. Everything’s fucked up and it’s all your fault. I hate you, Grace. I really, really hate you.”

Tears streamed down my face too. It broke my heart seeing her so torn up, so broken. “Lici, please,” I whispered. “Please, let me help you.”

“Just leave me alone.” She moved away then, bolted and yanked the door open. “Go!” she cried. “Get out of here!”

My eyes burned at the memory, but my grandmother’s words still echoed in my mind. Could it be true? Was Lici just like my mother? And could she, would she, eventually commit suicide too? The thought shook me to the core, and I pushed it away. “Well, even if it’s true and my mother was the same way,” I told Guelita that day under the mesquite. “I really don’t want to hear it. So keep it to yourself, okay?”

“I asked her once, your mother, why that was so,” Guelita continued, acting as if she was deaf and didn’t hear my request. “‘Why are you like this, Sarita?’ I asked her. ‘Why you so starved for affection, chiquita?’ And you know what she said?”

“I should get dinner going!” I started to haul myself off the courting bench, but Guelita put her hand on my shoulder and pushed me back down. It wasn’t that she was that strong, but if she wanted to keep me there, to torture me with “revelations” about my mother, there wasn’t much I could do about it. As my elder, I owed her my respect. She knew I was too good of a granddaughter to disrespect her by walking away while she was still talking.

“She told me a story, about *her* mother,” Guelita said. “She sat at my kitchen table and said, ‘If I had a peso for every time my mother cried, I could build myself a castle. In the sky, I could build it. My mother, God rest her soul, had no life of her own. Since the day my father showed up at her house, that cardboard shack in the middle of nowhere, she took no breath of her own. It was raining that night in San Vicente. More than rain. It was a deluge, but my father didn’t care. He tied a rope around his best cow and dragged it through that mud and muck all the way to my grandparents’ house. When my mother opened that door, he stood there with the relámpagos creeping across the sky behind him like devil’s finger scratching at the sky.

The rain poured off his hat by the bucketsful. He was soaked to his calzones, but he didn’t care. He wanted my mother so bad, he didn’t even wait for the rain to stop pouring outside before he made his move. As soon as my grandfather gave his consent, my father took my mother’s hand and dragged her back home through the mud and the muck the same way he’d dragged that cow there to trade for her. Pobrecita, mi madre.

She didn’t ever get a wedding. There was no white dress. No frosty cake. No music. No nothing. The truth is my father never married her. He just took her home, stripped her down, and made her his wife. Every night and every morning he made her his wife. She cried every time he left her to go plow the fields and cried every time he came home. She cried through every labor pain. Cried over every newborn and cried over every stillborn. She cried until the day she died,

and then she cried no more. I know you don't like me,' she said. 'But I won't be crying over that. So go ahead. Be as mean as you want to be. You won't be seeing any tears from me. Neither you nor your son will ever see any tears from me.' Yup. That's what she said, your poor mother. God rest her soul."

I sat on the bench and thought about my mother. Had she really been as cold in her youth as Guelita portrayed her? I knew from experience she was a harsh mother, I'd felt firsthand the power of her rage.

I have but a handful of memories of my mother and even less pictures. Unlike the pictures, however, the memories are vivid and fresh, but not in the warm, sentimental way memories of lost mothers usually go. My memories of my mother are full of sound and color.

In my oldest memory of her, she is all slapping hands and red lips. I don't quite see her face as much as I see her dark hair flying around that red, screaming mouth, how her lips moved angrily, how they pursed after every question then opened immediately, to scream again. And the boy, scuffling away, slapped off me, then getting up, his long legs sticking out from under the khaki shorts, naked from knees to ankle socks, brown and dirty as he ran away. And me clutching the two pennies in my hand, wondering what was so wrong about being his mommy for a few minutes.

"What were you doing?" my mother screamed, her red lips an angry line across her pretty young face. "What were you doing with him?"

"He was my baby," I said, "I was feeding him."

"Who told you that?" she asked. "Who told you you could feed him? Did he tell you that?"

I opened my hands and showed her the two shiny pennies, coppery brown and beautiful in the morning sunlight. “Yes.”

“No!” She slapped the pennies out of my hand. They went flying, bounced off the dirt and landed somewhere in the weeds, the bright, green blades of grass taller than the boy’s knees. “You don’t do that, Graciela! You don’t let boys climb all over you like that. Never, ever let anyone do that again!”

“He was my baby,” I repeated. “I was feeding him.”

My mother slapped me then. Again and again her hand slapped me, on the cheek, then on my arms and thighs as I scrounged up, hid my face, and cried into my hands.

“You’re not a carnival ride,” she screamed, pulling my hands away so I would look at her. “Me entiendes, Graciela!” she screamed. Her red lips made out each word again, deliberately, painfully slow. “You-are-not-a-carnival-ride!”

Then, because my face was hurting, I cried out. “No. No,” I cried. “I’m not a carnival ride! Not a carnival ride!”

“And you don’t take money from them!” She pulled my hands and held them inside hers, squeezing them hard, crushing my fingers, collapsing them. “Do you hear me? Never. Ever. Take money from boys. Not for things like this. Not for touching you. Not for kissing you. Not for getting close to you. You understand? Tell me you understand!”

“I understand,” I said. But I didn’t. I was four or five years old and I didn’t understand what I’d done wrong. I didn’t understand I’d been used by a boy three or four years older than me, a boy almost twice my age, tall and lanky and smart enough to get me to let him do things little girls my age were not supposed to do with boys.

Even despite the harshness, despite the abuse, I had to wonder if my mother had honestly said those horrible things about her own mother or if Guelita was just delusional? It was hard to tell if anything about Guelita's story was true. She had a penchant for the dramatic after all. But up to now, only about half the things that came out of her mouth were embellishments. The other half was the product of el chisme, the things she heard from her comadres. Although most of the time, it was hard to tell which was which. "Can I go now?" I asked, looking up at Guelita. "Lici's getting off work soon. I should really get dinner started."

"I wouldn't worry about her!" Guelita paused, waited for me to stop and look at her before she continued.

"Why not?" I asked, putting my hand on my waist and waiting for the blow.

Guelita smiled. "She put one of those things in her purse this morning."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, putting my hand on my brow to block the sun as I looked up into my grandmother smiling eyes.

She winked at me. "You know. One of those things you put on the man's penis. In the middle of intercourse?"

"Augh!" I stood up and walked away, refusing to discuss what I already knew to be true.

Chapter 8

I made dinner that night and waited for Lici, but she didn't come in until two in the morning, and by then I'd given up and gone to bed. Because Lici was still pretending I didn't exist in her world, I did the only thing I could do to let her know about school. I snuck into her room and put the red backpack I'd bought for her with the refund from my financial aid money at the college bookstore on her bed and laid her schedule on top of it.

She'd probably have to rework her dating schedule once school started, but I'd made sure her classes were all in the evenings, so she didn't have to stop working. She also had to go pick up the refund from her financial aid monies at some point, but I figured I'd tell her about that once she got over me signing her up for school. It would probably soften the blow if she knew she'd qualified for a needs-based grant, everything was paid for and she had a few hundred dollars coming back to her.

I was browning rice in hot vegetable oil, getting it ready for the herbed chicken broth that would bathe it, soak into it, making it tender and soupy the way she liked it, when Lici came bouncing into the house. She laid her purse on the coffee table and rushed into her room. I heard her door slam and stopped stirring, being as silent as possible, listening for a clue as to how she was taking the news of being enrolled in school for the fall.

"What is this?" Lici asked, after she opened the door and came walking into the kitchen holding her schedule with both hands. "Where did this come from?"

"I..." The word got caught in my throat and I couldn't get them out no matter how hard I tried. "I..."

"You did this?" she asked, her brows two beautifully painted birds facing off low on her forehead as she frowned at me. "What the hell!"

I cleared my throat. “Well, you’ve been so busy,” I started, but then nothing else would come out. Her eyes glistened, then narrowed, and her lips trembled.

“You had no right!” she said, waving the schedule in front of my face.

“School start Monday,” I whispered. “Don’t worry, we don’t have any classes together. I made sure of that.”

Lici’s nostrils flared, opening up wide, then quickly collapsing against the sides of her nose, again and again, like the hooded flaps of a tiny cobra. She chose her words carefully, deliberately. “You little worm!” she hissed. “Where did you get my information? How did you do this? Did you forge my signature?”

“Someone had to,” I said. “It’s not like you were ever going to do it. Your hands have been too busy doing God knows what to those dirty old men who drop you off after work!”

“You little bitch!” Lici screamed. Her schedule sailed sideways and glided across the floor as she came after me. She reached for my hair but I pulled away from her, ducking out of her reach, so that she lost her balance and pushed me back with the force of her attack.

I slammed hard against the stove and would have fallen except that I was able to reach backward and catch myself. Too late I realized the palm of my hand had landed on the handle of the skillet with the browning rice. The movement had jostled it just enough to splatter oil and rice all over the top of my hand.

I must have screamed, because Lici grabbed my arm and yanked it away from the grease fire the oil had started on the stove. She wrapped her arms around my waist and pulled me away from the flames instinctively. “Oh my God!” she cried, as she held up my hand and stared at it. “Oh my God! Oh my God!”

“Get some water on it!” Guelita yelled. She was holding onto her walker as she stood just inside the kitchen door. “It’s okay, Graciela. You’ll be all right. Lici—listen to me. Put her hand under the cold water. You need to stop the hot oil from soaking through.”

The pain eating away at my hand radiated up the length of my arm, like a relámpago, an electric shock that made me howl like an animal. The sounds coming out of my mouth scared me, and I tried to stop, but my body did things I couldn’t control. I shook all over, tears poured down my face, and saliva dripped out of nose and mouth. I grabbed onto my elbow and squeezed at my arm, trying desperately to make the pain go away even as Guelita and Lici placed it inside a bowl of icy cold water.

“We need to go to the hospital,” Lici finally said, pushing my hair out of my face and looking at Guelita as she spoke.

“No,” Guelita said, shaking her head. “It’s not that bad. We can take care of it here. Bring me one of those pots of aloe vera from the rack on the back porch. I’ll need some gauze too, from the top shelf in my medicine chest. Now, Lici! Move!”

Even after Guelita plastered the cooling, goey aloe vera slivers all over my burns and wrapped my hand in gauze so that it looked like a giant puff ball, I couldn’t control myself. I was losing my mind from the pain and the shock of it all. I knew I was not myself because when I went to my room and laid down on my bed Alexander crawled out from behind my dresser and come to watch over me. He stood beside me, staring at my puff ball hand and blinking, not sure if he could touch it or not.

“Yes, it hurts,” I told him when he pointed at it with his tiny index finger.

“Coco?” he asked.

“Si, coco,” I reiterated, closing my eyes and wondering how I had the energy to talk to a figment of my imagination instead of going to sleep. “Oh, Alexander. I don’t know why, but I get the feeling I’m being punished for hurting you.”

I opened my eyes and Alexander was still there, watching me with those large brown eyes, soft and dark as wet earth. If I didn’t know any better, I would say he was really there, alive and well and warm as my forehead when I pressed my hand on it and tried to relax.

“I not hurt, Grace,” Alexander said, lifting his hand and showing me that, unlike my own, it was fine.

“You’re not?” I asked, tears slipping and spilling down the side of my face toward my ear as I turned sideways to look at him.

Alexander shook his head and smiled. “Sleep now?” he asked, and I nodded. “Okay. I go?”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes. You go. I’ll see you later, okay.”

“Later-later,” Alexander said. Then he got down on his hands and knees on the floor and crawled under my bed, the way he used to when we would play hide and seek in the afternoons before Lici came home from work.

As the three blue pills Guelita had made me swallow before coming to bed started to take effect, I wondered how this would change Lici. Would she feel guilty and stop ignoring me altogether? Would she be more inclined to forgive me for enrolling her in school? More importantly, would she go class on Monday?

There was no telling how this whole thing with my hand would affect her. At that point, I wasn’t even sure I’d be in school on Monday myself. But I didn’t care anymore. My hand felt

like it was dying inside that pocket of gauze and goo, and I just wanted the earth to stop spinning, to freeze on its axis and let me get off its dizzying carnival ride.

Despite all my wishing, Lici's attitude toward me didn't get any better. If anything, I would say it got worse. She didn't ignore me anymore, so much as look at me like she loathed me. Every time she came in and out of the house she made it a point to stare at me with those same dark eyes, as large and beautiful as Alexander's but dangerous as obsidian daggers.

Don't you dare talk to me, those eyes said, and I listened to them and kept my mouth shut even though my whole body hummed with the need to scream at her for making it hard for me to go to night school. I couldn't use my hand at all that first week of school. I couldn't write anything down, so I had to use my left hand to manipulate my phone and take pictures of everything my professors wrote on the white board. I felt like an idiot, because I kept opening up the memo app and whispering notes to myself on my phone when they said something important but didn't write it on the board.

Lucky for me, the professors didn't mind that I kept fussing with my phone during class. After a while, I noticed I wasn't the only one doing it. For some reason, other students started doing it too. Rather than writing things down on their notebooks, they just clicked pictures too.

"I started a trend today," I told Alexander when I got home from school one evening at the end of the first week of school. "Thanks to me, nobody has to write things down anymore. What do you think of that?"

Alexander looked up long enough to smile at me before going back to playing with his red fire truck in the middle of my room. I put my injured hand, less heavily gauzed now, gingerly on top of my stomach, looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

If she had gone to her classes that week, maybe we'd of had something to talk about. Or maybe that was wishful thinking on my part too. The only thing that mattered was that instead of improving Lici's life, I had, once again, made it worse.

"You're not staying up are you?" Guelita asked, as she checked on me that night, opening the door just enough to look in on me and then reach in to flip the switch down when I shook my head. "Good. You need your rest. Do you want one of my pills?"

"No," I said and turned on my side, away from her. Guelita closed the door and I looked over at Alexander in the dark. He sat there, in the middle of the room, on his knees, watching me for a moment longer before disappearing, his tiny shadow dissipating and blending into the darkness. "Goodnight, Alexander," I whispered.

From somewhere in the darkness I heard him whisper, "Night. Night." His voice, soft, faint, gone.

The next day was Saturday, and, because I was feeling a little better, I took the wrap off my hand and let it breath. It wasn't so bad. The bubbles had deflated, and the redness had begun to lighten into a dull pink hue that covered a big area of my hand. Guelita insisted on covering it with aloe goo every few hours, saying that if I kept up the *treatments* I wouldn't have any scarring. She said aloe vera was a gift from the gods, given to the Mexican indigenous people to help them deal with the merciless sun back in the time when they first came over the ice patches on the north pole and settled in the Americas, way back in time, thousands of years before the Europeans discovered this continent. She said the word *discovered* like it was a curse word.

My grandmother was full of interesting stories like that. She hadn't been to school past the third grade in Mexico, but she watched all the shows on the National Geographic and history channels, so she had a lot of theories about our culture and how we got here. Like everything else

that came out of her mouth, some of it was fact, some of it was fiction, most of it lay somewhere in between.

I was settling in on the couch to write an essay for my composition class when I heard a knock on the door. I shifted uncomfortably, trying to get the new computer I'd bought with my financial aid off my lap with one hand so that I could answer the door when Guelita came walking out of her bedroom. "I'll get it," she said. "It's that nice boy from next door."

"Oh, please don't open the door," I said, feeling myself get sick to my stomach at the thought of having to talk to Connor. I didn't want him to see my hand and start asking questions.

"Why not?" Guelita asked. "It's not like he comes over every day. Besides, what makes you think he's here to see you?"

I let out a frustrated breath as I looked at my grandmother. "Really? You think he's here to see you?"

Guelita lifted her right hand in mid-air, flipping it palm up. "Maybe," she said. "I won't know until I open the door."

"Guelita, please! I'm busy," I said. "I have a lot of homework to do."

As usual, my grandmother did what she wanted. She opened the door and greeted Connor with a wide smile and asked, "Yes? Can I help you?"

Connor stood at the threshold with his hands shoved deep in his jeans' pockets, looking into the house as if he wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for. "Uh, no. Not really," he said. "I was just bored and I thought I'd come over and talk to Grace."

"Well, she says she's busy," Guelita said, cocking her head toward me. "But if you're bored I have things you can do. There's a whole yard of work that needs to be done out there. You got a lawnmower?"

“No. I don’t,” Connor said. He looked sideways at the front yard on both sides of the door, then he took his hands out of his pockets and shoved them under his arms as if he didn’t know exactly what to do with them. “I’m sorry.”

Guelita frowned at him. “Then what good are you?” she asked, and I cringed. She could be so rude. I could feel Connor’s devastation as he looked across the threshold at her.

“We have a wheelbarrow,” he said. He smiled then. I looked away because something about that smile made me very uncomfortable.

“A wheelbarrow, huh?” Guelita thought for a moment.

“I could move those rocks for you,” Connor said, turning to the left and pointing to my father’s handiwork, the huge pile of rocks that had become rooted to the earth. “What do you want me to do with them?”

“Don’t touch them!” I cried out instinctively, because the memory of my father’s reaction when I’d tried moving them myself was still fresh on my mind. “Leave them alone!” he’d screamed at me with such anger and rage that I hadn’t dared go near them again. I could only imagine what he would do if Connor touched them.

Guelita and Connor watched me from the door as if I’d just sprouted horns and hooves and snakes for hair. “What’s the matter with you? Why are you yelling?” Guelita asked, waving Connor into the house. “Come in, son. Grace didn’t mean to yell at you. Did you, Grace?”

I didn’t answer her. The fact that my grandmother was letting Connor into the house was frustrating me too much and I decided to go back to my school work and let Connor get the message. I didn’t have time to waste on visitors.

Connor came in and sat across from me on the loveseat because I had deliberately spread out my books and notebooks around me, giving the impression that there was no room for him to sit on the big couch.

“Well, I have things to do,” Guelita said. She picked up her walker and made her way back to her room.

When she was gone, and Connor and I were alone in the sala, I stopped fussing with my papers and glared at him. “Well?” I asked. “Did you need something in particular? Because, as you can see, I have a lot of work to do.”

Connor sat forward on the couch, clasped his hands in front of himself, and cleared his throat as if he was a presidential candidate about to answer an important question for the senate.

“Come on, spit it out,” I said. “I don’t have all day.”

“Why don’t you like me?” he asked, lifting his chin and fixing me with a penetrating, clear stare. “I mean, I haven’t been anything but nice to you, and you keep shoving me away. Every time I try to make friends, you shoot me down. What is it? My hair? My eyes? My skin color? I’m half-Mexican, you know. I mean, I use my mother’s name, but my father was from Queretaro. I’m not all white, if that’s what bothering you.”

I was shocked. Out of all the things I’d expected him to say to me on that couch, that was the last thing I would have guessed. “I’m not prejudice,” I said. “I don’t care if you’re orange or blue or green. I just don’t have time to *get to know you*. Unlike my sister, I have things I’m trying to do, goals I want to accomplish.”

“Okay,” he said. “I get it. You’re busy. But everyone needs a break every once in a while. I was thinking we could go get a burger or something. Everyone needs to stop to eat, right?”

I put my hand on my forehead and rubbed at my temple. It was exhausting, having to talk to him. Why didn't he get it? I just wanted to be alone. "Yes," I said. "People often do that, but they kinda have to get started first, which I can't do because you're here, distracting me."

"I can't win, can I?" Connor asked. His eyes softened then, and he looked down at the floor for a moment. "No matter what I say, no matter what I do, you're just going to keep shooting me down."

The silence between us grew and I shifted on the couch. "I'm not trying to be mean," I finally said.

"But you are being mean," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

I sighed and looked down at the open book sitting over my crossed legs. My head was throbbing from the sheer stress of having to talk to Connor. If I was Lici, if I knew how to handle boys, this would be fun, but I wasn't Lici and I didn't know what to do to get rid of Connor once and for all. "This is exhausting," I whispered, more to myself than to him. "You're exhausting."

"Well, thank you for your time. I'll let myself out." Connor stood up, walked over to the door, and pulled it open.

Guilt sprang up inside me. I was about to call Connor back when Lici stepped through the door. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Leaving," Connor said, his voice low, terse. "Just leaving."

Lici stared after Connor, who bolted out the door, letting the screen slam behind him as he fled across the yard. I watched him rush up to the chain-link fence that separate our yard from his. He put both hands on the top bar and flung his body over it, quick and agile as a feline. He didn't look back, but ran up the porch steps and disappeared into his house.

“What was that about?” Lici’s eyes narrowed as she watched me close the curtain and settle back on the couch.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know,” I lied. “Something about a wheelbarrow. He’s going to do some yard work for Guelita or something. I’m not sure.”

Lici shrugged her shoulders, turned away, and started to walk toward her room.

“Lici,” I called out, my voice warbled, nervous. Lici stopped and halfway turned toward me, keeping her eyes averted. “How’s school?” I asked.

She let out a quick, frustrated sigh. Then she threw back her shoulders and turned to face me head on. “I’m not going to school, Grace.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I don’t want to, okay,” Lici said. “Listen, Grace. I need you to just leave me alone. Okay?”

“But if you don’t go to school now, you’ll lose your financial aid,” I said. “You can’t just ignore this Lici. That’s not the way things work.”

Lici shook her head. “Stop!” she screamed. “Just stop! Don’t you get it? I’m not you, Grace. I’m not interested in school!”

“You used to be,” I cried out, slamming the book on my lap closed and pushing it aside, onto the couch. “You used to say we’d go off to school together, when we were young, remember?”

Lici put her hand on her hip and stood staring at me for a second. Her left leg shook nervously. “Yeah, well. That was a long time ago,” she began. “You just have accept it, Grace. I don’t need to go anymore.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said. “Everyone needs to go to school. You need to think about your future. You think just because you kiss those guys in their cars they’re going to take care of you? They’re not, Lici. They’re just using you?”

“Shut up, Pansona,” Lici yelled, her mouth twisting in disgust. Pansona. I hadn’t heard that word for years. Not since we were in middle school had Lici called me pansona. “You’re just jealous,” Lici continued. “You’ve always been jealous. Face it, Grace. You have to go to school. It’s the only way you’re ever going to get a life. You’re never going to get a man to marry you. Guys just aren’t into you. Not that way anyway.”

That’s not true—not true at all—I wanted to scream, because I knew it was just her immaturity talking back to me then, but I didn’t. Instead, I just stared at Lici. The word pansona hung between us like a hot air balloon, suspended in mid-air.

Lici turned around and left the room. I sat with my hands on my lap, staring at her closed bedroom door.

Chapter 9

I didn't want to admit then, but Lici's insult had made an impact on me. As I sat in class the next evening, I kept thinking about my pudgy belly, the small rolls of flesh that bulged out and sat one on top of the other around my waistline no matter how many sit-ups I did day after miserable day, because fighting the battle of the bulge was a daily struggle for me. It always had been. Unlike Lici, I didn't have the luxury of walking around eating everything in sight knowing that no matter how many calories I consumed I would always look like a campamocha. Unlike Lici, I had to stay active.

After class, I walked over to the admissions office, signed in, and sat down to wait to talk to our advisor. I needed to let her know that Lici wasn't going to come to classes after all. There was no way around it. I had to come clean about my part in this charade. To lie would be pointless, especially if I wanted her to help me find a way of keeping Lici's financial aid eligibility viable.

Half an hour later, our advisor, Ms. Gamez, called me into her office, saying, "Come on in. Sit down."

"I need your help," I said, as I took the chair on the right, in front of her desk. "I think my sister's changed her mind about coming to community college. I mean, she wants to come, but she's not ready yet. She needs more time."

"Yes," Ms. Gamez said, smiling as she spoke. "I know."

I blinked, confused. "You do?"

"She came to see me this morning," Ms. Gamez said.

"She did?" I asked.

“She unenrolled,” Ms. Gamez explained. A small frown marred her face as she spoke. “I tried counseling her, but she seems to have made up her mind. She’s having a tough time. But I’m sure you already know that.”

I nodded, wondering just how much Ms. Gamez knew about Lici, and, consequently, about me. “Yes,” I said, looking down at my backpack sitting over my lap. “She has. This isn’t going to mess up her eligibility, is it? She’ll still be able to get financial aid when she’s ready, won’t she?”

“Yes, she will,” Ms. Gamez said. “It’s the first week of school, and she didn’t attend classes, so it’s okay. We’ll just refund everything back to the state. Don’t worry about it, we’ll take care of it.”

“Oh, good,” I said, letting out a long held breath.

“And how about you? How are you doing?” Ms. Gamez asked. “You’re not going to drop out too, are you? I know it’s probably not easy, after what happened this summer.”

I grabbed my backpack and bolted upright. “No.” I turned toward the door. “I’m staying in school. I’ve gotta go. I have a lot of homework.”

A lot of homework? A lot of homework! Was that all I was ever going to have to keep me busy, *homework*? As I left the admissions office, and sprinted across the lawn toward the street, I wondered if school wasn’t a crutch, the thing I used to keep me from dealing with my own inadequacies in life. Was my good girl image just a mask, a façade, the thing I hid behind?

A million questions rolled around in my mind as I turned left at the corner and headed home. Was Lici living a more genuine life? Was she being more true and honest with herself than I? Was taking chances with those men, going out, dating, kissing, more real than burying

my nose in a book? Was I wasting the best years of my life on letters and words and pages and pages of research papers?

I was opening the gate to the chain link fence when Connor came out of his house. He turned around and stopped at the sight of me staring at him. We stood frozen for a moment, and then, because I could think of nothing else to do, I lifted my hand and waved.

To my surprise, Connor's face broke into a huge smile and he waved back. Then he bounded off his porch steps and practically ran across the yard to talk to me from the other side of his fence. "How's college?" he asked. "You get all your homework done?"

"Yes, turned it in and everything, but I have more homework now. You know how it is. Finish some, turn it in, get some more," I said, hanging my head and shifting from one foot to the other. The truth was, I didn't know how to make pleasant chit-chat.

At eighteen, I'd never even been on a real date. Lici was right about one thing. Guys just hadn't been interested in me, not in a dating kind of way. The only reason any of the boys in high school had ever talked to me was to ask if they could copy my homework, but because I always said no they'd stopped talking to me altogether.

"Well, you wanna go down the street and get some ice cream before you get started again?" Connor asked, cocking his head sideways, trying to get me to look up at him.

I lifted my eyes to his. They were cerulean blue, as light as the morning sky on a clear summer day. "Sure," I finally said. "Okay, so there's a place on main street that sells yogurt. They have different fruit you can put in it. It's better for you than ice cream. Healthier."

"Yogurt, fruit, chocolate flavored vitamins and minerals, whatever you like," Connor said. "It's up to you. Just say the word and I'm in."

I laughed. "Okay, just let me put my books in the house. I'll be right back, okay?"

“I’ll be right here,” Connor said, pushing himself off the chain-link fence and walking backward toward the gate of his fence.

I ran up the walkway, opened the front door, and slung my backpack onto the couch. The lightweight feeling of exuberance that had overtaken me was ripped right out of me when I closed the door and turned around to see my father’s truck turning into our driveway. My father straightened the wheel, turning it quickly with both hands before he put it in park. He kept his eyes on Connor as he got out of the cabin.

I walked quietly down the walkway, pretending not to notice that my father was just standing there with his hands on his waist, watching me walk toward Connor. To his credit, my father didn’t say anything. He just waited until Connor and I started down the street together before he made his way into the house.

“Your father’s not much of a talker, is he?” Connor asked when we had turned the corner onto Brazos street. I shook my head. “Guess you take after him, huh?”

“What?” I asked. “Me? No.”

“You don’t think so?” Connor asked. “Was your mother quiet too? Are you more like her? Or are you more like your grandmother?”

“My grandmother? Oh God! No!” I said, laughing.

“I don’t know. You’re both pretty blunt,” Connor teased.

“Blunt?” I asked, cocking my head to look at him from the corner of my eye. “You think I’m blunt?”

“More than blunt,” Connor admitted. “You can be pretty brutal.” Then, because I didn’t say anything back, he said, “Oh, come on, Grace. I’m just teasing you. I like your personality. At least you’re not like all the other girls.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked, crossing my arms in front of me as we waited for the walking sign to change before we crossed the street again on the way to Main Street.

“Listen,” Connor said. “I like you, okay. That’s it. That’s all. I want to hang out with you. Go to the movies. Take you to dinner. Can you handle that?”

“You want to date me.” It wasn’t a question. I just wanted to verify it, because for once in her life Lici was wrong. Connor Blades was a guy and he was into me.

Connor nodded. “Very much so,” he said, and then he reached over and took my hand and tugged at me to start walking.

“Okay,” I said, and let Connor’s smile pull me forward. We walked hand in hand all the way down the street until we reached the yogurt shop. We ordered, sat across from each other at a small, circular table and talked. He smiled often. I smiled too, and even laughed, and the sky didn’t crack or crumble or fall.

Connor was easy to talk to. He didn’t tease me too much, just enough to keep things light, casual, which is exactly what I needed because anything more and I think I would have cut the date short.

At one point, he reached over and tugged at a strand of my hair to get my attention because I was looking behind him. I thought I saw Lici in the passenger seat of a Buick that stopped at the intersection of Main Street and Brazos. The driver, an older man with white hair wearing a nice blazer was obstructing my view, so I couldn’t verify if it was her.

“Hey, you okay? What is it?” He asked, turning around to look at what had caught my attention.

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “I thought I saw...”

Connor waited, but I couldn't finish my thought. The idea that Lici was on a date with another old man turned my stomach and I couldn't even give it voice.

When the light changed and the Buick pulled forward, driving through the intersection and disappearing down Main Street, Connor asked, "Lici?"

"Yes," I admitted. "Was it? I couldn't tell."

"Nah," Connor said. "It just looked like her. Lots of girls look like her."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked. "We all look the same to you?"

Connor laughed, a quick squirt of a laugh that said he found my question ridiculous. "I mean she had long black hair and wore lots of make-up. Lots of girls do that. They paint seagull eyebrows on with those thick black pencils and shape their eyes the same way, with those long, black wings that stretch up at the outer corners."

"And they all wear bright red lipstick. I know," I said.

Connor nodded. "At a distance they all look the same. But it wasn't your sister."

"Hmm," I said, taking another bite of my yogurt. "I guess you're right."

Connor put his hand over mine on the table. He toyed with my thumb, pinching it gently between his index and middle finger and pulling it back and forth to make my hand wiggle. "You don't do that."

"Do what?" I asked.

"Wear too much make-up," Connor said.

"What for?" I asked. "It's not like it changes anything. When I take it off at the end of the day I still look like me. I don't see the point."

Connor pushed my hand upward on the table until our palms were touching and then he laced his fingers with mine and squeezed. When our hands were intertwined, braided together, he

leaned forward and smiled. “You don’t need it,” he whispered. I felt short of breath. His face was too close, so I sat back a bit, to create some distance between us. I just wasn’t ready for anything more than vanilla yogurt with blackberries.

When I got back from the yogurt place, my father was sitting at the kitchen table talking to Guelita. They were sharing a bowl of salsa, dipping tortilla chips into it, and they both looked up at me when I walked through the door.

“Hi,” I said as I reached for my backpack, pulling it over to me on the couch and lugging it over my right shoulder.

“Hey, Grace, where’d you go?” my father asked, as if this laid-back questioning was something we did every day, as if talking to me at all was normal.

I toyed with the frayed strap of my backpack, thinking that I should just use the new backpack I’d bought for Lici since she’d decided not to go to college. “We got some yogurt,” I whispered, shifting from one foot to the other, wishing I could just run to my room. But Guelita and my father had stopped eating altogether, and they were both focused on me.

“So, are you two a thing now?” my father asked, pushing the bag of chips away from him and shifting sideways in his seat so that he was facing me. “Is it official? Because we have a bench for that, you know.”

“The bench?” I asked. “But it’s not mine! You made that for Lici.”

“Yeah, well, it’s yours now. So don’t be taking off with that boy anymore. If he wants to see you, he can come over and sit on the bench so your Guelita can keep an eye on you two.”

I rolled my eyes. Was he serious. “Really, dad?” I asked. “That’s your narrative? I’m not a child anymore. I’m eighteen years old, Dad!”

My father lifted his chin. “Hell, yeah, that’s my narrative!” he said, slamming his hand on the table for emphasis. “I don’t care if you’re eighteen or twenty-eight! As long as you live in my house, you’ll live by my rules. You wanna see that boy, you’ll sit on that bench. You got that?”

“Fine. Whatever. It’s not like it means anything,” I said. I took a few steps towards my room, intent on getting the hell out of his way, but then something stopped me. A dark thought struck me and I couldn’t let it fester in my chest, so I stopped, turned around and said. “What about the rocks. Are you going to do something about those piedras. Cause I’m not going to sit out there with Connor to stare at that pile of rocks all day. That’s just stupid. Why’d you bring them anyway?”

My father’s eyes sharpened, glistened, and his jaw tightened and untightened a few times before he answered me. “Just...don’t...” He let out an exasperated breath. “Never mind about the rocks, Grace. You let me worry about the rocks.”

“It’s an eyesore,” I complained. “Are you ever going to do anything with them? Can we move them?”

“You stay away from those rocks,” Guelita said. “There’s probably copperheads or rattlers in there.”

“But it’s embarrassing,” I insisted.

“Just keep to the bench,” my father said, turning away from me to look back at the bowl of salsa. “I’ll mow the lawn down around the bench, make it all nice and pretty for you. The mower will scare away the snakes.”

I could feel my anger rising. His plan to mow around the bench frustrated me. *What about the rest of the yard?* I wanted to scream. “Don’t bother,” I said. “I don’t need it.”

“What do you mean you don’t need it?” Guelita asked.

“I mean I don’t need it,” I said. “We’re not there yet.”

My father raised an eyebrow and went back to his chips, looking sideways at my grandmother as he asked, “So you’re just friends, then?”

“Something like that,” I said. “Can I go now? I have to read two-hundred pages tonight.”

“Sure,” my father said. “Okay.”

I turned on the ball of my foot and bolted to my room, closing the door quickly behind me before they decided to lock me away in a closet or send me off to live with some distant relative in Mexico. The idea that they could monitor my relationship with Connor was beyond archaic. It was ridiculous. They didn’t monitor Lici. Not anymore, anyway. Why should they monitor me? It wasn’t fair.

In the privacy of my room, I laid back on the bed and remembered the day my father made the dating bench. He’d been working on it for weeks in his tiny workshop in the back yard, and when Lici turned fifteen, he’d taken it out and placed it under the mesquite tree in the front yard. Then he’d called out to Lici, told her to try it out. When she sat on it, he’d put his hands on his hips and said, “Happy birthday, mija.”

“A bench?” Lici’d asked. She’d sounded a bit confused. Her face was blank, so I couldn’t tell if she was impressed or disappointed by the unusual gift. “You made me a bench?”

“Not just any bench” my father beamed with pride. “A dating bench, so you have a place to sit when Jose comes over.”

“Jose?” Lici’d asked, a nervous smile forming on her lips as she shook her head. “No. That’s too weird, dad.”

“What’s so weird about it?” My father had crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “That’s what your grandfather did for your mother. I had to sit on a bench in his yard if I wanted

to see her. Two years we sat on that bench, night after night, until she turned eighteen and she could go to the cinema with me. Look at it this way, it's tradition. Sit down. Give it a try," he'd invited.

Lici had laughed then, a tinkling, light-hearted little laugh that didn't quite resonate with my father because his frown deepened and sectioned the skin of his forehead even further. "This isn't Mexico, dad. That's not the way we do things here," she'd said. Then she'd reached out and padded his shoulder like he was the kid in the relationship.

"Well, you'll use it anyway," my father had reiterated. "Don't worry about Jose. He's from Mexico. He'll understand. We don't want to give him the impression that just because you live on this side of the border you're anything but a decent girl."

Lici had turned her face to make eye contact with me then. There'd been a mischievous gleam in her eyes as she'd looked at me. She'd pressed her lips together and then smiled and said, "Sure, dad. Okay."

Later, as I'd laid down for bed, I'd heard her talking to her friends on the phone. She'd laughed about it every time she'd retold the story. "Can you believe? No, of course not! It's ridiculous! He's ridiculous," she'd said, again and again until I stopped listening and drifted off to sleep with the single thought that my sister was an ingrate.

Chapter 10

Even though I didn't want to, my father and grandmother insisted I use the bench every time Connor came calling on me, no matter how much I complained.

"I don't care if it's stupid," my father insisted. "You're not going to end up like your sister, pregnant and tossed aside like a hollowed-out watermelon rind. She was sixteen when she had Alexander. She had no business having a kid. No, sir. I'm not going to let that happen again. If that boy likes you, he'll sit on that bench with you until I'm good and ready to let you go out with him."

By the end of the fall semester, Connor and I had sat on that bench staring at the stupid pile of rocks for a grand total of forty-seven days. We were running out of things to say to each other out there under the mesquite, so that by the time the weekend rolled around, I was more than frustrated, I was downright livid.

I was mad at my father for forcing us to sit there, I was mad at Guelita for watching us every afternoon from the window, and I was mad at Lici for never having used it in the first place. If only she'd used it and kept herself out of trouble, my father would probably leave me alone. I was days away from turning nineteen years old, for God's sake!

Connor wanted to take me to the carnival in front of the mall, but I didn't have the nerve to ask my father's permission, which made me angry at myself, for being afraid of him. I was sitting on my bed in my room, trying to study for a history test, when I heard a car drive up. I looked out the window and saw Lici kissing an older blonde guy inside a Ford pick-up.

The sight of her doing whatever she wanted with whomever she wanted infuriated me, and I shut my book and tossed it away from me on the bed. I got off the bed, opened my bedroom door, and leaned back against the frame facing the hallway, waiting.

“What are you doing with that guy?” I asked when she walked past me in the hall.

Lici stopped at her door and looked back at me. “Mind your own business,” she said. Then she put her hand on the doorknob and twisted it open.

“Yeah, well, I would, except that thanks to you I have no business,” I said, raising my voice so she could hear me as she walked into her room.

She was about to close the door, but I put my foot against the frame. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I want you to talk to him,” I said. “Tell him I’m not like you, that I’m not going to fuck up my life the way you did.”

“What are you talking about?” Lici asked.

“Dad!” I said. “He’s mad at you for getting pregnant and taking it out on me and Connor.”

“Leave me alone, Grace. I’ve got more important things to do than argue about the bench with your father.” Lici started to close the door in my face.

I put both hands on the door and pushed it back as hard as I could. Lici jumped back, hit her heel against the metal foot of her bed, hollered, and fell backwards onto her pillow. “That hurt, you idiot!” she yelled when she sat back up. “Get out of my room!”

“Make me,” I said, and to prove that she had no power over me I walked right on in and went to stand in front of her mirror. I looked at the wide assortment of cosmetics strung about like fallen chess pieces all over her dresser and picked up a lipstick. “Flaming Crimson.” I read the name out loud and rolled my eyes. “More like whore red if you ask me.”

“You bitch!” Lici said, getting up and ripping the lipstick out of my hand. “What is it, Grace? Let me guess, he wants to go all the way and you can’t do it because Guelita’s watching you.”

“No!” I said, glaring at her. “He’s not like that.”

“Oh, please,” Lici said. “They’re all like that. Every single man I’ve ever met wants only thing, to get between your legs. Don’t do it, Grace. Don’t give in, no matter what he promises you, no matter what he buys you. Save it for someone who really cares about you.”

“Oh, like you did with Jose?” I asked.

Lici flinched at my words. Then she looked away. “You’re so naive, Grace! It’s weird—you’re older, but you know nothing about life. Maybe you’re better off staying on that bench. You have no idea what it’s like out there.”

I looked at her face, all made up to look older, wiser. It was just a façade. Inside, she was still that little sister I always loved, that baby sister I always protected. “You’re not as wise as you think,” I said. “You don’t know everything, Lici. It’s okay to admit that, you know. It’s okay to stay go back to school and start fresh again.”

“Listen to you,” Lici said, turning away and then jumping onto her bed again. “Always preaching. Don’t you get tired of pretending to be perfect, Grace? Don’t you hate faking it? Is that what’s going on? You want to screw Connor Blades, but you don’t have the guts to just get off that bench and get in his car and see what happens?”

“Stop it!” I pushed myself off her dresser and sent a tube of mascara rolling off the counter. Mad, I kicked it out of my way as I started toward the door.

“What are you afraid of, Grace?” she asked. “Face it. We aren’t much different!”

I stopped at the door and turned to her again. “I’m not like you, Lici. I don’t use men. It’s not my thing,” I said. “Connor’s nice. He respects me. Not like those old guys you like to date.”

Lici took a deep breath and expelled. “Oh, God. Grow up, Grace,” she said. “Connor Blades is just as much of a jerk as every other guy out there. He’s a horny toad, a disgusting slimy piece of amphibian shit. If I were you, I’d send him packing.”

“Shut up!” I yelled, but Lici didn’t shut up.

“No,” she said. “Connor Blades is a jerk. He’s an ass, just like all the rest. He’s going to stick his dick in you and walk away and tell his friends all about it. And when he’s done with you, he’ll move on to the next girl and forget all about you!”

I leaned over the bed and slapped her hard across the face. “Shut up!”

Lici looked stunned as she rubbed her cheek with her hand, trying to erase the red fingerprints from her face. I wanted to say something, to tell her I was sorry, but I couldn’t. Something in the way her face contorted made me freeze, and I couldn’t think straight.

“Connor is different,” I finally said, because I couldn’t think of anything better to say. “He’s not a predator, like those old farts you go out with. He’s a nice guy. You’re just jealous because I got it right the first time.”

“Okay. Fine. Have it your way,” Lici said, tossing her hair back, away from her face, before she put her hands behind her and leaned on the headboard. Her eyes swept over me up and down with disdain. “You’ll see soon enough. He’s no better than any of the guys I date.”

Chapter 11

Friday, as I walked home from my last class of the semester, I saw Connor sitting on the bench. It was after nine, and the porch light was off, but the moon was bright and enough of its light pierced through the branches of the Chinaberry tree so that I could see he wasn't sitting alone.

Lici was with him. She was sitting very close to him. Her right leg was crossed over her left leg. Her shoulders were thrown forward and she was resting her crossed arms over her knees. She looked like she was entranced by whatever was coming out of Connor's lips.

As I neared the house, slipping into the yard quietly through the open car gates, Lici pulled away from Connor. Then she stood up and walked around the bench. She slinked away without ever looking back at me.

"What's going on?" I asked Connor when I stepped up to the bench.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "Just getting to know you sister a bit."

Bells, whistles, loud sirens wailed in my head. "What do you mean?" I asked. "What did she say?"

"Nothing really," Connor said. "She just wanted to know where I came from. I told her all about California and how different it is over there. Then she kind of teased me a bit about having to sit out here."

"She did?" I asked. Connor nodded, and I smiled wearily. "She'll do that," I said and left it at that. I didn't have the heart to ask him what I wanted to know. Had she told him about our argument? I didn't want Connor to get the wrong idea about me, especially because I still wasn't sure where we were in the relationship. We hadn't even kissed yet, so things were still awkward and strange between us. He didn't need to know he'd come up during our squabble.

I sat down and put my books on the bench between us. Connor took my left hand. “Man, you’re freezing.” He cupped my left hand inside his and lifted it to his lips. Then he blew warm air on and rubbed it. When he was satisfied that it was sufficiently warm, he stopped. I pushed my hand inside the pocket inside the front of my pink hoodie, where it would stay warm beside my right hand.

“So, have you talked to your dad about the carnival?” he asked, moving the books to the left of him on the bench so he could scoop in and get closer to me.

“No,” I said, shifting on the bench so we were not so much facing each other than sitting side by side.

“Why not?” he asked. “Don’t you want to go?”

I looked at the dark pile of rocks sitting at the other end of the moonlit yard. In the night shade cast by the surrounding mesquite trees, it looked like a Mayan pyramid I’d seen on documentaries on television. “No. I do,” I finally said.

“You don’t sound so sure,” Connor said. When I didn’t answer, he half-heartedly pushed his shoulder into mine, gently nudging at me.

“I’m sure,” I said. “It’s just that. Well, talking to my dad. That’s harder than you think. He’s not necessarily open to conversation, you know.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s not that bad,” Connor said. “Why don’t we ask him together?”

“What?”

“It’s harder to say no to two people at once,” Connor said.

There were so many reasons I didn’t want to talk to my dad in front of Connor, so many reasons why I shouldn’t, but I didn’t have time to even begin to explain the complexities of our

relationship because my father driving up the street and pulled into our driveway in less than a minute.

“Connor, please, let’s not do this today,” I said, as I watched my father slide out of his truck and reach back in to pull out his jacket from the passenger seat. Then he came around the truck and started walking toward the house.

“Come on,” Connor said, nudging me again before he stood up. “Hello, sir, how’re you doing?” Connor pushed his hands deep into the pockets of his loose-fitting jeans and talked to my father like it was the most natural thing in the world.

My father stopped midway up the pathway to our house and cocked his head sideways to look toward us. He was wearing a ball cap, and the short bill threw a shadow over his face and I couldn’t see his expression, but I could feel the tension in his back muscles as he straightened up. His shoulders shifted, turned, and he began walking toward us, slowly, deliberately.

“Hello, son.” My father stopped in front of us and reached out to shake Connor’s hand. “How have you been?”

“Just fine, sir, just fine.” Connor took my father’s hand, shook it, and then put his own hand back inside his pocket. He threw his weight onto his heels and rocked himself back a bit.

Fine?

I wasn’t fine!

My head was spinning. My stomach was twisted into all kinds of knots, and I had the intense desire to jump up and run down the street into the night. More than anything else in the word, I wanted to get as far away from the situation as my legs would take me. But instead of running, I sat frozen on the dating bench— my back was stiff, my hands were tight balls inside

the warm pockets of my hoodie, and the muscles on my face were stiff from the cold breath of the dark December night.

“Good. Good. And your mother? She getting along? Can’t be easy moving all the way across the country to start a new job,” my father said.

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Connor said. “She’s all excited about the carnival this weekend. Her art students have a face-painting booth. She’s really looking forward to running it.”

“Hmm.” My father popped the cap off his head and scratched his head, looking sideways toward our front door, before putting it back on. “That’s good.”

“I was wondering,” Connor continued. “Do you think it would be all right for Grace to come with me to the carnival? It closes at midnight, but we can be back earlier if you wish. It’s a small carnival. I’m sure we can get on all the rides way before then.”

My father rubbed his beard stubble vigorously. “Well, I don’t know son. Are you going to drive her there yourself? Won’t your mother need her car if she has a booth?”

“It’s not too far,” Connor said, shrugging his shoulder. “I figured we could walk.”

“Walking, huh?” My father rubbed the back of his neck and thought about it for a moment. “I guess it’s okay. But I don’t want you two walking back too late. People tend to get crazy when the party’s over. Can you make sure you get out of there by ten-thirty, eleven at the latest. That should put you back here well before midnight.”

“Eleven. Got it,” Connor said, giving my father the thumbs up.

“Back before 12.” My father reached out a hand and Connor took it. They shook on it. I shifted in my seat as I watched my father step back, turn around, and leave without even one word to me.

“There,” Connor said. “That wasn’t so bad, was it? He’s a nice guy, your dad.”

No sooner had my father gone back into the house than the light went out on the porch. “Nice!” Connor said, sitting down on the bench and putting his arm around my waist. “That’s a sign, you know? Between men. He’s okay with me now. He gets it.”

“He gets what?” I asked, watching the windows, to see if my father was looking out at us from inside the house.

“Us,” Connor said, and he reached up and took my chin in his hand and pulled it gently toward him. I turned to him. His breath was warm and balmy against my cheek as he leaned in and kissed me. I held my breath and let him kiss me.

His tongue in my mouth shocked me. He tasted a bit like warm limeade, tart and sweet and delicious. Something inside broke through and I let myself enjoy the moment. He whimpered when I grabbed his hair and pulled his head back, pushing him against the trunk of the Chinaberry tree, so I could kiss his neck, feel his skin against my cheeks, my lips.

“Whoa!” Connor said. “What’s this?”

I laughed, the sound leaving my throat was deep, throaty, unlike anything I’d ever heard coming out of my mouth before. “Shut up!” I said, and I pulled his hair until his face was angled just right and then I kissed him again, nipping at his lower lip, teasing him with the tip of my tongue again and again.

The porch light flickered and sputtered as it came on, and I pulled away. Connor slid his hand out from under my shirt in one swift motion, and I wondered when that had happened. I pulled my shirt down and straightened up my collar over the neckline of my zipped up my hoodie.

Lici opened the screen door and came out of the house. She leaned on the door frame. Connor took my hand. A tight, little smile formed on his lips when Lici left the doorway to stand

against the railing at the top of the porch steps. “It’s getting late, Grace,” she called out. “You coming in?”

“Yes,” I said. She looked up at the moon for a bit, staying her place at the top of the steps.

“Not yet,” Connor squeezed my hand when I tried pulling it out of his grasp.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I whispered, and he released my hand.

I jumped up and trotted up the walkway and up to the porch, keeping an eye on the steps as I went up. When I passed Lici, she smirked. “So you’re going to the carnival,” she whispered, so only I could hear her.

“Yes,” I said, putting my hand on the cold handle of the screen door. The moon shone down brightly on Lici, making her eyes glisten and sparkle darkly under the shade of her lashes. She lifted her chin and sighed. Her breath formed a white-gray cloud as it left her lips, rolling out and dissipating into the night as the wind swept it away. “Just don’t get into any cars with him,” she warned under the breath.

“Shut up,” I said, and I pulled the screen door open and walked inside.

Lici rushed into the house behind me. “Wait a minute. I’m talking to you,” she said, following me down the hall. My head snapped when she grabbed me by the hair and pulled me back toward her.

I started to scream, but she put her hand over my mouth and muffled my voice. “Don’t you ever tell me to shut up again!” I struggled against her, but she pinned me into the corner between the door to my bedroom and the hall. She was smaller than me, but there was strength in her anger, and I couldn’t get away from her. “Now listen to me. You better not give it up to that guy out there. You hear me? Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on. I’ve been watching you

two cozying up to each for weeks. He's got you are all fired up, but you can't let him get to you, Grace. He's not good enough for you."

"You're disgusting," I said when she lifted her hand off my lips. "Let me go!"

"Stop it!" Lici said, slapping the back of her hand lightly against my cheek. The sound her hand made against my cheek smarted more than the actual slap, and I reached up and rubbed my face. "Just keep your legs crossed, okay? Don't let your hormones get the best of you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, turning my face away from her.

She let me go, stepped back, and leaned against my door. "I saw you, Grace," she whispered as she crossed her arms in front of her. "He put his hand up your shirt and you didn't stop him."

"You're crazy," I said. Then I grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and walked into my room. I tried closing the door, but Lici stopped me and followed me inside. I took my shoes off and threw them into the closet. Then I yanked on the zipper of my hoodie until it gave way and slid down. "Do you mind? I'd like to go to bed now," I said, slipping my jammies out of the top drawer of my dresser and folding them over my arm. "Why are you spying on me? You have no right to do that!"

"I'm your sister," she said. "And I'm damned if I'm going to let you go out and make the same mistakes I made."

"Maybe I need to make mistakes. You're not the only one who feels," I said. "You ever think about that?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

“I’m talking about us, you and me, and this hatred between us. I have feelings too, you know. I am just as lonely and sad as you. You’re not the only one who lost Alexander, Lici. He was as much my baby as he was yours.”

“Leave him out of this!” Lici said, turning away from me to look out the window.

“He’s still here, you know,” I said. “I see him every day. He comes in and out of this room and wanders around because he’s just as lost as we are.”

“You’re not making any sense,” she said. “Just listen to me and dump that kid. You can’t afford to lose your dreams to the first guy that comes at you with a hard on. You have to go to Sul Ross next semester. Don’t let that guy derail you. You need to go off to school like you always planned.”

“I’m not going to Alpine.” I threw my pajamas onto the dresser and let myself fall onto the bed on my side. “I’m staying here.”

“What?” Lici asked, leaving the window to come stand over my bed. “Why? For that squirrely guy? No. No. You have to go. You have to get out of this armpit of a town. You have to leave the border. Go out into the world, Grace.”

I wanted to tell her how I felt, but I couldn’t. Because I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on. Things were moving so fast. Connor had asked my father for permission to take me out, officially, and he’d said yes! And that kiss! That kiss on the bench had changed everything for me! I thought...I wasn’t sure, but, I thought, that—maybe—I might be falling in love with him.

“I can’t,” I whispered and I pulled my quilt over myself, covering my shoulders and face. It was old and raggedy, with frayed edges and compromised seams, but Guelita had made it for me when she’d first come to live with us, so I refused to throw it out no matter how torn it got.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can do anything you set your mind to do.” I felt Lici’s weight hit my mattress. She tried to pull my quilt gently off my face, but I tugged it out of her hands and refused to let her have it, so she put her hand on my shoulder and rubbed it gently. “You’ll see. You’ll forget all about him once you get to Alpine and you meet other boys.”

“I’m not like you.” I pulled away from her, refused to look at her. “I can’t go from one to another just like that. I’m not a slut like you.”

Lici’s hand lifted off my shoulder. When she stood up and left the room, closing the door quietly behind her, the bed felt empty and the room felt cold. I heard something rustle and the soft padding of little feet walking across the room, and I knew Alexander was in the room again, but I refused to acknowledge him. I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep.

Alexander didn’t disturb me.

Chapter 12

The day of the carnival, I dressed carefully, choosing a blue knit sleeveless dress with small, white buttons that went all the way down the front. If one was patient enough, the entire dress could be separated via those buttons. But I never had to do that. I always just slipped it on and up over my shoulders and off over my head.

The night was chilly, so I threw a pink cardigan over the dress. It was soft and plush and felt good against my skin. I slipped my feet into a pair of slate blue flats because there was no point in wearing high heels if we were walking up to the mall and back. The carnival was set up right up at the top of the hill, to the left of the theatre, but we approached it from behind, so we went right when we hit the mall parking lot.

“I’m glad you finally agreed to go out with me,” Connor said, reaching out and taking my hand in his. He swung our clasped hands up in the air and letting them fall naturally back as we walked down the empty lot in the dark with the dim, foggy light of half a dozen light posts to illuminate our way.

“Me too.” I looked around the empty parking lot. “I guess everyone parked on the other side.”

Connor looked behind us and then nodded. “Yeah, well, there’s more light in the front, with the street and the cars going by, so it makes sense. People want to protect their assets.”

We walked by a broken light, and Connor stopped to look up at it. I looked up at it too, “I see what you mean,” I said.

It felt nice, holding hands with a boy. I hadn’t done that since Kindergarden, when Joey Zombrano took my hand and pulled me toward the merry-go-round because I was afraid of getting on it. That hadn’t turned out very well. He told me to sit on the axis so I wouldn’t get

scared and then spun the thing so quickly I fell back and hit my head on one of the metal bars. I'd cried and my head hurt the rest of the afternoon.

I let Connor lead the way toward the end of the mall where the lights from the carnival created a halo over the one-story building and the psychedelic wheel of fortune spun slowly off in the distance, too far away for us to hear anything but the soft echo of chromatic carnival music intermingled with the high pitch of squealing children and the murmur of hundreds of effervescing conversations.

When we turned the corner, the carnival lights ate up the moon and we were suddenly bathed in rays of golds and greens and blues so bright we squinted as we walked around looking for Connor's mother and her art booth.

"There she is," Connor said, pointing to a tiny, little box structure squeezed in between the Spider and the Floating Teacups. "Come on. Let's go say hi."

"Hey!" Connor's mother said, turning around from her work on a young girl's face. "What do you think? It's my first dragon of the evening."

"Cool." I said, leaning in to get a better look. She had beautiful lines. The dragon's tail along the girls' jawline was masterfully drawn.

"You want to help us?" she asked. "We could use another pair of hands. Can you draw, Grace?"

"Mom!" Connor said. "Please. It's our first time out."

"Okay, okay!" Connor's mother pinched his cheek and laughed. "Leave. Get out of here. Go do what kids do on dates these days. I'll see you at home."

"Love you." Connor took my hand and pulled me away from his mother. "Come on," he said. "Let's go get bracelets. That way we don't have to keep getting tickets."

The bracelets were ten bucks each. Connor counted out every dollar out loud in front of the old lady in the ticket booth before handing her the stack of bills. "It's all there," Connor said, but the girl counted the money twice before she made us extend our arms into the booth so she could put the flimsy bracelets around our wrists.

"Don't take those off," the old woman said. "You take 'em off, you have to buy another one."

"Thank you," Connor said, as we stepped away from the ticket booth.

"I don't understand why she just couldn't give them to us. What did she think we were going to do with them?" I asked Connor. "Go sell them on the black market?"

"Forget her," Connor said. "She's probably seen a lot of shit in her day."

"I guess," I said. "What should we get on first?"

"Whatever you like," he said. "As long as we get on the Hurricane at some point. That ride looks vicious."

"Let's start off easy, okay? We have all night," I said, because I knew myself. If I went on the craziest ride first, I'd never make through the night. My body needed to build up resistance to movement, and I needed to build up my courage to tackle the big rides.

After the Ferris wheel, we got on the Sidewinder, which was crazier than it looked because it moved faster than I'd expected. My stomach did a couple of somersaults while we were on it, and I needed to recover, so I suggested we try our hand at throwing rings over the moving fowl in the kitty area. Connor teased me about wanting a toy, but I was glad to see him struggle to land a ring over the golden goose. "It's not as easy as it looks, is it son?" the burly man taking his money for another five rings grinned as he watched Connor attempt to win a prize for me.

“Come on,” I said, pulling Connor away from the duck pond. “I’ll buy some cotton candy to help smooth down your ruffled feathers.”

“My feathers are fine,” Connor said. “It’s my ego that took a beating.”

“Pink or blue?” I asked, when we got to the cotton candy stand.

“Neither,” Connor said. “I want popcorn.”

In the end, we got both pink and blue cotton candy, a small bag of popcorn and two soft drinks. Because I didn’t listen to my nervous stomach and got on the Hurricane right after I’d just downed the last of my drink, I ended up refunding every bit of my cotton candy and soda all over the grass mound beside the flying chairs.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, turning away from Connor, who had been nice enough to hold my hair back while I puked my guts out.

“It’s okay,” he said, moving aside and giving me room to step away from the mess in the grass. “It’s the sign of a good carnival ride when you toss it up like that. Wanna go again?”

“Are you crazy?” I asked, walking slowly away from the flying chairs. “I almost lost a lung back there.”

“I was kidding,” he said, catching up to me but leaving me alone so I could catch my breath as we strolled past the Ferris Wheel.

We walked quietly for a few more yards, me with my arms crossed low against my stomach because I wasn’t sure I was done throwing up, until we got back to his mother’s booth.

“You look like a ghost,” Connor’s mother said, putting a hand on my face. “Here. Sit down a minute. What happened?”

“The Hurricane got to her,” Connor said.

The effort of leaning over and sitting down made my head spin and my stomach dip, and I shot up intent on running to the nearest bush. I didn't quite make it and splattered pink swirls of puke all over the ground, splattering Connor's mom's foot in the process. "Oh my God! I'm so sorry!" I said when I looked up from the mess to see Connor, his mother, and several of her art students turn away disgusted.

"It's fine. It's okay. I'm a mom, I've been puked on more times than I care to admit," Connor's mother said. She stepped back and away from the mess in front of her.

"But your shoes," I said, looking down at her sandaled feet.

"They're old, and they're leather," she said. "There's a water hose back there, by the port-a-potties. It'll rinse right off. I'm more worried about you. Are you okay? Here. Have some water"

"Thank you." I took the small bottle of water she handed me. "Can you excuse me for a minute. I just need to rinse my mouth."

"Oh my God, of course. Why didn't I think of it first. Connor, go to my car. I have a travel kit in the glove box. There's a new toothbrush and toothpaste in there," Connor's mother picked through her coat's pockets to find her car keys. "You can give her a ride after she's had a chance to clean up."

"No. No more rides." I said, waving a hand in her direction. "I need to walk."

"All right," Connor's mother said. "But you should at least take the travel kit and wash your mouth out. You don't want those stomach fluids floating around in there longer than they have to. They can damage your teeth. Here. Take my keys. Go with Connor. And if you should change your mind, he can take you home. Okay?"

"Thank you," I said, taking the keys from her. "I'm sorry about the mess."

“Don’t worry about it.” Connor’s mother shrugged her shoulders. “It’s a carnival. Kids get sick. Go on now, let Connor take care of you.”

Connor and I walked silently around to the front of the mall and down the well-lit parking lot. When we got to his mother’s car, he sat on the passenger’s seat, rummaged through the travel kit he found in the glove box, and handed me the toothbrush and toothpaste.

He sat waiting while I reached into my purse, found a piocita, and pinned my hair back into a loose bun at the nape of my neck. I put a generous dollop of toothpaste onto the pink toothbrush and leaned against the car’s fender to brush my teeth while Connor waited patiently for me to be done with his long legs sticking out of car.

He turned on the radio and I brushed away vigorously until, satisfied I rinsed my mouth out with the leftover water in the bottle. I washed out the toothbrush and put it in my purse, but I handed the toothpaste back to Connor. “Keep it,” he said, waving it away. “She has fifty of these things in different places in the car and around the house.”

“Really?”

“It comes with being a free spirit,” he said, smiling as he nodded. “There’s always some art show or artist colony she wants to go to on the spur of the moment. So yeah, she’s always ready to hit the road.”

“Thank you.” I put the tiny tube of toothpaste away. Then I pulled the small purse over my head and laid it on my shoulder and across my chest, pulling my hair out from under it and flipping it aside. “Shall we go?”

“You still want to walk?” He poked his head out and clung to the roof of the car by his fingertips. “Or should we take the car?”

“Walk. I think,” I said, biting my lower lip. “It won’t take long.”

“I don’t mind if it takes long,” Connor said. “We could take the scenic route, go for a long ride, before I drop you off.”

“No.” I pulled at my purse, adjusting it under my left breast. “I need to walk. It’s just a few blocks. I have to get out of these clothes. I’m pretty sure I stink.”

“Well, I wasn’t gonna say anything,” he said, getting out of the car and coming around to take my hand.

“What?” I said, lifting my collar up to my nose and smelling it. “Really?”

Connor laughed and placed his hands on my waist. “Of course not. I’m messing with you.”

“Are you sure?” I cupped my hand over my mouth and sniffed gingerly.

“Calm down,” Connor said. “You smell nice. Promise.”

“We should really get going,” I said, but Connor didn’t move. Then leaned into me, closing the space between us by embracing me and snuggling against my cheek.

“What are you doing?” I asked, as he wrapped one arm around my neck and pulled my lips inches from his.

“What does it look like I’m doing,” he asked. “Giving you a chance to finish what you started.”

“Stop,” I said, pushing him off me. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“How?” he asked, still holding me by the waist.

“Because.” I put my hands on his chest and pushed lightly. “We’re in public and I just...puked.”

“We’re alone, Grace.” Connor laughed. He took my hands, kissed them, and placed them on his shoulders before putting his arms all the way around me again. “There’s no-one else out here. We’re not in public, and you just brushed your teeth.”

“I mean we’re in a public place.” I pulled my cardigan closed and held it in place over my chest with my right hand. “A parking lot is like the definition of a public place.”

“Awww, come on,” Connor let out a sigh. “You really wanna do this?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Tease me like that?” he asked, letting go of me long enough to adjust himself. I’d never seen a boy adjust himself before, not on my account, and the act offended me.

“What’s going on with your pants?” I asked. “Because I’m not gonna lie, you’re freaking me out right now.”

“I’m into you, Grace,” Connor said, pressing against me, so that my back was arched over the car and he was hovering over me. “My body’s just reacting to you. That’s all. You feel that? That’s you. You do that to me.”

“Stop it!” I screamed. But I was too late. Connor had me pinned between the fender and the mirror and I had to fight if I was going to get him off me. “Let me go!”

“Shhh...” Connor’s breath was hot against my neck as he put his mouth on it. I tried pushing him away, but he was stronger than me, and he wouldn’t budge. He moaned, moving his hips against my pelvis and kissing the taut nerves along the side of my neck.

“No!” I cried out. “Stop it! Get off me!”

“Oh, come on,” he said, lifting his head and looking into my eyes. “You want this too. I know you do.”

“Want what?” I asked. “You acting like a beast?”

“You asked for this, Grace,” Connor said, grabbing me by the neck. “You may say you don’t now, but you sure wanted it the other night. You practically raped me on that bench. It would have happened if your sister hadn’t come out.”

“That’s not true! I kissed you, that’s all!” The maniacal carnival music roared in my ears, wild and confounding, and I put my hands on his chest and pushed. He stumbled back and I moved away from the car and circled around him. “I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask you to climb all over me like a monkey. I’m not a carnival ride! I’m not here for your enjoyment! I have every right to say no. It’s my choice. I am not. Not. A carnival ride. You understand?”

“Don’t get mad,” Connor said, grabbing my arm and tugging at me. “Come here.”

“Don’t touch me!” I pulled my arm out of his grasp and started to walk away, but the faster I walked the faster he walked, always close behind me, close enough to grab me again if he decided to. “Leave me alone. I’m going home.”

“Why are you being so cold again, Grace?” he asked. “Why can’t you just let yourself enjoy your youth?”

I kept walking, throwing my words into the air before me, refusing to look at him. “For your information, that was not enjoyable!”

“Stop! Come back!” he yelled after me, his voice getting smaller and smaller as I kept walking faster and faster. “I’m sorry! Please! I’m sorry!”

Chapter 13

The screen door was cold as was the metal knob on the front door, but the house was warm, and the difference in temperature made my head spin for a second. I closed my eyes and when I opened them my father was standing in the doorway to the lighted kitchen holding a piece of toast in his hand. “What happened?” he asked, swallowing before speaking.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Eight thirty!” Guelita yelled from the kitchen. It was obvious they were having an after-dinner snack. Guelita always ate early, between five and six, but she often had a snack before settling in her room for an evening of raunchy telenovelas.

“Why are you home so early?” my father asked, biting into the toast.

“I got sick,” I said.

“Sick!” Guelita hollered. I heard a chair scrape the linoleum floor and then her walker click-click-clicked vigorously until she was standing in the doorway behind my father. “What kind of sick?”

“I threw up,” I mumbled, pressing a hand to my flushed face. “From the rides.”

“I got a pill for that.”

“No, that’s okay,” I said. “I just need a shower. My clothes stink, and I need to wash my hair.”

My father came around to inspect my face. “You do smell a little rank,” he said. “Let me see.”

“Should I get my pills?” Guelita asked.

My father lifted my chin and pulled down on my lower lid to look at the underside of my eyes. “Nah, she’ll be all right. She just needs to sleep it off. I’ll check up on you when I get in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I asked. “Where are you going?”

“Hunting,” my father said. “Gonna meet up with a buddy in Uvalde. He’s bringing a big group to the lodge and asked if I wanted to earn some extra cash for the holidays. You know me. I’d do it for free, but for money is even better. I’ll see you all tomorrow night. I’ll be the one with a wad of cash in my hand. Okay?”

I shook my head and he stepped aside. I went into the bathroom and took a long shower, luxuriating under the faucet until the warm water started getting cold. When I got out, I toweled my hair dry and lay in bed in shorts and a t-shirt. I tried going to sleep but I couldn’t. Every time I opened my eyes I saw that the time on the clock was slowly slipping away.

At ten thirty, I lay on my side, playing with the sleek paper bracelet that wouldn’t come off even after getting wet and wondered what Lici was doing. Had she gone to the carnival after work, or was she just hanging out with some guy somewhere? I needed to talk to her, tell her she’d been right about Connor, apologize to her. If anyone could understand what I was going through, what I was feeling, it was Lici. Maybe, if I went looking for her, we could talk. Maybe this whole thing with Connor had happened for a reason, so my sister and I could start over and eventually get close again.

I sat up, touched my forehead, and then threw off my covers because I was feeling too hopeful to stay in bed. The mall had closed, but Lici was probably still cleaning up. If I hurried, I could catch her before she took off with some guy. I could tell her I needed to talk. I could convince her to stay home with me for the night. We could hang out in my room and just...talk.

I slipped into a pair of jeans, threw on my hoodie, and rushed out the door. I trotted up Wilson street, crossed over to Williams at King David, and hiked up the hill all the way to the darkened parking lot. I was thinking about what I would say to her, when I saw Lici's beat up Nova parked halfway up the empty parking lot.

I slowed down. My legs were suddenly stiff as boards and my muscles tensed as I walked toward her car. In truth, I couldn't be sure it was Lici's car, so I approached it quietly. It wasn't until I got close enough to read the license plate that I realized that one, it was her car, and two, it was moving. Not running, like with the engine on, but physically shaking, and there were strange noises coming from it, like whoever was inside it was having a wrestling match.

I thought about it for a moment, and then, swallowing hard, I walked closer to the car until I was a few feet away from the passenger door. I leaned over and looked inside, trying to see past the foggy windows.

A hand slammed against the glass and I screamed, jumping back at the sight of that hand pressed hard against the window. The noises ceased. The car stopped moving, and the hand disappeared into the dark interior.

I stood breathless in the parking lot. My heart hammered in my chest, but I couldn't move because I knew who that hand belonged to, and the thought of it was irreconcilable in my mind. Why? My mind kept asking, but there was no answer.

For a while, nothing happened, and then the couple inside the car moved, shifted around each other. The window rolled down a few inches and Lici said, "Go home, Grace."

"Why?" I asked her voice because her face was hidden in the shadows and I couldn't see her.

"Go home," she said again, her voice tired, waning.

“No,” I said, my heart slowing down, no longer roaring in my ears. “I want to talk to him.”

“There’s no point. Just go home, Grace,” Lici said. Then she rolled the window up again. My face flushed. I could feel the redness rising over my cheeks, my nose. My eyes burned, but I wouldn’t let the tears win.

“I want to talk to him!” I yelled.

I stood there a good two minutes before realizing he wasn’t going to talk to me. Nothing moved inside the car. They both just lay there on the tilted seat, looking like two dead bodies, one on top of the other.

I turned away. The tears brimmed over my eyes, but I rubbed them away with the palm of my hand as I forced myself to walk away from the car and the horrible thing I had just witnessed.

Somewhere behind me, I heard a car door slam, and then feet trotting toward me, so I broke into a run. I pumped my arms and legs, using every ounce of energy I had to get away from him.

“Grace, wait!” he called out. “Please. Stop.”

I kept running without looking back, but I didn’t get very far. He was taller than me, and naturally his longer legs let him catch up to me. He pulled at my arm, and I slowed down, stopped, caught my breath.

He reached for me. I could see the fly of his pants was open. “Get away from me!” I said.

“Please,” he said. “Let me explain.”

“Zip up your pants,” I said, and I started to walk away again.

He followed me, his bare feet almost silent against the pavement. “Why won’t you let me explain?”

“Because you’re not worth my time,” I said, quickening my pace.

“Wait, please. We need to talk,” Connor called out from behind me. “I love you, Grace,” he continued, but I didn’t answer. I was close to the exit, so I ran down the incline, all the way past the intersection of Brazos Street. I didn’t slow down until I reached our gate, where I threw up one more time before I went into the yard and walked slowly up the walkway.

Chapter 14

Somewhere in the middle of the night, I woke up with a start. The lids of my eyes felt heavy, like they were too thick to move on their own and needed me to pry them open. I reached up and touched them. They were huge, thick and spongy and completely foreign. I pressed my fingertips down on them.

I got out bed. Leaving my room, I crossed the hallway quietly past the bathroom, padding slowly past Lici's room, until I got to the kitchen. At the sink, I opened the cold water-faucet and put a fresh napkin under the trickle of water, soaking it thoroughly before turning the water off. I stood in the dark kitchen pressing that cold wet napkin onto my eyes, trying to stop them from hurting for a while before deciding to go back to my room.

As I walked past the kitchen window, I saw that Lici's car was parked in its usual spot under the mesquites at the end of the property. I opened the door, stepped out into the cold night and looked at the car.

I walked down the steps, breathed in the night air, and looked at the sliver of a moon hanging low in the sky between the trees and the outline of houses in the neighborhood behind us. I walked away from the house toward the car until I was standing right beside it, right beside the passenger window, and I saw his hand again, plastered against the glass, anchoring him as he pumped vigorously into my sister. His pale buttocks clenched, his back arched, the muscles of his neck corded, his face contorted like nothing I'd ever seen before, like nothing I recognized of him.

I turned away from the vision replaying itself in my head, and started to walk away when a strong wind rustled through the trees, making the weeds growing around the pile of rocks bend

sideways. I held onto my hair, pulled it back, away from my face and watched the unwanted shrubs arch themselves to the left, exposing the rocks behind it.

I reached down and grabbed the nearest rock. It was big as my fist, rough and coarse. I closed my hand around it, enjoying the way its jagged edges threatened to pierce my skin, expose my flesh. Then, because it felt good, I turned around and threw the rock at Lici's car. It fell short of the front windshield, hitting the rim of it before bouncing off the passenger side with a weak thud.

I turned back to the pile of rocks, picking up one rock after another and throwing them with all my might at the front of Lici's car. Somewhere in the middle of the attack the windshield gave way. The rock cracked the glass and then bounced off, falling by the wayside.

I didn't let that deter me. I didn't stop pelting the car until the whole front windshield shattered and rocks flew through because there was nothing there, no foggy glass, no reflection, nothing to protect the passengers from the elements, nothing but a gasping, gaping hole right down the middle of the car.

Breathless and spent, I tossed the final rock aside and walked back to the house. I opened the front door and went straight to my room. I laid down on my bed and buried my cold face in the pillow. Then I shifted my face sideways and allowed myself to breath. I kept my eyes shut until my whole body relaxed and sleep came and carried me far, far away.

I didn't wake up right away. The sound of Lici pounding on my door told me she was raving mad, but it took me a few minutes to realize I was to blame. There was no getting around it, so I turned over on my bed and thought about what to do. I looked over at the window and considered using it to escape. But where would I go that she couldn't find me?

"Grace! You little cunt!" she yelled. "Get out here! Now!"

“Shut up!” I yelled, sitting up and rubbing my eyes with my fists. My shoulders ached and my muscles were sore, but my palms hurt the most. I opened my hands. My left palm was fine, but there were tiny little pin-pricks inside my right hand. I touched them with my fingertips, scrapping tiny bits of debris off the little wounds while Lici worked herself into a frenzy outside my room calling me every nasty word she could think of.

“You’re going to pay for this!” she yelled, kicking the door to make her point.

I could hear Guelita trying to talk sense into her, but she wasn’t listening. “Stop it, Lici,” my grandmother begged. “Whoever did this is long gone. You’ll see. Grace had nothing to do with this.”

“Go away!” I screamed, but that only made Lici kick the door harder, many more times, again and again.

“Come out here!” she kept yelling. “Come out here and face me!”

Guelita shushed her loudly. “Stop it! Call the police. That’s what you need to do. Make a report and then file a claim. The insurance will take care of it.”

“I don’t have insurance,” Lici said. “It’s not my car, remember?”

“Then call Jose,” Guelita said. “Tell him the car was vandalized. He’s probably got insurance on it.”

“He doesn’t,” Lici said. “He never did before, why would he have it now.”

“Because it’s the law,” I called out.

Lici stopped hitting and kicking at my door. I could hear her thinking. “Jose didn’t even care about his own son. You think he cares about the law?”

I got out of bed and opened the door. “Then call one of your boyfriends,” I said, pushing Lici out of my way and walking hurriedly past her. Before she could recover, I knifed between Guelita’s walker and the bathroom door to get out of the hall and into the kitchen.

“Why should I make them waste their money when this is your responsibility?” Lici asked, following me into the kitchen. “You know you did this. Don’t deny it.”

I reached for the dish detergent and put a dab on my right palm. “I’m not denying it,” I said as I ran the hot water and gently washed my injured hand. As I looked down, I stopped to examine the scar tissue on the back of my burnt hand. “It’s just a broken window, Lici. Just glass and maybe some rubber or felt edging.”

“And dents. Dents! Dents! And more dents! There’s damage all over the side panels and on the roof and the hood. How am I supposed to pay for that? I don’t have that kind of money, Grace.”

“¡Ay, Graciela! Your father’s not going to like this.” Guelita shook her head and turned away. She shuffled over to the table and sat down in front of the window.

I turned off the water, reached for a napkin, and dried my hands as I walked around Lici and went to sit on the other side of the table, opposite Guelita. From where I was sitting by the window, I could see the damage to Lici’s car.

“I mean it, Grace,” Lici warned taking the keys from her purse and weighing them in her hand. “You need to help me fix it. I can’t drive it like that. It’s not legal to drive with a damaged windshield. It’s not safe.”

“I’m sure safety is a big concern for you,” I said. “Here’s a question for you. Did you make him wear a condom? Is that why he wouldn’t get out to talk to me? He had business to take care of?”

“Stop it!” Lici said, looking down at the keys in her hand, letting her hair fall over it, hiding behind the cascade of curls amassed around her cheekbones.

“Condom?” Guelita asked. “Is that one of those contraptions you buy at the drug store? For intercourse?”

“Yes, Guelita,” I said. “It’s contraception, so she doesn’t get pregnant again.”

“You pregnant again, Lici?” Guelita asked.

Lici lifted her eyes to my grandmother and shook her head. “No.” she whispered. Then she turned and glared at me. “I don’t have money for this, Grace. You know I don’t.”

“Well, there’s always prostitution,” I said. “Making enough money to fix a windshield should be a cake walk for you. How much would that be? One, two, three jobs at the most. Don’t sell yourself short, Lici. You can do this.”

“You bitch!” Lici hurled her keys at me. The heavy metal hit me across the temple and bounced off, sliding across the floor somewhere under the table. I screamed and grabbed at my face. Blood, warm and bright red, oozed down my arm. I watched it trickle down the length of my forearm.

Lici ran out of the kitchen, grabbed her purse from the end table, and slammed the front door behind her. Guelita opened the window and yelled out, “Lici. Where are you going? You can’t drive that thing!”

“I’m going to catch the bus,” Lici said as she ran out into the yard and toward the street. “I’m late for work.”

Lici walked out of the kitchen without even bothering to look at my face or the injury she had caused. She picked up her purse from the coffee table and ran out of the house. My grandmother cringed as she heard the door slam, then she looked at me and said, “We need to put

something on that wound. It's not big enough for stitches but we should put some of those little strips on it so you don't get a scar. Bring me the medicine kit. I'll take care of it."

"No. It's all right," I said, getting up from the table and putting my cup in the sink. "I'll take care of it."

I got up and walked over to the restroom down the hall from my bedroom. The cut just above my eyebrow was deeper than I'd expected. I pressed on it gingerly with a piece of folded gauze I'd dipped in brown iodine, the kind you get at the farmacia in Piedras Negras, letting the medicine seep into the wound. It didn't sting as much as it pulsed to life when I removed the gauze and let it breathe for a moment pressing it closed with my index finger and thumb and applying four butterfly strips across it to seal the wound shut. Hopefully, it wouldn't get infected. At that point, I didn't care about a scar. Nothing that had ever transpired between Lici and I in the last few months would ever be same again, not my hand, not forehead, not our relationship.

Back in my bed, I plopped down on my bed and looked at the old curtains on the window. They were the same curtains that had been there all my life, since before my mother died, old white lace that had turned a dull beige-grey. But I didn't want to think about my mother or the old curtains or anything else in that neglected house anymore. I was tired of being there, trapped in that room with my thoughts, so I got up and picked up the red backpack and cleaned it out, dumping last semester's books and journals aside, on the floor, beside my nightstand because I didn't want to think about school again until the new semester started in late January.

I open the closet, pulled sweaters and t-shirts off the rack and stuffed them into the backpack. I took several pairs of jeans from my dresser, rolled them up and forced them inside over the underwear and bras from my nightstand.

“You go see you Mami.” Alexander stood in the corner of the room to the left of the door. He was wearing a red jumper and his little red shoes. He looked a little worried as he watched me shove things into my backpack.

I stopped and thought about what to tell him. How do explain to a two-year-old that you have to go, that you’re too messed up to stay there, playing with him. “Yes,” I said. “I am. Are you going to be okay? You’re not upset, are you?”

Alexander put his hands inside the front flap of his jumper like it was a big pocket and nodded. “No. You go see you Mami now.”

“My Mami?” I asked, shocked at the way he’d said it, not a question, but more like a statement, like it made sense to him. Of course, it would be logical to him that the only reason I might want to leave him would be to go see my mother, since he’d always been told my mother was not with us, that she lived somewhere else, somewhere he couldn’t visit. “No,” I said, going to sit on the bed to face him. “I’m not going to see...listen. I’m just leaving for a little while, okay? I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

“Okay.” Alexander walked over to the window. He put his little fingers on the window sill and anchored himself there before putting his chin between his hands. He was watching something intently outside, and ignored me as I moved around the room, gathering the rest of my things. I stood in the middle of the room, with my hand holding the backpack strap firmly over my shoulder, wondering what to say to him.

“Alexander?” I called out, quietly. He lifted his head and turned around to look at me. There were tears in his big brown eyes, and I dropped the backpack. It thudded beside me on the floor and I stepped forward.

“Don’t go!” Alexander turned back to the window. “You stay! Here. With me. Yes?”

My heart was breaking. I wish it was possible, to stay in the room with Alexander for the rest of my Christmas break, but, the truth was that I was suffocating. I didn't know where I was going, I only knew I couldn't stay there, afraid of going outside for fear of running into Connor in the yard, much less letting Lici taunt me and abuse me even one more time. I needed to get out and I needed to do it right away, before I talked myself out of it.

Alexander wasn't real. He wasn't my responsibility any more than Lici or my grandmother or my father were. I had one responsibility, and that was to myself. I needed to put some space between me and my sister. I needed room to think. I needed room to breathe.

I picked up my backpack and headed out. "Good bye, Alexander." I said as I closed the door behind myself. Guelita was in her room, so I didn't have to explain anything to her as I left the house. I left a note for my father, telling him I was all right. I made up some story about going over to a friend's house in Cotulla and I'd be back after the Christmas break. He'd be upset, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. The one that was going to be mad was Lici. She was going to go bonkers when she figured out I took her car.

As I drove away, Alexander was standing in the window, watching me pull the car up to the house from the back of the property. I stopped, looked at him, and threw him a kiss, but he just disappeared, slipped behind the curtains and I didn't see him again.

Chapter 15

I wanted to disappear for a while, so I headed for the border. The customs officer who took my money at the international bridge took one look at the broken windshield and let out a long, low whistle. “That’s quite a bruiser you got there,” he said, referring to the broken windshield. I reached up and touched the bandage on the left side of my face, adjusting my hair so that it covered most of it. “Going into Piedras to get it fixed?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s the law.”

“You know where to go?” he asked.

I winced. “No. Not really, but I have an uncle in town I could ask.”

“Well, if he can’t help you, there’s a really good place just past the Plaza de Toros on the Avenida, past the meat market. Green place, with a big blue mirror on the side of the building, El Espejo. You can’t miss it. They have their own installer. Guy named Jorge. He’s got a limp and he’s old, but he and his son will get you all fixed up for less than half of what it would cost you on this side.”

I nodded and kept my eyes on the arm lift, waiting for him to press the button so I could go through. “Thank you,” I said. “I’ll remember that.”

“Good luck!” The customs agent lifted the bar and I drove through the barricade and onto the international bridge. Once I was on the other side, I parked at the plazita and got out long enough to visit the Santuario of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.

The chapel was quiet, with only a few lost souls sitting in silent prayer. I scooted into the last bench, kneeled down, and closed my eyes in prayer. The scent of burning candles mingled with the ghost of spent incense and dead flowers brought tears to my eyes and I begged the Virgensita to forgive me for all my sins, including hurting Connor enough to make him fornicate

with my sister, who I'd hurt more than anyone else in the world, in the worst possible way a sister could hurt another sister. I just couldn't let myself off the hook that easy, so I said ten Lord's Prayers and ten Hail Marys. When I was done praying, my eyes were swollen again and I had a dull headache. I wiped my face with my sleeve and crossed myself before I left the church.

Outside, morning had turned to noon, and street vendors were hocking their delicacies up and down the sidewalks. I purchased an ear of corn, glistening on a stick, steaming and slathered with butter and cream.

I didn't wait to eat it there, but jumped back into Lici's car and drove with one hand as I ate my elote. When I was done, I tossed it out the window at an intersection on the outskirts of Piedras Negras and drove all the way out to my mother's ancestral home, San Vicente, a tiny municipality along highway 57 where I remembered her mother had lived when she was still alive, way before I was born, when my mother was a child herself.

I had seen my Guelita Estela's house more than a few times. Before my mother passed away, she would drive us out to her mother's house. She used to make me sit in the car while she crossed the street, opened the gate, and walked around looking in all the windows, remembering things she never shared with me. Things that made her cry out loud as she walked from window to window, looking more like an apparition than a real live woman.

It was dark by the time I drove through the main intersection of the village of San Vicente, past a tired old postecito and parked in front of my grandmother's estate. The ranch was nothing more than a wide patch of dirt located in the edge of the village, past the school house and the communal well. I parked in front of the tall willow tree beside the iron gate with its weeping skirt of limbs grazing the ground, raising dust as pale and light as spirits, sending it flying in tiny clouds that lifted, lingered, then rolled out into the street like fleeing souls.

I looked at the front door, with its blue painted trim sloughing away and had a strange desire to walk around the grounds and look in all the windows, the way my mother used to do every time she went there.

As I looked at my maternal grandmother's house, it occurred to me that I could stay there. *Why not?* I asked myself. *It's not like anybody's using the place. It's been abandoned for years. Who would object to that? Nobody. Nobody at all.*

I picked up my stuffed backpack and had almost made it all the way to the front door, when a young girl came out of my grandmother's house. She held onto the screen door with one hand as she looked at me standing there, staring at her. "Digame?" she asked. "Can I help you?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I must be lost. I'm at the wrong house."

The girl cocked her head. "Who are you looking for?" she asked.

"Nobody," I said. "It's just... Well, this looks like my grandmother's house. She used to live around here."

"What's her name?" the girl said. "Maybe I know her."

I pressed my lips together and took a deep breath. "Estela," I said. "Estela Moreno. I thought this was her house."

"Sí, this is her house," the girl said, putting her hand down and looking at the car behind me.

I introduced myself, explained I was the granddaughter, from her eldest child, Sara Torres, from the United States. The girl grinned. "Oh, how wonderful to meet you. We are cousins, twice removed. My name is Lucia. Lucia Ramirez," she said, extending her hand. Her smile was warm, welcoming, and she shook my hand vigorously, with gusto, not like those girls

in the states with their dangling fingertips. “Come in. Come in. Your grandmother’s in bed, but maybe this will make her get up, come to the table for some cafecito, verdad?”

“My grandmother?” I blinked, confused. “No. My grandmother is dead. She died before I was born.”

Lucia shook her head. “Dead?” she asked. Then she crinkled her nose. “Doña Estela? Oh no. Doña Estela’s not dead. She hasn’t left her bed in years, other than to take care of her personal business, but she’s not dead. It’s always back and forth with her. All day. From the shower and the urinal to the table out back and then immediately back to the bed.”

“You mean, my grandmother? Estela Moreno?” I asked. “She’s alive?”

“Yes,” Lucia said, smiling. “You want to come in? See for yourself?”

I looked around the yard and up the empty dirt road that had brought me here. A cold wind blew from the north. I remembered my mother leaving me in the car while she peeked in through the windows of this house and I shivered. “Yes,” I finally said. “Yes. I would. Thank you.”

I stood waiting for Lucia to close the door behind us and followed her in to the small living room. Lucia picked up a ball of yarn and a half-finished knitted piece with pair of knitting needles sticking out from it and placed them in a basket on the coffee table. She lifted an old newspaper off the floor and placed it beside the basket. “You must excuse the mess,” she said. “We don’t ever get any visitors.”

We went through the kitchen, where she cleared off a few knickknacks off the table and dusted off the invisible grungies off the table cloth, snapping a napkin over the table again and again until she was satisfied that it was clean and ready for visitors. Then she pinched her

fingertips together in the air and said, “un momentito, I will be right back,” and disappeared behind a curtained doorway.

She came back with another chair from somewhere in the back of the house and redid the seating arrangement around the kitchen table so that we could all have a view out the window.

“There,” she said. “That’s good, que no? A place to sit and talk to her.”

I nodded.

“Good,” she said. “Should we go get her?”

I took a deep breath and released it. “Yes,” I said, and I smiled, a panicked little smile because it was all too surreal. My grandmother—alive and well and living in the same house I’d been driven to in my childhood. It was unbelievable.

“Are you staying long?” Lucia asked.

“Staying?” I asked.

Lucia pointed to my backpack, slung behind me, hanging off my right arm. “Yes.”

“Oh.” I laughed. “Well, I considered it. When I thought nobody lived here.”

“You should stay,” Lucia smiled. “To get to know her again. That would be so good for her. It might bring her back.”

“Bring her back?” I asked.

Lucia nodded. “Yes. From the places she goes, from the past. You’ll see. Come. She’s in bed because her nights and days are upside down. But it’s late, time she woke up anyway.”

“Upside down?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lucia’s eyebrows furrowed over, creating a small crease over her forehead.

“Backwards. I think you might say. She sleeps all day and stays up all night, talking to her invisible friends.”

“Invisible friends?” I asked, thinking about my own my tendency to conjure up Alexander, to pretend he was alive so I wouldn’t feel so lonely—so empty.

“Abuela,” Lucia whispered as we entered the darkened bedroom. “Abuelita...” Her voice was a song, the word a lingering lullaby. “You have a visitor...”

As the form on the bed stirred, I looked around the room. To the right, there was an old dresser with a brush and toiletries at the center of it, a metal stand with a blue spotted basin and pitcher, and, beside it, a tall, long-length mirror with a strand of scarves delicately layered one on top of the other on its stubby arms. To the left a bulky chest of drawers and a tiny drawing table with a pencil sitting on an open small spiral notebook.

“I take notes for her,” Lucia said. “When she requests it.”

I touched the open spiral. The paper was onion thin, cheap. “Notes?” I asked.

“Yes. Letters and such. I keep most of them here, inside the drawer,” she said. “Because I don’t know where to send them.”

I opened the drawer and looked inside, at the tightly bundled pieces of paper. “How sad,” I whispered.

“Not really. Most of those people are probably dead,” Lucia said, watching me sort through the notes before putting them back in the drawer respectfully.

“They’re not dead,” my grandmother said, and I turned around. My grandmother was like an ancient moth, slowly emerging from a cocoon of bedclothes. First one hand came forth, broke through the gauzy fabric like a naked, leathery wing. Then her other arm pushed past the linens. Slowly, deliberately, she pulled and tugged at the blankets until she had uncovered her pale, balding head. Frowning, she shoved her left elbow into the lumpy mattress, and, waving Lucia

away, she finally sat up in bed. “Is this your child?” she asked, Lucia, who turned around and smiled at me.

“No, Abuelita,” Lucia said. “This is not my child. I’m too young to be her mother.”

“I’m your granddaughter, Grace. Sara’s daughter,” I said, when she didn’t say anything.

My grandmother looked at something behind me. I turned around and noticed the curtain to her door was moving, as if a strange wind had suddenly come through. “Yes. Of course, of course,” my grandmother said, looking me up and down and then smoothing her frayed white hair aside. “She looks like you.”

Lucia stopped fussing with my grandmother’s bedclothes long enough to giggle. “Me?” she asked, looking up at my face. “No. She’s much prettier.”

“Did my mother ever tell you know about me?” I asked my grandmother, stepping forward, into the light that came through the window when Lucia lifted the curtains and folded them over the iron bedpost.

My grandmother Estela shifted in her bed, cocked her head and waved for me to give her my hand. When I placed my left hand in hers, she pulled on it, tugging on it and shaking it side to side, like she was testing it. Then she flipped it over and looked at my palm, examined the lines. “Floencia... Mi Flor Silvestre,” she whispered. “Same delicate petals, translucent and soft as satin.”

“Who’s that?” I asked Lucia, who shrugged and lifted her eyebrows high on her forehead.

“Could be anybody. From the past. She has Alzheimer’s or dementia. I don’t know which,” Lucia said. “It’s hard to tell.”

“Who are you?” my grandmother asked, when I smiled down at her.

“Your granddaughter, Graciela.” I introduced myself. “Sarita’s daughter.”

My grandmother frowned, slapped my hand. She lifted it to her lips, kissed it, and then pressed it against her cheek. “No. No. You are my little wildflower,” she said. “My first moon. My first star. My first love.”

“No, Doña Estela. This is your granddaughter. She came to visit you, from El Aguila, del otro lado,” Lucia said, putting her hand on my grandmother’s shoulder and leaning in to talk to her. “Will you get up and come to the table? Will you sit and have some cafecito with her?”

“Do we have goat cheese?” she asked. “She looks hungry. We need some goat cheese and some bolillos. We need to feed her something hearty, something to nourish her. She’s real, you know.”

“I know she’s real,” Lucia said. “I saw her drive up.”

“Good.” My grandmother let go of my hand and pushed the covers off herself. “Give me a minute,” she said. “I have to make myself presentable.”

“You can go look at the guest room if you like, while I help her get dressed,” Lucia said pointing to the curtained doorway. “It’s to the left, at the end of the hallway. It’s not much, but you can stay there if you like.”

I left my grandmother’s bedroom and went straight to the back of the room. The room Lucia was talking about was an attachment to the house. By the looks of the dull, azure paint, it was hard to determine which part of the house was older. Maybe this long suite-like building, with a bathroom at one end and a six-inch cement trough with the water spout coming out of the wall beside it, was once the main house and my grandmother’s bedroom and kitchen were the additions.

There was no use speculating, because it didn't matter. I was just glad to see a cot at the far end of the room, under the wide windows, next to the back door. It was a lovely little nest, but by the looks of it, it wasn't vacant. There were some clothes folded neatly on top of the armoire to the left of the cot. One of its doors was slightly ajar and there were dresses hanging in wire hangers inside it.

"I'll move my things if you decide to stay," Lucia said. She was standing just inside the door to the hallway.

I shook my head. "Oh, no. I wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

"No. No. Está bien," she said. "I can easily move my things out of your way. There is another cot. I can set it up in the kitchen. Here, you have a heater, but in the kitchen, I can turn on the wooden stove. It's no inconvenience at all."

"I can sleep in the kitchen," I said. "It's just for a few days. A week at the most."

Lucia waved the idea away. "No. You are the guest. You should stay here, where there is more comfort. Come. Let's go have some goat cheese. It is divine, fresh and light and just beautiful. Your grandmother's favorite meal. It will make you want to stay longer, maybe even the rest of your life."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," I said, following Lucia out of the room and into the hall, where the portraits on the wall hung one right after the other, faces I didn't recognize, spirits from a past I did not know.

Chapter 16

That evening, Lucia announced that she was leaving.

“Leaving?” I asked. “Why?”

“I’ll be gone by morning,” Lucia placed a small plate with a glistening cheese ball in the center of the small round table between us. “I’ll have to leave before the sun comes out if I want to get a good seat on the bus out of town. I haven’t been home in almost two years, and since you are here for a few days, I thought I could go visit my family in Nava. Would that be okay with you?”

“But I don’t know anything about her medical care,” I said.

Lucia pulled out a chair and sat down next to me. She took my plate and put a corn tortilla on it. “Have some of this cheese. The gardener’s wife comes over once a week so see her husband. She makes a batch of tortillas and puts them there, in that cubby.” Lucia pointed behind her, to a small square bread box on the counter. “She makes this cheese and hangs it up there,” she pointed at the corner of the kitchen with her knife. “For him to eat when it’s ready.”

I took the knife she offered me and dug into the cheese, scooping a bit of the white creamy substance and putting it on my tortilla. It was delicious, delicate but firm, like nothing we had in the states. “It’s good,” I said, after I swallowed. “Does she take any medicines?”

“No,” Lucia watched me take another bite of the cheese taco. “She stopped taking her pills years ago, just refused to take them. Said they made her sick. Something about her age, she just doesn’t tolerate them anymore.”

I looked toward the bedroom, and thought about her condition, the way she had laid there, all wrapped up in her blankets, sleeping the day away and talking to people who weren’t

there. “I’m not sure I can take care of her. I don’t know what she likes or doesn’t like to eat. And honestly, I don’t know how long I’ll be here.”

“She’s not a lot of work,” Lucia began. “She gets around by herself. Takes a shower by herself. Does her own toileting. All you do is make sure she gets something to eat when she finally gets up. It would just be for a few days, three or four. I’d be back by Friday evening at the latest.”

I looked around the kitchen. It was basic stuff. A white, thin refrigerator, a small gas stove, baskets of fresh fruits hanging from the ceiling beside the deep sink and a tiny herb garden on the windowsill. “Where’s the nearest store?”

“There’s a postecito up the street, on the corner, for minor things, but down the street and to the left, two blocks east, there’s an almacén. You can get almost everything you need there. Even things like socks and brooms. The floors get cold at night, so you’ll want to wear socks when you go to bed. If Don Maldonado, the owner, doesn’t have what you need, he can get it for you in one or two days.”

“When does she eat?” I asked. “And what does she like? Does she eat in bed or does she come in here?”

Lucia smiled, and patted my hand before standing up. “She eats in here, but not until she’s ready. She’s got a weird schedule. Her days and nights are switched around.”

“What do you mean, switched around?” I asked. “Like she’s up all night?”

Lucia laughed. The sound was low and light, like a tiny bell ringing somewhere deep in her throat. “She’s nocturnal,” she admitted. “Like a kid on summer vacation. Come. It’s time to help her up.”

I followed Lucia into my grandmother's darkened bedroom. She was sitting up, looking out the window at the setting sun through the sheer curtains. Her cloudy grey eyes focused on us when she heard Lucia calling her. "Doña Estela, it's time to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Hmm, sí," my guelita said, and she started to push the covers away, pulling delicately at the thick woolen blankets until she was free of them. I watched her move her legs slowly, until she was facing us. Then she reached up and Lucia offered her a hand so she could steady herself as she stood up. The whole process was simple. She didn't need assistance, and she didn't have a walker like my paternal grandmother at home, but she was fragile looking, rail thin and bony, her face angular and sharp looking.

Guelita Estela walked quietly beside Lucia into the kitchen. She sat at the chair I pulled out for her and put a napkin on her lap while Lucia reached into a basket on the counter and brought out a brown egg. "These are fresh. There's a chicken coup out back with a handful of chickens. They don't lay more than two or three eggs a day. The gardener brings them in every few days," Lucia turned on the stove and put a small frying pan on the burner. She fried an egg and I served it on a saucer, placing it in front of my grandmother.

"Does the gardener live here too?" I asked. "Will I meet him in the morning?"

Lucia shook her head and reached into the basket for another egg. "No. He lives out back, in a small shed. But you won't see much of him. He keeps to himself," she said. "You want some eggs?"

"No," I said, looking down at my half-eaten cheese taco. "This is plenty. I'm not very hungry."

"Me either." She put the egg back in the basket and sat next to my grandmother. Guelita Estela hadn't started eating and Lucia scooted the cheese closer to her. "You want some of this?"

she asked, and Guelita picked up a sliver of cheese with her fork and placed it beside her fried egg.

“Eat your egg.” Lucia patted my grandmother’s delicate, pale hand gently and then put a fork in it. “Sometimes, she needs reminding,” Lucia said. “Of what we are doing.”

“Oh.” I took a bite of my taco and nodded. “This cheese is very good. I wish I knew how to make it.”

Guelita stared at her eggs. “The gardener doesn’t eat it,” she said. “Sometimes, his wife has to pull it down and toss it out to the chickens. But she always makes another one. Week after week.”

‘You should eat your huevito,” I said. “Before it gets cold.”

“I need my shawl.” Guelita Estela looked for her glasses under her plate. She patted the tablecloth and lifted the napkin off her lap. “I want to go outside.”

Lucia reached up and touched my grandmother’s shoulder. “You should eat first,” she said. “Before you go outside.” Then, looking at me, she said, “She likes to go outside to drink her coffee on the patio, after she has her first meal of the evening.”

At that first strange night breakfast, I found out everything there was no know about Guelita Estela’s habits. She got up late in the afternoon, at about six or seven, when the sun was setting because she said the sun hurt her aging eyes. She had become nocturnal first out of habit and then out of necessity. After her first meal, she had a shower and took coffee on the porch out back. She liked to walk around and talk to her plants before she came back inside. The plants would need watering on Tuesday and Thursday. Guelita ate one egg and one piece of toast every evening. She didn’t care to have anything else for *breakfast*.

For lunch, at around two o'clock in the morning, she liked to sit outside and eat something light, like a bean and cheese taco or a small avocado sandwich, which I would have to make. She enjoyed listening to the night creatures, a white owl that hunted mice on the field behind the house and watching the kittens play out in the yard. There was a new litter of kittens living under the shed and she liked watching them tumble around and chase each other in the back yard.

She took dinner inside, at the kitchen table, around five in the morning, right around sunrise and watched telenovelas in her room before going to bed. I had to make sure to turn off the lights and close the curtains while she watched TV because she liked to keep her room dark while she slept during the day.

By the time Lucia left early the next morning, taking a small suitcase with her and walking down the dark street, I knew everything I would need to know to take care of my Guelita Estela for a few days. I wasn't worried about the cooking, and it helped that she wasn't on any medication. It was the idea of turning my night and days completely around that worried me. I didn't necessarily want to get into a bad pattern like she obviously had because I still needed to get back to my life as a student when I got back to the states.

I stood watching Lucia disappear around the corner from behind the metal gate in front of my grandmother's house not knowing if she was ever coming back, but not too worried either. I was glad to be alone with my grandmother. She seemed to be very quiet, and quiet is what I needed, what I craved at that moment. Besides, I had my uncle Juan's number written in a notepad by my bed, and I could always call my father should I find myself stranded after Friday evening.

I went to sleep, telling myself I would only take a nap and then do something during the day to keep my own schedule as best I could. When I woke up, I was disoriented. I looked at the azure ceiling and tried to focus. The naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling swayed softly, as if someone had opened a door and a breeze had come into the room. I watched it for a second and then something moved in the room behind me and I jumped up in bed.

Looking around, I saw that it was a big cat, scratching at the window, trying to get inside. I pushed the bedclothes out of my way and went to open the window. “Buenos días” I said, caressing the Momma cat’s back while she danced back and forth on the windowsill.

I closed the window and went to the door. Standing on the threshold, I put my hands on the doorframe, threw back my head, stretched and yawned, and hung there like a spider monkey, letting the sun warm my face and neck. It was going to be another warm day. So far, the winter had not shown much of itself. Even the coldness of the glazed cement floor had not bothered my bare feet as I’d made my way around the house in the middle of the night.

A thud caught my attention and I looked up. The sun was high up in the sky, letting me know the day was half gone already. I squinted and found the source of the noise. Two men were tearing down the roof on the neighbor’s house. They worked quickly, pulling the old, dull shingles and tossing them on the ground off the side of the house.

I continued to hang from the doorframe, watching the men working, pulling, plucking, and tossing without regard for anything but their work. One of them whistled as he worked, and the musicality was pleasant, inconspicuous. I closed my eyes and abandoned my thoughts, just enjoying the cool air as it entered my lungs, awakened my body, and chased the sleep out of my bones.

When I finally opened my eyes again, the two men had stopped working. The older of the two was drinking water out of a small gourd, but the younger one was crouched down, holding a hammer in one hand. He looked at me intently, and I was suddenly ashamed for standing there in my nightgown. It wasn't a particularly attractive nightgown, nothing sexy or revealing. As far as nightgowns were concerned, it was rather boring and matronly, dark green and long. It covered me from neck to foot, even my arms were covered by the long, loose sleeves that buttoned at the wrists.

The stranger's dark eyes centered me. I felt pinned down, pierced through, as unable to move as one of those dead butterflies sitting behind the glass of a shadow box. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. Something about the young man's eyes held me motionless.

I smiled, but he didn't smile back. In fact, he frowned, and then he looked down at the shingles in front of him and spoke softly to his companion. The older man turned to look at me as he capped the gourd and strapped it back on his tool belt. Then he turned back to the young man, said something to him, and laughed. The young man lifted his head and snuck another look at me before turning away, giving me his back as he went back to work.

I went into the house and took a shower. The water was ice cold, but I suffered through it, washing up as fast as I could before getting out. Once I was dressed, I checked the water heater, but I couldn't figure out if it was broken. Cold showers, however, was the least of my problems. There was a whole lot of cleaning to be done around the house. There were dust bunnies and cobwebs everywhere.

I gave my room a good, thorough cleaning, and was a little disappointed to see that the young man was no longer on the roof when I went out to shake the dust out of the carpets. I threw both floor rugs over the fence at the far end of the back yard and gave them a good paliza

with the broom. I brought out an old box of powder soap I'd found under the lavatory in the bathroom and dusted the carpets with them. Then I wrestled the garden hose out of the grip of the overgrown grass and hosed them down thoroughly.

I was giving the soapy carpets another beating, trying to whack the excess dirt and grime out of them, when I heard a long, loud whistle coming from behind me. I turned around, broom held high up in the air over my shoulder to find the young roofer standing on the other side of the fence.

"Can I help?" He grinned as he pushed himself up and jumped over the fence.

I didn't answer him, just watched him stroll across the back yard toward me. He moved comfortably, like an athlete. Sunlight glistened and bounced off his brown hair. His dark eyes and generous lips synchronized a smile and showcased his bright teeth. Like something out of a telenovela, my mind said, and my heart rate accelerated. I could feel the blood rushing inside my ears.

"Here, let me have that," he said, reaching for the broom.

I pulled back. "No. I was done with it for now," I said, putting the broom down and stepping away from him. "I'll give it another scrub later today."

He moved out of my way. I started back to the house, looking down at my feet as I moved along the brambles and weeds. The gardener must be old because he sure wasn't keeping up with the work I thought as I peered sideways at the small cabin that must serve as his temporary home.

"Hey, what's your name?" the young man called out to me. I could hear him walking, following me at a distance, not too close but not too far behind me.

I reached the back porch, set the broom standing against the wall of the house, beside the blackened, mildewed, screen door. I'd have to scrub that too, tomorrow maybe, or the day after. I wanted to finish the inside first, then I could give my full attention to the two porches. Five days might not be enough to get the place in order, but I was determined to make a dent. Maybe I'd come back for a second visit on Spring Break or during the summer, before I had to leave for Alpine in the fall.

I opened the screen door and started to go inside when the young man took a long leap and jumped onto the edge of the porch, his work boots thudding loudly behind me. "You're seriously not going to tell me your name?"

"Don't you have work to finish?" I asked, my hand holding the door ajar.

"You're from the states, aren't you?" he asked. "I can tell by your accent. You don't talk like a Mexican."

I considered going inside and slamming the door behind me, but something in his easy smile stopped me from being mean. Why fight it? my mind asked. It hadn't worked with Connor. He'd crept in anyway. "What do I sound like, if I don't sound like a Mexican? And what does a Mexican sound like anyway?"

"You have a different way of pronouncing things. It's not as smooth as it should be. I can't explain it," he said. "It's like you've lost the music in the language." Then, because I didn't say anything, he added, "Don't get me wrong. It's not bad. It's just different."

"Okay," I said. "Anything else?"

The young man smiled again, that generous, easy smile that lit his eyes and made me think of Alexander when he found an insect in the yard. "Yes," he said, and he pushed his thumbs into the belt loops of his work pants. "Your name."

I sighed and fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Graciela,” I said, and then I opened the door the rest of the way and stepped up and into the house. When the door snapped shut behind me, I turned around. He was still standing there on the porch, staring up at me.

“I’m Manuel,” he said. I nodded and closed the interior door and leaned my back against it. Placing my hands against the wood grain, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and held it. Five days, I told myself. You can keep him at bay for five days. Then you can go home. It was a promise I made to myself. A promise I intended to keep.

Chapter 17

“Lucia!” My guelita’s voice, calling me from inside the house, broke the spell and I turned around, closed the door, and rushed to get a fresh change of clothes out of my bag. “Lucia!” she called out again as I changed, zipping up my jeans and shoving my feet into my tennis shoes before heading to her room.

“I’m here,” I said. “Do you need to go to the bathroom?”

Guelita Estela cocked her head and stared at me as I crouched in front of her, reached under the bed, and put her shoes on her feet. The whole thing was vaguely familiar. It wasn’t much different than taking care of my paternal grandmother at home. “What are you doing here?” she asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, Guelita Estela looked past the rocking chair in her room. “Did you bring her with you? Is she yours?”

“Who?” I asked, looking at the rocking chair which faced away from us in front of her small television, a square, wooden console set from the 1950’s.

“Well?” she asked, pointing sideways with her thumb as she pushed her feet into her sandals. “She’s been cleaning all day. Woke me up more than a few times with her racket, but I was too tired to do anything about it.”

I heard a strange little noise and I turned around. The rocking chair was moving, back and forth it rocked, like someone was sitting in it, keeping a rhythmic pace that was much more than a simple gush of air or sweep of a breath making it sway. I stood up carefully, quietly, and watched it roll back and forth again and again.

My legs felt a little wobbly as I stepped forward and walked slowly toward the rocking chair. There was a floral back cushion on it, so I couldn’t see if there was anyone in it from behind, but I wanted—no—I needed to know who she was talking to.

At home, nobody could see Alexander but me, which made sense because he was a figment of *my* imagination. But if my maternal grandmother could see someone who had the power to sit in rocking chair and move it...well, it would mean maybe I was like her. Maybe ghosts existed and somehow she and I could see them. Maybe Alexander was *real*.

“Hello?” My voice trembled. I put my hand on the back of the chair, but when I leaned in to look over the cushions, there was no one in it. I turned around and scanned the shadows in the room. Nothing. No one else was in the room but me and my Guelita Estela.

“She definitely looks like you,” my grandmother said, looking at a point across the room, by the door. “Same hair, same hands, but there is something else, something sad, around the eyes. She misses you, I think.”

“Are you talking to me?” I asked, looking at the door. “Who looks like me?”

Guelita Estela smiled at the shadows across the room before she turned back to me. “You miss her, don’t know?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Your mother,” she said.

When I didn’t answer, Guelita turned back to the shadows and smiled. “She knows.”

“Who are you talking to?” I asked, walking over and offering her my hand so she could get up.

“She knows you miss her.” My grandmother patted my hand and then put her hands on my forearm and stood up. She didn’t put too much pressure on my arm, she just pressed lightly, steadied herself, and then started walking, shuffling slowly beside me on her way out of the room and into the bathroom.

It was dark by the time we went outside. My grandmother sat on the patio and started calling out to the kittens, pursing her lips and clicking her tongue, calling out, “¡Gatitos!” and “¡Chiquitos!” in a soft purring voice until all five kittens crawled out from under the shed and crept around on the yard, sniffing the ground and licking the dew off the thin blades of grass as they made their way toward us.

“They’re hungry,” I said. “Should I feed them?”

“They eat field mice, birds, and lizards and whatever else la gata provides for them,” Guelita Estela said, reaching down and letting a brown, striped kitten rub itself against the back of her hand. “They don’t need us. They have their mother.”

I crouched down and pet the kittens as they came to me. They wrapped themselves around me, meowling and rubbing their faces and coats against my jeans. I looked up and saw that although the roof was almost done, the house looked vacant.

“Guelita?” I asked, sitting next to my grandmother after I brought out her coffee and set it down in front of her. “Who lives there?”

My grandmother didn’t answer me right away. She petted another kitten and purred at it, calling it her consentido. “It’s hard living out here without another soul in sight,” she said, sitting back on her chair and reaching up to smooth her hair back with both hands. “Too hard.”

I looked at the house again. No telephone. No neighbors. No family. No wonder she was half mad and talked to the shadows. “Have you ever thought about crossing the border?” I asked my grandmother. “To live with us?”

“Some breakfast would be good,” my grandmother said. She picked up the spoon and stirred her coffee absently.

I turned away too. “I’ll get your egg,” I told my grandmother as I stood up and walked into the house. When I went back out, I set her plate down in front of her, laid a napkin next to it, and sat down again. She didn’t eat right away. It wasn’t until I pushed the plate closer to her that she started to cut into the single egg with her fork.

I sipped my coffee and watched Guelita move that egg around on her plate over and over again, separating the yolk from the white part, shoving one to the right and the other to the left, parking her fork between them. No matter how much I tried coaxing her to eat, Guelita just kept moving the egg parts around again and again, making a different arrangement with the two parts every time she picked up her fork to play with them.

After a while, I decided not to bother her anymore with it. “I’ll be right back,” I said, as I picked up my coffee cup and went back into the kitchen to rinse it out and put it on the rack. I’d eaten earlier, so I didn’t fix myself anything else. When I went back outside, my grandmother was gone. Her chair was pushed in and the Momma cat was hunched over on the table licking her plate clean.

I shooed the cat away and picked up the dishes. The coffee was cold, so I tossed it into the grass, and then I called out to my grandmother “Guelita?”

When I walked back inside, I heard the television murmuring softly in her room and I went in to look for her. She was sitting in the rocking chair watching reruns of an old telenovela that used to run when I was a child. Lici and I had watched it when it had first aired. We’d disliked the main character, because she was too nice, but we loved the male lead. He was very handsome and so very bad for her.

“There you are,” I said, as I stood next to my grandmother’s rocking chair. “Do you need anything else.”

My grandmother put her arms around herself. “This house is too cold,” she said. I took the throw cover off the back of the rocker and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“There,” I whispered. “Is that better?”

My grandmother didn’t answer me again. I was beginning to get used to it. I sat on the edge of her bed and watched the telenovela for a while. “I’m tired,” I finally said. “I’m not used to staying up so late. Is there anything else I can get you?” When she didn’t acknowledge me, I got up and walked toward the door. “I’m going to take a quick nap. Just holler if you need anything. Okay?”

Nothing.

“Okay.” I said. “I’ll leave my door open. Just in case.”

I fell asleep right away, sleeping so soundly that I didn’t wake up for hours. When I opened my eyes, my grandmother was shuffling quietly away from my bed. “Guelita?” I called out to her. “Did you need anything? Is it time for you to eat again?”

“We ate,” she said without looking back at me.

I sat up halfway, putting my weight on my elbows on the bed. “Is Lucia back?” I asked. “Who did you eat with?”

“Your mother,” Guelita said.

Suddenly I was very cold. A draft whistled somewhere in the house and I could feel it seeping into my bones. “Guelita? Did you go out outside?” I wondered if she’d gone back out and forgotten to close the door after herself. “Guelita?” My grandmother shuffled out of the room without answering me. I got out of bed and pushed my feet into my shoes because the cement floor was ice cold. I pulled the blanket off my bed and wrapped myself in it before I went through the house looking for the source of the cold air.

I found the window above the sink in the kitchen wide open and I reached up to close it. That's when I saw a shadow move outside. I must have screamed, because the shadow jumped away. "Graciela." Someone called out my name from the darkness. "Don't be afraid. It's me, Manuel."

"Manuel?" I stood on my tip-toes and peered out the window. "It's the middle of the night. What are you doing here?"

"I know it's late," Manuel admitted, stepping closer to the window. In the moonlight seeping through the shadows of the night I could see his dark eyes glinting up at me. "I couldn't sleep."

I looked at him for a second and then put my feet flat against the floor and turned away. Close the window—my mind whispered, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't get my hands to obey. "That's too bad," I finally said. "But there's nothing I can do about that. Go home, Manuel." Then I reached up and closed the window as fast as I could without looking at him.

Guelita laid down for a nap, but told me to leave the television on. She liked listening to it in her sleep. I went to bed too. My bones ached from the cold, so I wrapped myself like a burrito and curled up into a fetal position. When I woke up, Guelita was in the kitchen. The kittens were under her feet and the Momma cat was eating something out of a plate on the chair beside her.

"What time is it?" I slipped my hand under the Momma cat's belly, pulled her off the chair, and placed her gently on the floor between us. I picked up the plate, put it in the sink, and ran some water on it. There was cheese residue sitting on the rim. "Why didn't you wake me? I would've fixed you something warm to eat."

“The sun’s coming out soon,” Guelita said. She stood up, shuffled over to the window, and fussed with the curtains, making sure they were closed. “These curtains have to stay closed. I can’t take in those harsh rays.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I said. “I forgot to do that after I closed the window.”

“I’m going to bed,” she said. “I need to save what’s left of my eyes.”

After Guelita went to bed, I scrambled some eggs and ate them standing at the kitchen sink. Outside, I could hear Manuel and the older man talking as they worked on the roof again. For the next few days, I worked on the kitchen, cleaning out the pantry, scrubbing the refrigerator and stove inside and out, and washing every dusty dish in the cupboard. I didn’t go outside for two days, until I saw that the roof on the neighbor’s house was finished and Manuel and his friend were nowhere in sight.

I took a few dollars out of my wallet and walked down to the postecito at the corner and bought some fresh vegetables and a fragrant papaya. It was so big it would probably take days to finish eating it, and that’s if I ate it every day. The woman at the postecito asked me if I was visiting, but I didn’t feel like being social so I averted her eyes and said, “No speak Spanish.”

The girl at the cash register scoffed and rolled her eyes toward her mother, who was sweeping the tiny space around her behind the cash register. When she gave me my change, she waved at me and said, “Hasta luego, pinche pocha.”

I waved back and smiled and pretended I didn’t know what she’d just called me, but I swiped a candy bar from the counter when she looked away and slipped it into my grocery bag as I left the store.

When I got back to my grandmother’s house, I put the small bag of groceries away. Then I went out back, sat on the porch steps, and ate my candy bar, saving every chewy bit of ill-

gotten chocolate and caramel goodness before swallowing it down and another bite. When I was done, I leaned back, holding myself up with my elbows anchored on the porch. I closed my eyes and let the sun kiss my face.

I heard a noise and when I opened my eyes I saw Manuel standing on the roof, staring down at me. Neither of us smiled, only stared. I sat very still, regulating every breathe, every blink so as not to make him think I was out there doing anything but enjoying the day.

Then, without dropping his gaze, Manuel reached down, undid his toolbelt and let it drop at his feet. It rolled off the side of the roof and fell to the ground with a thud. I sat up then, intending on going inside, but before I could get up he descended, taking giant steps he bounded across the roof, slid off the side, and climbed down a ladder. When I saw that he jumped over the fence, I scrambled to my feet and ran into the house using the nearest door, which led straight into my bedroom.

He came running in after me, shoving the door open, he stood a mass of muscle and sweat hovering over me as I stood against trapped between him and the dresser. "I'll scream," I said, but he didn't seem phased by my threat.

His hands on my arms were vices, and I my throat was suddenly closed shut, so that when he said, "Te amo," and kissed me, all I could do to fight him was bite his bottom lip. I tasted blood in the kiss, but it didn't stop him. He only kissed me more deeply, wrapped his arms around me and imprisoned me in his embrace.

I put my knee on his groin and my hands on his chest and shoved with all my might. He groaned, fell off the bed. He lay on his side on the floor, grabbing at his groin. I threw my legs off the other side of the bed and rushed out of the room through the open door.

Outside, I looked at the empty street and screamed, "Help!"

Then, seeing the gardener's shed door flapping back and forth, open in the wind, I ran toward it, screaming, "Socorro, Señor! Socorro!" When I got to the shed, stood breathless at his door, I saw that the shed was empty. The gardener was not home.

I turned around and saw Manuel running toward me. I couldn't go out to the street, so I ran through the ornamental cabbage and winter flowers in full blooms. But Manuel was too fast for me. Or maybe I was too slow.

Madly, he broke through the beds of geraniums and pansies, pushed untamed locks of his hair out of his eyes. I stumbled, almost fell, but caught myself and jumped over the bed of orange chrysanthemums. He smashed pumpkins, crushed tender vines, and cornered me between the jacaranda tree and the high wooden fence. His coarse hands grazed my cheeks. His rough knuckles scraped the length of my face, and he wrapped his thick fingers around my stilted neck. I arched back, pulling away, but he forced me down, down, until I was laying on a thick bed of star-shaped purple flowers.

I blinked at the brightness of periwinkle light bouncing off the lavender blossoms of the thrift phlox, so beautiful, so soft against my bruised skin. My lips moved, made sounds I did not recognize as I cried out, and, weeping, prayed—I implored as he explored—but he was not listening. I grabbed at the thin branch of a flowering shrub, pulled, tugged. The green of pinnate leaflets gave way, collapsed, and stripped off in my hand, cutting through skin and flesh as I gripped the purple, blood-soaked blossoms, pressed them against his face, shoved them in his thick nostrils, pushed them inside his gaping mouth to cleanse the foul kiss with the perfume I held in my wounded hand.

My tears were salt. My voice as I begged for my life was muffled breath, his kiss as he silenced me was earthy loam, the grit of grime and muck. As the periwinkle light faded, dimmed,

the scent of purple blooms overwhelmed me. I couldn't feel my body. I couldn't hear my blood roaring in my ears anymore. The tears were dry in my eyes. My throat burned. But the purple scent, the smothering perfume, lingered in my lungs. It was the last thing I remember before I lost consciousness.

Chapter 18

At first, all I saw was shades of green, rays of jaded light piercing through the emerald shadows. Then the green took shape, a thousand waving hands of gold and silver green. Leaves. Trees. My head throbbed, but my mind registered the names. Leaves on trees came into focus, gained definition, and I knew that I was lying in a garden, looking up at the top of a tree.

I sat up and my head swam. My throat hurt and my lungs felt heavy as they toiled inside my chest to take in and redistribute the oxygen to the rest of my body. I anchored myself against the trunk of the tree and stood up. My knees shook, wobbled under me, and I thought I would throw up from the dizziness.

I looked up toward the house and took a step forward, but my head swam again and I lost control. I fell forward, braced myself with my hands, but I didn't quite catch myself because I felt my face hit the ground hard. "Hold on," a man said, and I felt his hand on my shoulder, turning me over gently. "I got you, mija," the elderly man whispered, his voice calm, soothing. "Just put your arm around my shoulder, like this." He put my arm across his shoulder and around his neck. "Now hold on. Can you hold on? You have to help me. You have to hold on."

I couldn't hold on very well. My body wouldn't do what I asked it to do, so he put one arm around my back and the other one under my knees and lifted me up, slowly, carefully.

"Who...?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I just saw you right now. I don't know anything."

"Who...are you?" I asked.

"I am Jose, el jardinero," he said, and he started walking, hauling me back to the house. I lay my head against his shoulder and let him carry me into my room and lay me down on the cot.

He called out, into the interior of the house, loudly, as he stood over me. “Doña Estela! Doña Estela! Your granddaughter is hurt!”

I turned sideways to look at him standing by the door that led to the rest of the house and the room started spinning again. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, my grandmother was sitting on the side of the cot beside me, holding my face in her hands and looking intently into my eyes.

“Oh, good. She’s back,” Jose whispered from behind her.

Guelita Estela patted my cheek. “Mija? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” I said. “But my head hurts. Everything hurts.”

“Do you remember what happened?” a strange voice asked, and I turned to the left and saw that a short, thick-set man in a wrinkled police uniform was standing beside the gardener.

“He chased me,” I whispered.

“Who?” the police officer said. “Do you remember who chased you.”

“He caught me,” I said. “He was too strong. Too fast. I couldn’t close the door.”

“His name,” Guelita Estela said. “Who was it? Who caught you?”

Hot, angry tears started welling in my eyes as the memory of the attack came flashing back, and I blinked them away. “That boy. On the neighbor’s roof.”

“The neighbor’s boy?” the police officer scribbled on a notepad with his pencil. “Do you know his name, Señora?”

Guelita Estela shook her head. “The neighbors don’t have a son. They don’t have any children.”

“Manuel...” I whispered.

The police officer leaned over me. “What?” he asked.

“Manuel.” I took a deep breath and let it out. It felt like a chore, breathing, staying focused. “He said his name was Manuel.”

“So you knew him.” The police officer stopped scribbling. “And how did you know him? Is he your boyfriend?”

“No!” I put my hand down and tried to sit up. “He was working on the house next door. That’s all—that’s all I know.”

It took me a while to explain the circumstances of Manuel’s attack. My grandmother brought me a glass of water. I sipped at it every few minutes while I tried my best to answer the police officer’s questions. He grilled me until I was so exhausted that I thought I would pass out again.

“I’m tired,” I told my grandmother. “I want to go home now.”

“You can’t let her leave,” the police officer told my grandmother. “She has to stay here for a while. We need her to be available, to identify her aggressor when we catch up with him.”

“Do you think you’ll find him soon?” Jose asked from the other side of the room, where he’d sat down on a folding chair while the officer interviewed me.

The officer tapped his pencil on his pad. “We have his name. We know who he worked for. Should be easy to trace. It’s a matter of days, I think. She should rest until then. She needs to recover.”

“And then?” my grandmother asked, looking up at the heavy policeman. “What happens when you catch him?”

“Depends,” the police officer said.

“Depends?” my grandmother turned to look at him. “Depends on what?”

The policeman took a breath and let it out quickly. “On what he says, Señora.”

My grandmother looked back at me, and then something hardened in her. It started in her eyes and moved down to her nose, making her nostrils flare even as her lips thinned. “And what does that mean, exactly?”

“Well, I’m not sure.” The policeman shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He pulled at the lapels of his shirt and pressed them down before running his hand flat against the front of his shirt, as if he was trying to press it with his fingertips. “There are several ways this could go. He might admit his guilt right away. Then again, he might say this was something else, something more than what I have been told so far.”

“Something more?” I said. “I don’t understand. What else could he possibly say? He broke in here. I didn’t give him permission—I didn’t—”

The officer cleared his throat and looked at his notepad. “Don’t get upset, Señorita. I believe you when you say you were attacked. It’s just that I have to take his statement, and, of course, we will go from there. We will look at everything and go from there.”

When Jose and the policeman left, my grandmother got up and locked the door behind them. In the bathroom, she helped me run a bath before excusing herself. She left me alone, to tend to my bath. I slipped under the stream and let the ice-cold water just slide over me while I stood there shivering, numb and colder than I’ve ever been in my life. I’d just finished rinsing the soap off when I heard someone come into the bathroom. I stood frozen in place under the cold stream of water when suddenly, the intruder pulled the curtain back and screamed, “Cochina!”

It was my grandmother, standing a few feet away from me in her long, grey sleeping gown, her white hair, wild and disheveled, hung over her face, like a hazy curtain and she was

holding up a broom in her raised arms. “Get out of there! You filthy whore! You don’t deserve to live here!”

“Guelita!” I cried, when the first blow struck my shoulder, hard and brutal and much more forceful than I’d expect from a woman as frail as her.

“Guerca lepe! Get out!” she kept screaming as she beat me with the broom again and again. “Get out! Get out!”

Covering my breasts, I scooted around and ran out of the bathroom. I ran into my room, wet and stark naked, frantically looking for something to put on. I had just gotten a hold of a long t-shirt when she was behind me, hitting me with the broom again. “Please, Guelita,” I cried. “Stop.”

“I saw you,” she said. She stood holding the broom in the air, crying. “I saw you talking to him. You were flirting with him.”

“What’s going on?” Suddenly, Lucia was in the room, standing behind me. I had no idea she had come home early. But there she was, and I couldn’t be any more horrified by own nakedness.

“Please,” I said. “Let me get dressed.”

“What for?” Guelita screamed and she began raining blows on me again. “You’re shameless. Eres una puta. Una guila. Magdalena encarnada!”

Lucia stepped in and wrestled the broom out of my grandmother’s hands, threw it aside and held her back as she bent forward enraged. “Por favor, Doña,” Lucia begged. “Don’t hit her any more. Whatever she did. She’s sorry. Aren’t you sorry? Aren’t you?”

I didn’t answer. Tears were streaming down my face and I was trembling as I pulled my arms and head through the t-shirt and covered myself. Sniveling, I looked around for my jeans.

Lucia put her arms around my weeping grandmother and walked her out of the room. “She was flirting,” she kept crying, as she walked away. “I saw her, Lucia. I saw her talking and smiling at him in the back yard. Se sonreía. I saw her. Se sonreía.”

Putting on my jeans had made me dizzy again, and I sat on the edge of the cot waiting for the room to stop spinning. Suddenly, the muscles in my abdomen contracted and I started heaving. Nothing came out at first, but I knew it was coming. I could taste it, right there, in the back of my throat and I got up and wobbled over to the bathroom.

I sat on the floor by the toilet and threw up the water my grandmother had given me to drink earlier. Lucia rushed in and kneeled beside me. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered as she pushed my hair back and held it with her hand at the nape of my neck. “Please, don’t let them upset you. I know you’re telling the truth. Jose knows it too. We’ll testify if we have to—we’ll say whatever we have to say to make sure that pelado gets what he deserves.”

“I want to go home,” I cried. “I just want to go home.”

Lucia put her arms around me and cried with me. Then, when I was quiet again, she put a blue hand towel under the faucet, ran cold water on it, and pressed it against my face. “Come on,” she said, speaking low and soft. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“Can you help me up?” I asked. “I’m still a bit dizzy.”

“You probably have a concussion,” she said. She helped back to my room. “You need to rest, stay in bed. I’ll go down to the farmacia and ask them what to do. They’ll give me something for the dizziness. I’ll be back before you know it. Okay?”

“Don’t” I grabbed her arm as she started to leave. “What if...”

“She won’t. I won’t let her,” Lucia said. “I’ll wait until she’s asleep to go to the farmacia. Okay?”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

Lucia fluffed the pillows and set them behind me on the cot. “Now close your eyes and rest. Please.”

Chapter 19

Lucia closed the door and left me alone in that room. I closed my eyes and told myself not to think about what had happened. I must have fallen asleep because, when I woke up, Lucia was holding my hand and soothing me, saying, “It’s all right. You’re okay, now.”

I looked around the room, disoriented. “I was dreaming,” I whispered.

“It sounded more like a nightmare,” Lucia said, sitting back in the cot.

“Was I screaming?” I asked.

Lucia shook her head. “No, more like whimpering.”

“Sorry.”

I didn’t tell Lucia what the dream was because I was foggy on the details myself. The best I could recall was a compilation of images. My mother, cringing in a dark corner, crying, begging forgiveness, saying it again, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Then my grandmother, her hair flying, her eyes shining, and the broom hitting me again and again over my shoulders and back. And then my mother again, telling me not to be mad at her, not to be upset, as she pushed me away in the back seat of our car when I was seven years old. “It’s not your fault,” she whispered as she pulled away from me. “It’s not your fault you came along. God knows I love you, Graciela. You’re my first moon. My first star.” Then she reached over to lock the door and stepped out of the car, leaving me there, to wonder why she was crying.

Lucia picked up a bag from the floor and searched through it. “How are you feeling? Still dizzy?” she asked. “The pharmacist said you could take one of these every twelve hours, and just keep movement down to a minimum until you regain your equilibrium. He said concussions usually go away on their own. All you need is rest, but to stay in bed or sit up in the sala until you’re sure you’re not going to fall and hurt yourself even further.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the pill from her and letting it sit in the palm of my hand while she went to the dresser and poured me a glass of water from the small floral pitcher she kept there.

“You’ll want to eat something light,” she said. “He told me not to give you anything heavy until we know how your body’s going to react to these.” She shook a small box of pills in her hand. “They’re muscle relaxers, for the aches and pains, but he said they also help you sleep. I’m thinking it might help with the nightmares. Do you want one now or later, before bedtime?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Well, he did say to take these with food,” Lucia said, reading the instructions on the package and then putting it back in the bag. “So, how about I make you some caldito? Then you can take one. What do you prefer? Chicken or beef?”

Nobody had cooked for me since I was a child, since Guelita Rosa first came to live with us, and I felt a little overwhelmed by the idea that Lucia was willing to make caldo just for me.

“Chicken,” I said, and before I could do anything about it, tears started rolling down my face. I tried to wipe them away, to control myself, but the emotional wave that had brought them on was a force onto itself and I couldn’t stop crying. “I’m sorry,” I mumbled and took another swig of water from the glass in my hand.

“Oh, it’s okay,” Lucia said. “You’ve been through a lot. Why don’t you go sit out front, on the porch, and wait for me while I put together the caldo.”

“No!”

I hadn’t meant to speak so forcefully. I just wasn’t ready to sit out there. The scene in the garden was too fresh and just the thought of being outdoors made me want to throw up.

“Oh my God,” Lucia whispered. “Forgive me. I wasn’t thinking. You don’t have to go outside. You can sit in the kitchen with me if you like.”

“I need to lay down,” I said. “My head still hurts.”

“Okay. I’ll come check on you after I put the caldo on the stove.” Lucia stood up. She took the bag of medicine and placed it on the dresser on the way to the door. “Call if you need anything. Okay?”

“Yes.” I nodded and laid back down, laying sideways on the cot and pulling the baby blue sheet over my shoulder.

Lucia closed the door behind her and I closed my eyes. When I woke up again, she was back in the room. She was holding a small, wooden tray in front of her and smiled when I rubbed my eyes and blinked up at her. “Buenas tardes, Bella Durmiente,” she cooed. “Did you have a good nap?”

“Hi.” I shook off the bed sheet and sat up in bed. “How long was I sleeping?”

Lucia put the tray on my lap and waited until I had a good grip on it before sitting down next to me. “About two hours,” she said. “As long as it took to cook that. You hungry?”

“Yes,” I said. “That concussion medicine put me right out. I don’t remember anything after you left.”

“Sleep’s good for you,” she said. “Eat some caldo.”

“You didn’t have to bring it in here.” I picked up the spoon, loaded it with bits of chicken and vegetables and just a bit of broth. I blew on it before putting it in my mouth. It was delicious and piping hot, just the way I liked it.

Lucia watched me load another spoonful. “Good?” she asked.

“Perfect.” I nodded and ate another two mouthfuls before I lay the spoon inside the bowl. “There’s nothing better than caldo. It just makes every muscle and bone in your body just melt. Doesn’t it?”

“Melt!” Lucia giggled. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Yes. Just melt away,” I said. “Like you could just die happy because there is nothing better in life.”

Lucia frowned. “Die? You don’t want to die, do you?”

“No,” I said. I looked down at the bowl of caldo and thought about my mother, about the way she’d gone, the way she left us. Selfish. The word just floated in my mind and I pushed it away. “Of course not.” I fiddled with the spoon. “It was just...I don’t what that was. I was just trying to say that I like it. It’s good. Thank you.”

Lucia took a strand of my hair and pushed it back, over my shoulder and away from my face. “You shouldn’t blame yourself,” she said. “It wasn’t your fault. What happened.”

I couldn’t talk, couldn’t make sense of what I was feeling. There was something sordid and shameful in the way the police officer had said it would “depend” on what their investigation revealed. I’d wanted to hit him when he’d said he’d get back to us after they talked to Manuel. But there was more to it than that. I was humiliated by the way my grandmother had treated me after he’d left. It was clear to me, after everything that had transpired, that I’d made a huge mistake by staying there.

“I’m not,” I finally said. “But that policeman got to me. The way he talked to me, well, it just made me...I was so embarrassed. I’m sure that’s why Guelita Estela was so mad at me. She probably thought—”

“No,” Lucia said. “You’re not on trial here, so don’t even think about that. I know you didn’t do anything to cause that.”

I pushed the bits and pieces of chicken and vegetables around in the bowl with the back of the spoon. “Thank you,” I said, sighing. “I just want this whole thing to be over so I can go home.”

“Well, time has a way of slipping away from us,” Lucia said. “You should finish that caldo and get some more rest. And don’t worry about your abuelita. She’s probably already forgotten all about today’s misfortunes, and we’ll deal with that police officer together when he comes back. I’m here, and I won’t let anything bad happen to you. I promise.”

I put the spoon down and pushed the tray aside. My head was throbbing again, and my heart and lungs felt heavy inside my chest. Lucia took the tray and placed it on her lap. “You okay?” she asked. “You need one of those pain pills?”

“I think I do,” I said. “My headache is back.”

Chapter 20

Under Lucia's care, I ate and slept so much that by the fifth day I couldn't take it anymore. I got out bed and dressed, intent on doing something other than hide in my room. I had slept most of the day away and the sun was almost gone. I wasn't ready to see the garden yet, but I thought I might be able to sit out on the porch in the dark if Lucia joined me after she took care of my grandmother.

In the bathroom, I let myself sink into a warm bath. I washed my hair and rinsed it carefully, and when the water cooled I got out and padded around the room in my towel, picking out a warm outfit. My bones still ached, but I had a feeling it was due to lying in bed so long. I pulled a pair of comfortable corduroy pants and picked out a big pink sweater Lici bought for me at the mall on my birthday. I slipped it over my head and pulled it down until it covered me all the way down past my hips. It was thick and fuzzy and perfect for cocooning myself outside, as I took in my first taste of fresh air in almost a week.

I was sitting on a metal chair in front of the dresser in the darkened room with nothing but the light of an oil lamp lighting the room, combing my absently, when out of darkness I saw someone standing behind me in the mirror. As the image of my mother came into focus, creeping out of the shadows in the room, gaining shape and form in the mirror as she came closer, I dropped the hairbrush. It clattered on the ground at my feet and then slipped away, gliding somewhere under the dresser in front of me.

"Mami?" The word came out of my mouth involuntarily, instinctively. My hands trembled and I clasped them together and pressed them against my chest, unsure of what to do, what to say to her.

"Mi niña, mi muñeca!"

It was my grandmother's voice, and I blinked. The pale woman in the mirror lifted her hands, reached for me, and I jumped. I turned around in my seat intent on leaping out of her way when I saw that it was my grandmother and not my mother standing behind me. "Guelita!" I cried out, putting my hands over my face and pressing my fingertips against my burning eyes.

"What is it?" she asked. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying." I lied and quickly swept the beginning of hot tears out of my eyes. "You scared me, that's all."

Guelita touched my hair, caressed it. "I'm sorry," she said and she bent down to pick up the hairbrush. "Turn around," she said, waiving the hairbrush in the direction of the mirror.

I turned around and watched her lift the hairbrush and put it against my scalp. "Such a beauty," she said, as she took a lock of my hair and brushed the snares out of it. I sat there and watched her comb one lock after another, with such devotion, such love that I closed my eyes and pretended it was my mother doing it. "What's the matter? Why are you so sad, mija? A pretty girl like you should never be sad. You should be smiling. Smile for me, cariño."

I didn't know what to do, how to react to my grandmother's loving request. It seemed impossible to me that she should make such an odd request after everything that had transpired between us. "Smile?" I asked, my voice quivering.

"Si, sonriete," she said. "But not too big. Just a little smile. A small smile, like a lady."

"I don't understand," I said, remembering how she had told Lucia that she had seen me smiling and flirting with Manuel in the back yard. I pushed the brush away from me and turned to look at her. "What do you mean, like a lady?"

“Don’t be mad at me, corazón,” she said, reaching up to stroke my cheek with her right hand. “You have a beautiful smile. Smile for me. Please. Don’t you know how much I love you. You were my first moon, my first star. I love you, hija.”

Her words startled me for a moment. Then I realized she wasn’t talking to me. I was part of one of her delusions. “Guelita? Do you know who I am?” I asked her.

“Of course I know who you are,” she whispered. “You’re my first love.”

I thought about it for a moment. Was she talking about my mother?

“There,” my grandmother said, pinching my chin and then tapping my cheek lightly. “Just like that. Perfect. Small. Delicate. Like a lady. You understand, don’t you? Why you shouldn’t show your teeth when you smile?”

I shook my head.

My grandmother put the hairbrush on the dresser and took my hands in hers. “A smile is an invitation,” she whispered. “An invitation into your life, into your heart. The bigger the smile, the wider the door opens. For a man. You understand? That’s how they think. They think you’re calling them inside. You can’t do that, hija. You can’t smile too much or too often.”

Just then, Lucia entered the room. “The policeman is back,” she said, coming over to my grandmother. She put her hands on her arm and started guiding her toward the door. “Come,” she said, looking back at me. “He says he wants to talk to you both. He has news about the attacker.”

My grandmother shuffled out of the room. With her shoulders drooping, she looked as frail as the first time I saw her. We met the police officer in the kitchen. He was standing by the front door, holding his hat in his hands. “Hola, Señorita, Señora,” he said, bowing his balding head slightly toward us as we entered the room.

“Well?” my grandmother said after she sat down at the table and folded her hands in front of her. “Did you catch him?”

“Yes. Yes,” the police officer said. “We have him in custody. He was not hard to find. The description and the information you provided us made it very easy, very easy for us.”

Lucia lifted her hand in the air. “What did he have to say for himself? Did he confess? You didn’t fall for his lies, did you?”

“No,” the policeman said. “He confessed. We have it all in writing. He will be going away for a very long time, I suspect, especially since it wasn’t the first time.”

“Not the first time?” The news shocked me, and I felt myself sicken. “What do you mean? Has he been arrested before?”

The police officer nodded and put his hat back on. “Once before. Two years ago, in Nava. But they couldn’t make a conviction, because the girl said she believed he was in love with her and recanted, so he got away with it.”

“Yes, he told me that too,” I whispered. Remembering that night at the window made the tiny hairs on my arms raise up, and I rubbed my forearms.

The police officer stepped away from the door, came closer to me, and I shifted in my chair. “You don’t believe that, do you?” the policeman asked, looking down at me.

“Of course not,” I said. “He’s a monster, a beast of the worse kind! I would never...”

Lucia put her hands on my shoulders and squeezed gently. “Thank you, officer,” she said. “Is there anything else we need to do? Any papers we need to sign? She doesn’t have to go down there, does she? To identify him?”

The officer pushed his chin out, making his lower lip stand out, like a spatula. He shook his head. “No. We have a signed confession. We don’t need to put Graciela through any more

hardships than she's already experienced. I just wanted to let you know that we caught him and that you can sleep at night knowing he's off the streets and you're safe now."

"Thank you."

"Gracias." Lucia and I thanked the policeman. My grandmother didn't say anything. She just stared at the wall in front of us, lost in time again. When he saw that there was nothing more to be done or said, the police officer excused himself and walked back out. Lucia locked the door behind him. She turned around and sighed.

"Well, that's a relief," she said. "Now. Who wants something to eat?"

Suddenly, I was ravenous and I raised my hand like a school girl. Lucia laughed and went to work on some eggs at the stove while my grandmother and I looked out the window at the starry night. I didn't go outside that night, but I did go into the sala and watched television with my grandmother and Lucia for the first time since the incident. I didn't feel completely healed, but something inside me was working again. My heart and my lungs weren't so heavy inside my chest. I felt like I could breathe again.

Chapter 21

A week later, I finally felt strong enough to go back to Eagle Pass and face my family without falling apart. I'd resolved to leave everything that happened at my grandmother's house behind, to forget it, bury it and move on with my life. I hadn't even finished coming through the front door before Lici, who was sitting on the living room sofa, looked up at me, put her hand out, and said, "Give them to me."

"What?" I asked, looking at her all coiled up like a rattlesnake, ready to strike.

"Las llaves," she said. "Give them to me!"

I reached into my coat pocket and handed her the keys.

She got up, tossed her hair back, and walked off saying, "I knew you wouldn't get it fixed."

Guelita Rosa watched me pull my bag off my shoulder and lay it on the coffee table by the front door. "Welcome back, stranger," she said, as I went over and hugged her. She let me put my arms around her and put up with my slight display of affection. "Where have been? You missed all the fun around here. That Connor boy came by, and he and your father had it out."

"They did?" I asked.

"Yes," Guelita Rosa said. "Your father told him if he ever comes near you again, he's going to cut off his balls. And he let your sister have it too, for wrapping her legs around him when she knew how you felt about him."

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe, and my chest hurt again. I touched my forehead. It was ice cold. "Where's Dad?" I asked, because I hadn't seen his truck parked outside.

"He's back in Del Rio," Guelita Rosa said. "He's still helping that friend build a series of cabins on his deer lease. He said he might not be back until the end of the month."

“Okay,” I said, letting out a long, tired sigh. It was a relief to hear that he was gone, because that meant I didn’t have to explain where I’d been. I wasn’t ready to talk about Connor with him, much less confront him about why he’d never told me my maternal grandmother wasn’t dead. I needed time to process how I was going to approach him on both subjects.

“You hungry?” Guelita asked. “You look like you lost weight.”

“I’ve only been gone three weeks,” I said. “Not enough time to lose much weight.”

Guelita Rosa scanned my face. “You look different,” she said. “Where were you?”

“In Mexico,” I said.

“Mexico?” she asked. “Doing what? Where did you stay?”

“I’m tired,” I whispered, picking up my bag and starting toward my room. “I need a nap. We’ll talk later, okay?”

My grandmother’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t say anything else. She stepped aside, moved her walker, and let me through. I walked down the hallway and stopped beside Lici’s bedroom door because I could hear her moving around in there.

I went into my room and tossed my bag on the rocking chair in the corner. Everything was exactly as I’d left it. The bed was unmade, my dirty clothes were still in the hamper, and my school books were all piled up on the floor next to nightstand beside my bed.

I laid down on my bed and closed my eyes. I must have fallen asleep right away, because when I opened my eyes again, the sun had started to set and Alexander was standing beside the bed staring at me. He was sucking his index finger and he looked as real to me as when he was alive. I closed my eyes and told myself I needed to stop thinking about him every time I entered this room. It was time to move on.

“Grace,” Alexander called out to me.

I opened my eyes and turned my face to him. His eyes were red and he looked like he'd been crying. "What's wrong?" I asked.

Alexander took his index finger out of his mouth and pointed at the door. "Mommy's mad."

"I know," I said, turning sideways on the bed to look at him closely. Alexander walked over to the rocking chair, climbed into it, and started rocking himself slowly. I sat up and watched him until he disappeared and only the memory of him remained in the room. "I love you, Alexander," I whispered to the emptiness.

I heard a noise outside and went to the window. A souped up Chevy was slowing down in front of the house. When it came to a stop, I saw Jose jump out of it. His hair was longer, grazing the faded tattoos of an eagle and a scorpion on his shoulders. He slammed the door and tapped the fender, smiling and waving good-bye to the driver. When he was in the yard, he went straight to his car and inspected the windshield. I left the window and rushed to Lici's room.

"What do you want?" she asked, as she folded a sweater and placed it on top of stack of clothes on her bed.

I closed the door behind me. "Jose's here," I said. "He's looking at his car."

"Uh-huh." Lici folded another sweater. She opened her closet and pulled out a suitcase.

"What are you doing?" I asked when she placed it on the bed, opened it, and started putting her clothes in it. "What's going on, Lici?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Lici asked, opening her dresser and picking up her undergarments in one sweeping motion. "I'm packing."

I watched her stuff her bras and panties into the interior pockets of the hard-shell suitcase. "Why?"

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked, turning away from me to get her shoes off the rack and place them on top of her clothes in the suitcase. “I’m leaving.”

“With him?” I asked, my voice an octave higher. “You’re leaving with that pond scum? Are you out of your mind? You can’t get back together with him!” Lici didn’t say anything. She just shoved more and more things into her suitcase. I sat on the bed and reached over and put my hand on hers. “Lici. He hit you.”

“We’re getting remarried,” she said. “He promised to be good to me this time, and--he’s going to fix my car.”

“No, no, no,” I cried. I threw my arms over the suitcase and placed my hands on the edge of it to block her, stop her from shoving even one more thing inside. She pushed my arms out of the way, threw the lid down, and tried her best to shut the overflowing suitcase. It had too many things in it, and she had to take out a pair of sneakers. She laid them next to a pair of cargo pants on the bed. “Here,” she said, shoving them in my direction. “You can have these.”

“Lici, listen to me,” I said as she snapped the suitcase shut. “He’s not *the one*. You deserve better than him.”

“Everything’s so easy for you, isn’t it?” she asked. “You walk around daydreaming and scribbling down nonsense in your journals and judging me for living my life, but you don’t know anything, Grace. You’re just a little girl who throws rocks when she’s mad and runs away when she doesn’t get her way.”

“And what do you do, Lici?” I asked. “You sleep around with men so they can buy you things. And, now, because Jose is promising to fix your car, you’re going to marry him again? Didn’t you get enough of him the first time? Wasn’t one fucked up marriage to him enough?”

Lici threw her coat on and buttoned it up. “You’re such a virgin. You have no idea what it means to be a woman,” she said. “Go back to your room and write more silly love poems.” She picked up the suitcase and hauled it off the bed.

She was at the door, her hands were twisting the doorknob, and she was about to walk out of my life again when I spouted out the words, “I’m not a virgin.”

Lici stopped. She stood very still. I got off the bed and stood up. Lici turned her head sideways and, without making eye contact, she asked. “Who?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I walked over and put my hand on her shoulder and pressed down gently.

She turned around and glared at me. “Who?” she asked again.

I wanted to tell her the truth, to open my heart to her and say *Oh, Lici, it was horrible. I didn’t know what to do! I couldn’t make him stop!* But the words stayed trapped inside me. “Nobody you know,” I whispered.

“Congratulations,” she said. “Now you’re a slut too. I hope you used a condom?”

When I looked at the floor and didn’t answer her, Lici huffed. “Stupid!” she said under her breath. Then she opened the door and walked out.

I spent the next few weeks going back and forth to the Sul Ross annex of the community college, making all the preparations to transfer to the main campus in Alpine in the spring. It helped to keep my mind busy to work on a way out of Eagle Pass, far away from the border and everything that happened to me on both sides of the international bridge.

My father came home for a few days, and, by then, I was a bundle of nerves. Not only had my grandmother and I not heard from Lici since she’d left the house, I was also a week late. My stomach was bloated and my breasts hurt, but nothing was happening down south.

I thought about going to the clinica across the border, but I didn't have the money to spare anymore. I couldn't buy a pregnancy test at the grocery store or even go down to the free clinic downtown because if anyone in Eagle Pass were to see me they'd start talking, and then Guelita would get wind of it. She'd tell my father and there was no telling what he would do. Of course, he'd probably assume the worse, maybe even go after Connor again, which would just turn everything into one big, awful mess.

My father got home the last day of the first week in January and went straight to his room. He came out a few minutes later and took a shower. Two hours after he'd walked through the front door, he finally came to my room to greet me. By then, I was a jittery mess. My hair was oily because I hadn't taken a shower in days, preferring to hide under the covers in my room because it was so cold outside.

"I'm glad you're back," he said. "But now the other one's gone."

"Do you know where she is?" I asked, sitting up in bed and pulling the covers over my shoulders.

My father's face contorted into a grimace, and his cheek twitched as he looked about the mess in my room. His eyes lingered on the pile of used paper plates sitting on my nightstand. "No," he admitted. "I suspect she'll be back when that loser dumps her again. You two are going to be the death of me."

I bit down on my lip too hard, because it started bleeding, so I put my finger on the stinging site and pressed it. My lips were severely cracked. I needed some lip balm. "She told me they were getting remarried," I said. "She says he's going to fix her car."

My father winced. "Sure he is," he said. "God. I don't know what she sees in that guy. But, enough about that. What about you? Where were you? We looked everywhere for you."

I thought about it for a moment. “In Mexico” I said. “Dad? Why didn’t you ever tell me Guelita Estela was alive?”

“What?” My father raised his eyebrows. “Alive? Your grandmother?”

“Yes,” I said. “Alive and well and living in her house in Mexico.”

“You went to her house?” my father’s eyes narrowed, and his brows formed a deep furrow on his forehead.

“I stayed with her and Lucia, her caretaker,” I said. “Why did you go along with Mom’s story all this time?”

“Honestly, Grace. This is the first I hear about her being alive.” My father looked around the room and then walked over and sat at my desk. “Your mother never talked about her. As far as I knew she died when your mother was a child. But how did you find the house?”

I could see it then, the house on the outskirts of Piedras Negras, in a memory from far away. “We went there a few times when I was young,” I said. “She made me wait on the other side of the street while she walked past the gate and went up to the house.”

“Did she talk to her?” my father asked, leaning over and resting his hands on his knees as he looked intently at me.

“No,” I said. “She just stood there looking in the windows every time.”

“Every time?” he asked. “How many times did she go there?”

I couldn’t remember. I’d been too young. “I don’t know,” I said. “More than once because I remember her walking her making me wait in the car each time.

My father seemed taken aback. “She didn’t knock or call out to her?”

“No,” I said, remembering how she would always press her cupped hands against the bare windows and plod through the overgrown grass, before she closed the gate behind herself

and trotted across the street hurriedly, like she didn't want my grandmother to catch her sneaking around outside. "She'd just look in the windows and then we'd leave."

"I asked her once, who she was looking for," I said. "She didn't answer me, just kept quiet and still, looking to the road ahead until we crossed the border. Then she was all smiles again, and wanting to stop and get some chicken before we came home. She liked getting a two-piece for us to share at the Golden Chicken on Main Street."

My father stood up and started toward the door. Then he turned around and looked at me "And you saw her?" he asked. "Your grandmother Estela?"

"Yes," I said. "Every night."

"What do you mean every night?" he asked.

I reached up and pushed my hair back, out of my face. I should get up and take a shower. My hair was getting out of hand. "She's kind of weird," I said.

My father crossed his arms in front of him and leaned against the doorframe. "You mean...like your mother?"

His words cut right through me, and I had a sudden vision of my mother wandering through the house with a butcher knife in the middle of the night with my father trying to coax it out of her hand, careful not to wake up her up.

"Not like mom. No," I said. "She didn't have episodes."

My father's eyes changed. He looked a bit lost for a moment. "I wanted to help her. I tried, you know," he said. "But something about her past, something that happened to her back there, in Mexico, haunted her, and I couldn't reach her. I tried."

"I'm sorry," I said.

My father shifted and cleared his throat. "So, you back for good?"

“Yes and no,” I said. “I’m leaving in a few weeks, as soon as the dorm opens in Alpine.”

“What?” My father reached up and rubbed at his beard and then scratched his head almost violently. “I guess I should just be glad you didn’t turn out like your sister, huh?”

“She’s not so bad,” I whispered.

My father looked at the ceiling and then back at the door. “Well, I’m glad you’re back safe and sound. I’m going to get back on the phone to see if I can track down your sister. I hate not knowing where that guy took her.”

When my father left my room, I got up and took a long, hot shower. El dia de los reyes magos was upon us and Abuela Rosa would be wanting me make her some hot champurrado so we could dig into the rosca she bought every year.

Even though the three kings brought everyone a present, the day was still boring for me. My father gave my grandmother a new batita, with tiny pink flowers embroidered on the white lapels and I got a new journal and some gel pens. My grandmother crocheted me the obligatory warm slippers and I wore them around the house until it was time to pack them up with the rest of my belongings and head out to Alpine for the beginning of the spring semester at Sul Ross State University.

My father drove me to the bus stop and waved me off, without too much fanfare. He slipped forty dollars into my hand and closed it over the cash, saying, “I’ll send whatever I can,” he said. “Won’t be much, but I’ll make an effort.”

“And you’ll keep looking for her?” I asked, because my sister was still missing in action. “You’ll keep up with her shenanigans, won’t you? You can’t give up on her, Dad.”

We had tried filing a missing person's report, but the authorities said there was nothing they could do. She was a grown woman, just turned eighteen, and she had left of her own free will. "Perhaps she doesn't want to be found," the police officer told my father at the station.

When I got on the bus, I put my earbuds in and laid my head back. Nobody was sitting beside me, so I put my legs up on the seat and laid down. My stomach hurt, and when I pressed it, I could feel the tenderness in my lower abdomen. Before I knew what was happening, tears were streaming down the side of my face, pooling into my cupped hand. I breathed in and out slowly, carefully, and let the tears flow freely, washing over me as I thought about everything that had happened to me in the last few weeks, everything I had lost.

When the bus pulled into a sad little rest stop out in the middle of nowhere, I went to the bathroom. My period had come and I had to run out to the bus and discreetly take out a pair of clean panties. I bought some supplies and took care of my business. The road ahead was dark and empty and cold. As the bus rolled out again, I wrapped myself in my jacket, shut my eyes tight, and went to sleep.

Chapter 22

In the fall, after almost a year of being gone, my college friend, Anne Marie Mitchell, drove me down to Eagle Pass. She was going home to Laredo for the weekend, and because I finally had a free weekend from my two jobs, I'd tagged along. It was almost five in the afternoon, and the sun was low in the sky by the time we drove up to the house on Wilson street.

The willow tree in the front yard was almost bare, limbs extended out, arched, and whittled down to thin, bony limbs that reached out like mummified fingers, wrapped in the gauzy, brown shreds of its long dead leaves.

I jumped out before she could offer to help me with my bags. "I'd invite you in, but, you know—" I said, coming around the car to give Anne Marie a quick hug through the lowered window.

"I can't anyway. I want to get home before dark," she said, letting go of me and adjusting her seatbelt.

I'd expected Chucho would be the one coming to the door to welcome me, barking at first, then sniffing my shoes, wagging his tail, and licking my face when I dropped to the floor to let him know I'd missed him. But it wasn't Chucho who welcomed me home.

My father opened the door as I lifted my foot off the last step and stepped fully onto our porch. He threw his arms around me, picked me up, and lifted me off the floor with his hug, making me dizzy as he squeezed the air out of me. After he put me down, he pulled me into the house. As he stood there grinning at me, I noticed there was something different about him, something about his face didn't quite fit the way I remembered him.

"Welcome home, m'ija," he said, his eyes shining, alive, present. "I like your hair like that. When did you get a haircut?"

"A month ago." My nose itched and I rubbed it. "A girl in my English class did it for me for free because I helped her write a research paper. Are you wearing cologne?"

"Just some nice smelling gel soap, some fancy thing," he said. "It was part of a gift set Bonnie gave me for my birthday last month. I don't really care for the cologne, and I've never been the aftershave type, but this foamy soap thing's nice."

"Bonnie?" I asked. "Are you talking about Conner's mother, the lady next door?"

"Yes, Bonnie," he said. "She brought over a birthday cake and everything."

"Oh, I didn't know that you talked to her," I said, thinking about Conner for the umpteenth time since Anne Marie and I had gotten on the road and started heading south towards Eagle Pass. I'd pictured him sitting out on his porch, watching us drive up, hands in his pockets, just watching me get out of the car, waiting for me to lift my hand and wave to him. He'd step off his porch and come around the fence to give me one of those small, quiet hugs you give someone you like but don't want to scare off. But Conner hadn't been there when I'd stepped out of Anne Marie's car. His door hadn't opened and he hadn't come out of his house.

"Why? Did you have something in mind for my birthday? I got your card. I have it in my room, next to the one from Connie. It's so funny, Connie's card. I'll show it to you."

My father turned around and rushed off, heading towards his room. His steps were quick, light. I could feel the ghost of his smile lingering in the room, haunting me, as I watched him disappear down the hall.

"Ay, pos, who are you?" my grandmother's voice called out to me, and I turned around, catching sight of her standing in front of her walker in the frame of her bedroom door. "You look a lot like my grand-daughter."

I flipped my hair. She grinned and I went to hug her. She came all the way through the door and lifted her right arm and put it on my shoulder, accepting my side hug and even smiling when I kissed her cheek. "When did you get in?" she asked.

"Just now, a second ago. Father opened the door, but then he went off," I said waving toward the other side of the house.

"Well, I'm glad you're home. No job should ever keep you away from home this long," she chided.

I nodded and dropped my purse on the coffee table, next to my suitcase on the floor. "Well, I also go to school," I reminded her.

Guelita Rosa lifted an eyebrow at me. "Summers too?"

"If I want to finish in four years," I said.

"Then what?" she asked, walking around me and sitting down on the loveseat by the window. "Married. Children. Moving away and forgetting all about us? Like your sister?"

"No," I said, sitting on the edge of the couch and fiddling with the handle on my suitcase sitting between my legs. "I would never do that. I would always call if I couldn't come by."

"Good." My grandmother patted my hand. "How long are you staying?"

"Just a week," I said. "But I'll be back the week of Spring Break. Unless Jerry doesn't let me take off, but he said he can keep the hotel going with local staff during the break. The town's not exactly dead, but not many vacationers hit Alpine that week. It's not like the place is a tourist attraction or anything."

"Here, read this." My father came out of his room, holding a card. He didn't wait for me to read it on my own, but kept it in his grip, opening it and reading it for me, like it was a picture

book, and I was a child, learning to read. "Get it?" he asked, after he'd reread the punch line twice. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, wrapping my arms around myself and pulling the collar of my jacket up over my chin. The temperature in the room hadn't changed. My father always kept it at 72 degrees for my grandmother's comfort, but, suddenly, I was more than cold. I was downright uncomfortable.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's just that—"

I thought of Conner then, about the last night I saw him. There was so much left unspoken between us. Did he think it was strange too, this new friendship between his mother and my father? Looking at my father, holding the birthday card, I hoped he wasn't reading too much into it. He seemed like a different person from the father I'd left behind. He was happier, beaming.

That he was even talking to a woman came as more than a surprise. I would say, by the coldness settling over me, I was in shock. I began to wonder what else had changed since I'd been gone.

"Just what?" he asked.

"Nothing," I whispered. I stood up, hoisted my purse over my shoulder, and picked up my suitcase. "I'm tired. It was a long haul. Five hours. Without much of a stop, except for gas and to pee a couple of times. I'm going to lay down in my room for a bit. I do still have a room. Don't I?"

"Of course you still have a room," my father said, throwing an arm around me again, and kissing my forehead. "Patita loca. What kind of question is that? Go on, you know where it is. Take a nap. We'll still be here when you wake up. I'm making carne guisada for dinner."

"You're cooking again?" I stopped in the middle of the living room and looked back at my father. He hadn't cooked for us since we were children, since before my mother...

"Of course," he said. "Who else was going to do it with you and your sister gone?"

"That makes sense," I said. "I missed Eagle Pass. There's only one good Mexican restaurant in Alpine, and their carne guisada sucks, like eating shoelace strips dipped in salsa."

"Good. That means you'll always come home if you want to eat good food," my grandmother said. I turned around and headed for my room.

Once inside, I closed the door and gently put the suitcase just inside my closet. Then I stood there looking at the rocking chair by the window. "Alexander," I whispered, softly. I waited for a moment. Seconds ticked by, then minutes. I stared at that inert rocking chair until my eyes burned and I had to blink. Why had I expected him to be there? Hadn't I outgrown him along with everything else that had happened to me on the border?

I turned away, took a deep breath, and I threw myself onto my bed. I laid with my face buried in my pillow for a few seconds, letting the pouch of lavender my grandmother always put at the bottom of our pillowcases do its job. Soon, my muscles relaxed and I turned my face toward the window.

Sitting up, I reached over to the window and pushed the lacy white curtain aside, letting the waning sunlight come directly into the room. Squinting, I looked across the yard. No Conner in sight. The house next to ours was still, remote. No sounds were coming from it. I sighed and rolled over, laying my forearm across my eyes while I tried not to cry.

"This would have been a good time for one of our famous sisters talks," I said, speaking to my run-away sister, "Oh, Lici. Why did you have to get married again?"

Thinking about Lici made me want to cry even more, and I rolled over, away from the window and resolved to stop feeling sorry for myself. Losing a sister to love wasn't all that bad. It was inevitable, sisters grow up, and not all of them stay close. My own mother had moved away, to a whole other country, to live with her husband. Why should Lici be any different?

Money had kept me from getting a cell phone, so I had no idea how she was. I'd have to ask my father how she was doing, maybe even go visit her, if she was up to it. Making a mental note to have my father get her on the phone for me sometime during the week, I started to drift off.

When I woke up, the sun had set. The light in my room had faded into the shadows, and I knew it was almost time for dinner.

"Buenas noches, Bella Durmiente," my father said, as I stepped into the kitchen, a bit foggy from my long nap. Guelita Rosa was sitting at her usual spot on the table by the bay window and my father was standing in front of the stove wearing a ridiculously feminine pink apron over a white dress shirt. I scooted under his left arm when he waved me in. He gave me a side hug and kissed my temple. "Are you ready to eat?"

"Yes." I lifted the lid off the pot of rice simmering on the back burner and let the delicate aroma waft into the air and mingle with the spicy scent of the carne guisada. "I'm ravenous."

My father took off his apron, rolled it up, and shoved it in the nearest drawer. Then he stepped away from the stove and finger-combed his hair away from his face. "Good," he said. "Don't touch anything. I'll be right back."

"Come sit right here, next to me, and tell me all about this job of yours." Guelita Rosa padded the chair to the right of her. I sat down, tossed my sandals off under the table, and pulled my legs up in front of me.

"Not one, two," I said. "I clean the hotel during the week and help man the desk at the school library on the weekends. That's the easy job. Except, of course, when I help someone do research. That's not so easy. But pulling books and putting them back when they're done with them. That's no trouble at all."

"Two jobs?" Guelita's eyebrows furrowed. "When do you have time to study?"

"I manage," I said. "Hey, what's taking him so long. I'm starving. Should we get started?"

Guelita Rosa looked out toward the hall. "I don't know," she said. "Why don't you go knock on his door. I'm starving too."

I was about to knock of my father's bedroom door when I heard him talking excitedly to someone on the phone. Lici! My mind shouted with joy, and I rapped quickly, impatiently. "Dad?" I whispered, when he stopped talking and everything on the other side of the door went silent and still. "Who are you talking to?"

"Just a minute! Wait...hold on..." My father's voice sounded strange, strained. I wondered if he was arguing with my sister. *Oh, please don't. I want to visit her. I need to see her.*

"Dinner's ready," I said, quietly, because he was whispering into the phone again and I wondered what was so important, so secretive, that he had to whisper it. Was he playing a trick on Lici, making her think it was someone else on the other side of the door so that we could drive out to her house sometime during the week and surprise her? My skin tingled with anticipation and I forced myself not to make a peep lest I spoil the surprise for him.

"Hold on. I'll be right there," he called out. "Wait for me in the kitchen."

I tried listening for a bit longer, but my presence on the other side of his door seemed to put stop to the conversation. He was waiting for me to go away.

Feeling a bit disappointed, I went back to the kitchen and found my grandmother still sitting at the table, nibbling on a corn tortilla as she looked out the window. "He's on the phone."

"Sit down, have a tortilla." Guelita pointed to the stack of corn tortillas wrapped warmly inside a shallow round basket at the center of the table. "This could take a while."

"I hope not. He said he'd be right out," I said, taking a glass from the cabinet and pouring myself some lemonade from the tall, floral pitcher on the counter before sitting next to her at the table.

Guelita reached out and pushed my hair out of my face. "I've missed you," she said. "It's not the same around here without children. It's love you know. Children breathe love into the world. You bring love into this house."

"I missed you all too," I said, taking a long swig of my lemonade and closing my eyes as the sweet, tart liquid toyed with my taste buds and awakened the rest of my senses. It was true. I had missed everything and everyone in this house, especially Alexander. "This is love," I whispered, remembering how much Alexander loved lemonade.

Guelita giggled and picked up her glass, clinking it against mine before I took another long drink. "You've always had a way with words. I bet they love you at that university. How are you doing up there? How are your grades? You still writing?"

I told Guelita about Dr. Lister and how he'd called me up after class to offer me a job as a tutor for the English department, and she clapped. Her eyes sparkled with joy when she said,

"See? You're on your way. Greatness, that's what you have inside you, Graciela. Your mother knew it. And I know it. Someday, you're going to be famous."

"Bonnie and Conner are on their way over," my father said as he came into the kitchen, a toothbrush sticking out of the side of his mouth.

"What? Why?" I asked, my heart beating out of my chest. I wasn't prepared to see Connor for the first time since *the incident* with everyone else around us. How would he act? What would I say? Would he talk to me? Try to explain again? All kinds of crazy, wild scenarios rushed through my mind like a whirlwind, and I couldn't breathe much less think straight.

My father checked on the food at the stove. "They're joining us for dinner," he said, after he'd made sure everything was ready. "Don't worry. I made enough food."

"What's going on here?" I asked, looking at my father. "Are you serious?"

"What do you mean?" My father crossed the kitchen and turned on the faucet at the kitchen sink. He ran water over his toothbrush and rinsed out his mouth. "Oh, that," he said, after seeing the horrified look on my father. "That was a long time ago, Grace. You have to learn to move on." Then, because I didn't say anything, he continued. "It's not like we could ignore them for the rest of our lives. They're our next-door neighbors, Grace. Bonnie's good people."

"I guess," I said, shaking my head. "But did you have to invite them over on my first day home. Couldn't you have waited, given me time to adjust? I mean, you could've warned me."

"They're good company," Guelita said, calmly lifting her glass and taking a drink of her lemonade while I clutched my glass between my hands to keep myself from shaking.

"Oh, they're here. Just stay calm, Grace. Here." My father handed me a stack of dishes off the china cabinet. "Why don't you set the table? I have to mouthwash real quick."

"Mouthwash?" I asked my grandmother, as he rushed down the hall. "Who brushes their teeth before dinner?"

Guelita lifted her hands in the air and shrugged her shoulders. "Hand me those plates. I'll help you set the table."

"You're going to use the good dishes?" I asked.

"If you never use them, they'll never chip or break," Guelita said, "and then, how can you ever prove you loved them. It's a waste to have beautiful things and let them sit around gathering dust. No, Grace, I'm too old to waste one more minute afraid of breaking things. I want mismatched dishes at my velorio."

As we set the table, I wondered when this started being a thing, using the good dishes and inviting the neighbors over for dinner, but I was too worried about seeing Connor again to ask any more questions. I was plating the carne guisada, moving it from the pot to a stout casserole dish, when there was a light knock on the door.

"I'll get it," my father called from the hallway. I froze mid-scoop. Guelita took the pot from my trembling hands when I tried setting it down on the table.

"Breathe," she said. "Pareces espanto. Sit down. Take a deep breath and let it out. In. Out. In. Out. There you go. You'll be all right. It's not the first time that boy comes through that door."

I stood in the archway to the kitchen and watched as Connor and his mother came through our front door. My father took a pie from Bonnie, giving her a reserved little hug before shaking Connor's hand and showing them into the kitchen.

"Hi," I said. I could barely breathe and smile at the same time. Connor's mother leaned in and hugged me. I must have hugged her back. I think I did. I don't remember. The only thing I do

remember is how Connor shook my hand and leaned in too close so that I let go of his hand and jumped back startled.

The conversation at dinnertime was strained. Everyone looked a bit tense, except for Guelita who entertained us all with stories about her childhood in San Vicente, Coahuila.

"There's nothing more delicious than fresh goat cheese. We used to hang those little cheesecloth bundles in every corner of the kitchen. We'd squirm in our chairs every time my Mamá would reach up there and bring one of these little treats down. Wish I had some right now. There's nothing like fresh goat cheese on a carne guisada taco. Delicious!"

"Speaking of family," I said, turning to look at my father. "Anyone heard from Lici lately?"

Connor coughed and started choking. I hadn't meant to make him uncomfortable, really. I'd meant to ask him about my sister earlier, but the long nap stole the opportunity. "I haven't heard from her in months. How is she doing? Where does she live?"

My father frowned, then his face contorted, like his skin was itching or something. "I don't know," he finally said, reaching across the table to pull out another tortilla from its warm nest inside the basket.

"What did she say the last time you talked to her?" I asked. "Is she coming to visit soon? Does she know I'm here?"

"Well—" My father folded and unfolded his tortilla several times in his hands before he bit into it and looked down at his plate. "You know your sister."

I swallowed a bite of carne guisada. "What?" I asked. "She's not stopping by? I really hope you told her I really wanted to see her."

My father raised his eyebrows, moved his head side to side, and cleared his throat. "Well, the truth is I haven't heard from her in a while."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "When was the last time she called?"

Guelita Rosa put her hand on my arm. "We haven't heard from her in months, dear," she whispered.

I dropped my fork. It clattered on the plate. The noise reverberated through the silent dining room. "Months?" I finally asked, folding my napkin and putting it on the table beside my plate.

"What did you expect?" Guelita continued. "Guerca lepa. She never did care about her family. Born selfish. That's all."

"Well, I've been busy, so I didn't really keep up with her either," my father admitted, putting his fork down and looking at Conner and his mother with hooded, apologetic eyes. "It's not my fault," he continued. "I don't want you to be upset. Try to understand. I haven't been able to reach her."

"Her phone got disconnected," Guelita Rosa said, breaking the news to me in her usual, unfettered tone of voice.

"But...I thought...." I stopped midsentence because my mind was reeling, and my voice had an unusual quiver in it.

"We haven't heard from her since she moved to Mexico," my father admitted.

"Mexico?" A wave of nausea took over me. "Mexico! When? Jesus, Dad. Anything could have happened to her. Mexico is not safe. Not safe at all."

"Calm down," my father said, looking nervously at Connor and his mother. "Your sister's a grown woman. She can take care of herself."

“Have you tried reaching Jose’s family?” I asked. “His employer? His friends?”

My father didn’t say anything. He just put his hands on the table on opposite sides of his plate and stared at his carne guisada. “Have you done anything?” I finally asked. “I mean, what if something’s happened to her. She could be hurt. She could be dead in a ditch for all we know. That guy’s a creep. He’s no good for her. You know that. My God. Who does this? Who loses touch with their own daughter?”

"I'm sorry," my father said, reaching out to put his hand over mine.

"I thought that was her on the phone!" I yelled out. “Tonight! Before dinner!” Hot, angry tears began to prick at my eyes. "You sounded so...animated... I thought you two were trying to surprise me.”

My father rubbed my forearm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Never mind,” I said. “It was a stupid assumption. Who were you talking to, anyway?” I asked, trying desperately to keep myself together.

My father pulled his hand away from mine and looked at Connor's mother as if she knew something I didn't.

"It was me," Connor's mother said, after a long, still silence. The smile on her face didn't quite match the worried look in her eyes as we made eye contact. I couldn't quite figure out what she was trying to tell me. "He was talking to me," she continued. “About tonight. About dinner with you. Here.”

Suddenly, and without another word from either my father or Connor's mother, I understood what was going on. I looked at Connor, but he looked away. My father reached over and took Bonnie's hand in his and said, "We wanted to wait 'til you came home...to tell you in person. Bonnie thought it would be best if we...if we told you together."

The look shared between them, was a whisper of light, a candle in a dark room. My eyes caught fire and my body went cold. I ran out of the kitchen and rushed down the hall, locking the door to my room behind me as I leaned against it. I felt faint and I thought I might vomit.

"Graciela, m'ija. Open the door. We need to talk," my father's voice called to me from the other side of the room, but I couldn't talk. My tears had run away with my voice, and I crumbled to the floor and sobbed silently into the palms of my hands.

Chapter 23

I tossed and turned in my bed all night, kicking the covers off myself when it got too hot in the room and pulling them on again when it got too cold. I was so uncomfortable, so upset, I finally pulled on my boots, shoved my arms into the white London Fog jacket Lici had given me two winters before, when she was still living at home and working at Macy's in the mall. Zipping it all the way up to my chin, I left the house.

I walked around the yard, not sure what I was doing out there, just blowing off steam, watching the breath swirling out of my mouth in transparent whirls as I sat on the so-called "dating bench" my father had built for Lici when she'd starting seeing Jose. I sat there long enough to get a chill, and I blew warm air between my hands and rubbed them together while I stared at the house. The yard looked different somehow, and I tried to put my finger on it, but I couldn't quite figure out what had changed.

The flowerbeds were still there, not that they could go anywhere since they were made of brick. They were bare, but that was nothing new. The prolific gladiola leaves had turned to brown husks, their bulbs resting deep under the soil, waiting until spring to come back. The house still needed painting and the walkway was still cracked two feet from the porch steps.

The rocks!

They were gone. The big, giant pile of rocks my father had created in our yard was gone. Every one of the grey, misshapen things had been picked up and removed. But what had he done with them? And when?

Was it because of me? Because of what I'd done to Lici's car? Had that been the reason he'd gotten rid of them, or had he done it for her? For Bonnie—had he done it to impress her? Oh, hell. What does it matter? I asked myself as I put my feet up on the dating bench and pulled

my knees close to my chest. "Oh, Lici. Where are you?" I looked up at the marbled night sky with its layer of grey, shredded clouds drifting southward, toward Mexico, and sighed.

I heard a door snap shut quietly and saw Connor jump off the porch. "Hey," he said, making his way toward me in the dark. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I pulled the London Fog closed and held the lapels against my cheeks, hiding half my face inside it. *How soon can I go inside?* I asked myself. *Without being too rude to my future brother-in-law?*

"May I?" he asked, pointing at the empty space beside me on the bench.

"No," I said. "Not ready for that."

"I understand," he said. "You're upset."

I nodded once and then filled my lungs with fresh air. "I didn't mean to run out on your mother like that," I said. "I'm happy for them. It was just that...I was..."

"In shock?" Connor asked. He leaned back against the willow tree and crossed one leg over the other.

"Yes," I said, feeling relieved that he understood.

"I was a bit shocked myself when I caught them kissing," Connor admitted. "I'm still trying to erase that image from my mind."

"Oh, don't tell me that," I said. "I can't even..."

"Yeah. It was brutal. I might need to see a therapist if the nightmares continue," he said, chuckling.

"Please." Under normal circumstances, I might have laughed along with him, but I couldn't. The whole thing was just too much for me, so I closed my eyes and pretended I didn't

care. But, apparently, I couldn't because a little sob left my lips and I felt fresh tears starting to prick at my eyes again.

"I'm sorry," Connor whispered. "That was thoughtless of me."

"No, no," I said, shaking my head as I wiped at my eyes, forcing myself to calm down. "I get it. It's not like the world is going to end...if...if my father...and your mother..."

"Listen," Connor said, reaching up to push his tousled hair out of his face, and looking at me again. "I know it's tough. I'm still trying to figure it all out myself. How I feel about this whole thing. How it all fits together. Your father and my mother, in love, with me and you, and the way we left things when you went off. It's all very—well, it's all very complicated. Isn't it?"

I shook my head and wiped at my eyes again, trying desperately not to wail like the Llorona in front of him. "I just thought he would love my mother forever. You know—keep her in his heart—he promised. When I was small. He told us he'd never get married again."

"Love doesn't work that way, Grace," Connor said, after a long silence. "Love has its own mind, its own will. It's impetuous that way. Selfish even."

"Well, you should know" I said, under my breath.

Connor lifted his head and looked at the waning moon. "That wasn't love. That was—"

"Stop!" I said, waving my hand in the air. "I don't want to know."

"But I want to—" Connor said, stepping out from under the tree.

I shook my head. "I don't care," I said. "Not my business. Really. It doesn't matter now. Ancient history."

"So you don't want to talk about it?" Connor shoved his hands in his pockets. He looked small, like a shy boy I'd met maybe centuries before, too long ago to ever be close again.

“Nope. Never.” I stood up and zipped my jacket up so that the lapels met at the top and I nestled my chin inside it.

Connor lifted his shoulders and shrugged. “Okay,” he said.

The light on the porch came on, and suddenly everything was bathed in gold. I walked away from Connor and ran up the steps. My father and Bonnie stepped aside to let me get through. “Excuse me,” I said. “It was nice seeing you again, Ms. Blades.”

“Are you going to bed?” My father asked, as I moved past him. “So early?”

I stopped and, keeping my eyes on the floor, I nodded. “I’m still tired,” I whispered. “From the ride in. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Have a good night,” Bonnie said, as she opened the screen door. My father followed her outside and I rushed to my room and closed the door.

I lay in bed and pulled the curtain aside just a fraction. Connor had left the yard and my father and Bonnie meandered down our long driveway hand in hand, their voices trailed behind them as they disappeared into the shadows and eventually down the street.

I closed the curtain and lay back against the pillow. A low rustle and Alexander was there, hiding behind the curtains, giggling. “What are you doing in there?” I said, happy to see him again after my long absence.

Alexander pulled the curtain aside. “Peek-a-boo!” He squealed and pulled the curtain back over himself again.

“Come here.” I reached out and rustled the curtain. “Hey, I missed you, chiquito. Did you miss me?”

“Time to go.” Alexander stepped out and stood looking at me. He was so close, I could have reached over and touched him, but I was afraid of waking myself out of my delusion,

making him disappear. I needed to see him. To talk to him. Because no matter how hard I tried, I hadn't been able to conjure his presence at the dormitory. Not with a roommate peeling the paint off the walls with her snoring ten feet across from me every night.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked. Alexander went to the door and reached up to hang off the doorknob.

"Go," he said, turning to look at me as he clung to the doorknob.

"Go where?" I asked him.

"Go get Mommy," Alexander said. His feet came off the floor as he tried in vain to twist the knob on the door. "Come on, Grace! Let's go-go!"

"I can't," I whispered. "I don't know where she is."

"You go!" Alexander let go of the handle. "Now!" he insisted. "Now, Grace!"

He started sobbing, and I threw my legs over the bed, got out of bed. "Don't cry," I said, but Alexander was disappearing. His tiny frame was wavering, dissipating into nothingness before me, until all that was left of him was his soft sobbing voice, whimpering, "Go, Grace. Go."

"Grace?" Guelita Rosa was on the other side of my bedroom door. She twisted the knob and cracked the door open. "Are you going to bed already?"

"Yes. I'm going to Piedras in the morning," I said, pulling my suitcase onto the bed and taking my pajamas out of it.

"Piedras?" Guelita Rosa asked. "Whatever for?"

"To look for Lici." I closed the suitcase and put it on the floor beside the pile of books.

"What? How are you going to get there? You don't have a car," my grandmother said, opening the door the rest of the way and coming halfway into my room.

"I'm getting on a bus in the morning," I said. "I can walk across the bridge and take a taxi at the plaza."

Guelita Rosa shook her head. "But you don't even know where she lives. Nobody does."

"I know where Jose's mother, Doña Sonoria, lives," I said, changing into my jammies and rolling back the blankets on my bed. "I went looking for him there with Lici more times than I care to remember."

Guelita dug deep in her batita's left pocket and pulled out her change purse. "You'll need some money," she said, snapping the little purse open.

I got up and went to her. She pulled out two twenty dollar bills. I folded the money and put it back in her little change purse and snapped it shut. "I've got money," I said. Then I patted her shoulder and looked out into the hall. "Did you finish eating?"

"Yes," she said. "Nothing keeps me from having my three squares. You should know that."

I laughed and she turned to leave, moving the walker around so that she was facing the hallway. "You sure about this?" she asked, raising an eyebrow as I started to close the door behind her.

"I have to."

"You should make your father take you." Guelita shook a finger at the front door. "This is all his fault."

"I think it's better if I go alone," I said. "We have things to talk about, Lici and I."

"Private things?" Guelita asked. "Like boys and sex?"

"Sister things," I said, inching the door closed as Guelita sighed and started down the hall, back to the living room.

Chapter 24

Doña Sonoria's neighborhood was on the outskirts of town, in what was probably considered rural Piedras Negras, but thanks to the bus driver, who told me how to get to her house from the bus stop, I found the place without having to ask anyone else for directions. I recognized the pink brick house with its red tiled roof and black iron post fence as soon as I turned off Avenida Morelos.

I opened the gate and stepped down into her garden and took the narrow walkway up to the front door. I knocked once, twice, three times, each time louder than the last, but Doña Sonoria didn't come to the door.

I looked around at the neighbor's houses and wondered if they'd know anything. Probably not. I knocked again. Four more times. More forcefully, but no one answered. I sat on one of the black iron chairs on the porch, determined to wait as long as it took her to get back from wherever she was this early in the morning.

A few neighbors came out of their houses and smiled at me as they watered their plants or left for work. A woman in a yellow flowered house dress swept her porch and sneaked peeks at me when she thought I wasn't looking. "Do you know where Doña Sonoria is?" I asked her, when I caught her eye.

The woman shook her head. "She's not home?" she asked, pushing a thin layer of dirt off the side of her porch.

"No," I said. "I've knocked a hundred times, but nobody answers."

"Pos no sé," the woman said. "She never goes anywhere. Not since she fell down and hurt her hip."

“Really?” I said, and I looked at the window on the other side of the door. The curtain moved just a fraction and I saw fingertips linger at the seam between the two halves of the curtains before the two pieces of fabric touched again.

“I saw you!” I said, jumping up from the chair and going to the window to look in. I cupped my hands and tried creating a mini telescope, to help me look through the veil of the thin curtains. “Doña Sonoria! Open the door! I need to talk to you about my sister, Lici!”

Nothing. The curtains didn’t move an inch and, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t see past them. “Doña Sonoria! Please,” I begged, but still no answer. Not even a whisper came from the interior of the house. “I know you’re there! I saw you!”

“Shh! Go away!” a quiet voice hissed from inside the house. “Go! Get out of here!”

“No!” I yelled, going to the door and banging on it with my fist. “I want to see my sister! I’m not leaving without seeing my sister!”

A latch snapped and the door creaked open. Doña Sonoria’s left eye peeked out at me from between the front door and the frame behind the screen. “She’s not here!” she said. Then her hand appeared, and her fingers waved me away. “Go home before I call the policia!”

“Call them!” I said. “I’ll tell them you’re keeping my sister locked up in your basement! I’ll tell them your son killed her and you’re protecting him. They’ll knock down this door and make you answer for her!”

“Shut up!” Doña Sonoria said, her eyes narrowing as she stared at me through the expanding crack in the door. “Just be quiet and wait!”

She closed the door then. I could hear her moving in there, opening drawers or something that sounded close to it. I didn’t care what she was doing, if it meant she gave me information about my sister.

I stood very still in front of the door, waiting. A few minutes later, Doña Sonoria opened the door again. Her left eye stared me down and I glared back. Then, slowly her fingertips reached out and unlocked the screen. Then her hand retreated and crept out again a few seconds later with a tiny piece of paper folded up into a perfect square caught between her index and middle finger. I pulled down on the latch, opened the screen door, and snatched the tiny offering. She reached out and locked the screen door again.

She closed the door so fast, she didn't hear me say, "Gracias."

I turned around and opened the paper. A single line. An address, scrawled out in crooked, frazzled long hand, not quite script, not quite cursive. It was the handwriting of an infirmed old lady, the reluctant last words of a mother-in-law who would like to forget her son had ever married my sister.

I folded the piece of paper and shoved it deep into the front left pocket of my jeans. Then I left her house, went down to the corner and sat on a bench waiting for the next bus to arrive. An hour later, I got off at the edge of a dusty road. I looked around and saw nothing but sadness. Everywhere I looked, gray cinder block houses with rusty tin roofs stared back at me. There were bars on every window and locks on every gate. It was not at all the kind of place Lici had always wanted to live, certainly not the kind of place I expected to find her.

I pulled out the piece of paper with the address on it and stared at it again, but it wasn't any use. There were no numbers on the doorways, nothing to distinguish her house from the rest.

"A quien buscas?" A young boy sitting on the edge of the dirt road asked, lifting his chin to acknowledge me.

"Mi hermana," I said. "Felicidad. Delgada. Alta. Asi." I showed him how much taller my sister was than me by placing my hand over my head. "Muy bonita."

“Sí. La Americana,” the young boy said, smiling. “Alla.” He pointed down the street, “To the end. Second to last house.” Then he extended his hand out and waited.

“Oh, yes. How much?” I said, realizing that he was expecting payment.

The boy spit into the palm of his hand and rubbed it against his filthy shirt . “Whatever you think is best.” He grinned and extended the hand out again.

I gave him two dollars. His eyes lit up and, grinning, he took it and put it into the front pocket of his brown pants. He thanked me. Then he turned around and ran up the street and jumped over a low cinder block fence and took off into an alley.

I turned around and started down the narrow dirt road. I found her place right away. The fence wasn’t finished, so there was no gate to keep me from going into the yard and up to the small house.

Before I had a chance to knock, the worn curtains moved in the window and then the door flew open. Lici stood in the doorway, a skinny shell of a girl, the ghost of my sister, with my sister's eyes and my sister's hair and my sister's hands, but nothing of my sister's smile or her full lips.

"Grace!" Lici's broken voice shattered the silence and echoed in my ears as she threw her arms around my neck and hugged me harder than I've ever been hugged in my life. Her boney forearms hurt my shoulders and neck, but I didn't care. She was alive, and that was all that mattered to me in that moment. "I'm so happy you came! So happy! So, so happy to see you!" she kept repeating as she sniffled and cried into my neck, rocking us side to side in the middle of that never-ending embrace.

Once inside her house, Lici took me by the shoulders and shook me. “What are you doing here?” she asked. “You’re supposed to be in school. You didn’t drop out did you?”

I shook my head. "No," I said.

Looking around, I saw an unmade bed with a nest of pillows at the center of it. Except for a white metal table and two white iron folding chairs on either side of it, there was no other furniture in the one-bedroom house. On the opposite side of the room, there was an old-fashioned stove and a small space heater in what must have been the kitchen area.

"Where's Jose?" I asked, watching my sister as she fussed with the chairs, making sure they were properly anchored on the cracked cement floor before waving me to sit. "And why does he have you living here? Doesn't he work? Surely, he can afford a better place."

Lici stopped fussing with the chairs and sat down on the bed, gently, as if she wanted to make sure she didn't disturb the pile of pillows at the center of it. She wiped at her eyes, and let her hands rest on the side of her thin cheeks, looking out the window as if the world outside held the answer to all my questions. In that moment, she looked eighty and not eighteen years old.

"What is it?" I asked. "What's the matter? Has he...hit you? Is he hurting you again?"

"No," Lici said, her voice hollow, as devoid of emotion as her eyes and her face. "Not that. No hitting this time."

I sat on the bed beside her. "Then what? Is he out of work again?"

"What is it?" I asked. "What did he do?"

"He's gone, Grace," Lici whispered. Her eyes were huge, bigger and more luminous for the leanness of her face and the paleness of her sallow cheeks.

"What do you mean, gone?" I asked. "Where is he? Where did he go?"

"He left me," Lici whispered. "He's living in Washington."

My mind couldn't wrap itself around Lici's words. The story wouldn't form itself in my brain. "Washington? What's he doing there?"

"He moved there," Lici continued. "With his new wife."

"What?" I asked, pushing the hair out of my sister's eyes as she hung her head.

"No." I refused to believe it. She said he wanted to marry her. "That can't be true. Who told you that? His mother? Doña Sonoria?"

"It's true," Lici said, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief she dug out of her dress pocket. "I know because she sent me a letter, with a picture of them in it. She says he told her all about me, and how I tricked him into marrying me."

"Tricked him?" I said. "But you didn't. He came looking for you. I saw him. He tried kissing you on the porch after the funeral."

Lici blew her nose into the handkerchief and folded it neatly, crushing it in her fist as her body shook and she let the tears fall freely. "I know that," she cried. "But that's not what he told her. That's not what she thinks! Oh, Lici, what am I going to do?"

"You could have him arrested for that," I said, leaning in to look directly at my sister. "Put him in jail, Lici. Let her figure it out after that."

"I don't even know if it's true. Not that I really care," Lici said, looking out the window again. "He can die for all I care."

"But he lied to you, Lici. He hurt you emotionally," I said. "Look at you, you're so skinny. You can't let him do this to you. You have to do something. He has to pay for doing this to you. Putting him in jail is just for starters."

"I can't," Lici said.

"Yes you can!" I said, anger rising inside me like a raging tornado. "You can't let him do this to you. If he's married to both of you, at the same time, he deserves to go to jail! You shouldn't protect him!"

Lici stood up, went to a cabinet in the small kitchen, and fumbled around until she found an envelope. She brought it back and sat down beside me again. “He didn’t marry me, Lici, not again,” she admitted. “He said he would, when he had the money. That’s why he went to Washington. To get the money.”

She handed me the envelope. There was a picture inside the folds of a brief letter. A girl with bleach blonde hair was posing for the camera as she hugged Jose, pressing his face against hers. They were both smiling. Jose was holding a beer in one hand and her shoulder in the other.

“It’s from her,” Lici said. She the handkerchief out of her dress pocket and blew her nose. “Go on. Read it.”

There were only four sentences on the note that had accompanied the picture.

Felicidad,

Stop writing to him. He doesn’t want to hear

from you. We’re having a baby in December.

He’s mine now, so leave him alone.

Minerva,

His real wife!

She shook her head and pressed her lips together. “Twice I fell for it. Twice. In three years, almost four,” she cried. “This was not supposed to happen to me. This is not part of the dream. Why do the fairy tales tell you that? That they lived happily ever after? It’s a lie, Grace. Nobody ever lives happily ever after.”

“Well, some people do,” I said.

“Name one?” she asked. “Because Mom and Dad didn’t. We know that don’t we? We know that for sure. And nobody in our neighborhood did either.”

I thought about us on the porch that day, so long ago, promising to be together always. “Some have beautiful lives together,” I said. “But I until we find that person, we should stick together, you and I. The way we used to before Jose came along.”

“We are so stupid, aren’t we,” she whispered. “We fall for it every time. The kisses, the lies, the promise of forever. But they’re vultures. Grace. Men are vultures.”

“Except for Papá,” I whispered. “I wouldn’t see he’s a vulture. He’s more like a sparrow, trying to rebuild his nest.”

Lici looked at me funny, like she didn’t know what I meant. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. I folded the letter and put it back in the envelope with the picture. “Listen. You need to forget about Jose. He doesn’t deserve your love,”

"Oh, I don't care about him. Not like that. Not anymore," Lici said, wiping a stray tear off her cheek. "I just wish I hadn't trusted him. Oh, Grace, I've been such a fool, such a hypocrite, giving you grief, hurting you, as if I knew anything about being an adult, as if I had all the answers. I'm so sorry about Connor!"

Don’t,” I whispered, my voice getting caught in my throat. “You were right about him. He’s definitely in the vulture family, more like a buzzard or a turkey vulture, but I don’t want to talk about him. He’s history.”

“I was still wrong, Grace, in trying to show you how bad he was for you. Terribly wrong,” Lici said, reaching out, grabbing my hand, and squeezing it fiercely. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“Me? Forgive you?” I blinked back tears and swallowed hard. “I should be asking you for forgiveness.”

Lici’s face paled for a moment. “Don’t,” she whispered. “Please, don’t blame yourself anymore.”

“I was responsible for him. It was my fault,” I cried out. “Can you ever forgive me for being so careless, so stupid—”

Lici reached over and wrapped her arms around me, encircled me in her skinny embrace. “You’re not stupid. You loved him. I know you loved him. You were good to him. That’s why he was always in your room. That’s why I always left him with you.”

She rocked me in her arms for a few more minutes, and I let her. “I see him, you know,” I admitted, when she finally let me go and I could speak again.

Lici cocked her head to the side. “See him?”

“Yes,” I whispered, sniffing, clearing my throat. “I conjure his image, pretend he’s there, in my room, playing with his toys or sitting in my rocking chair. I know it sounds crazy, but it makes me feel better to think of him as there with me, alive and well and so very loved.”

Lici let out a whimper and wiped away fresh tears. “Oh, Grace.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to tell you about it. It’s just something stupid I do when I’m in that room—I see him there. In my heart, he will always be there.”

“I wish I could do that—see him, talk to him, play with him,” she admitted. “I remember what he looked like, the things he said and did, and I wish he was still here, doing them. I don’t want to forget his face, so I keep pictures of him in my purse. It’s the same thing. I think. As what you do.”

We sat quietly for a moment, each of us remembering Alexander in our own quiet way, giving each other space.

"So what are you going to do now?" I asked, looking around her house, wondering what I could do to help make things better for her. I didn't have much money with me. I'd run through most of my financial aid for the semester, but I was sure once my father found out about Lici's living conditions, he would want to do something to help. He wouldn't want her living like this, not by herself, when she had family to help her. The problem was, I didn't know why Lici hadn't gone to him yet. Was she afraid of what he might do or say?

"I don't know," Lici took a deep breath, looked about her house, and sighed.

"Well, you can't stay here. This place is falling apart." I pointed to the recumbent ceiling threatening to fall down on it. "Come with me. To Alpine. You can go school there. There's nothing to stop you now."

Lici shook her head. "I can't," she whispered.

"What do you mean, you can't?" I asked. "Of course you can. You can do anything you want. You're a free woman!"

Lici turned sideways on the bed and pulled the thin sheet away from the pile of pillows, revealing the sleeping form of a newborn. The tiny little bundle was swaddled up warmly in a green blanket.

I let out a shocked squeal, something akin to laughter came bubbling out of my lips. "Oh my God! Is that? What? When?"

The baby squirmed, stretched, and then let out a tiny cry that sounded more like a yawn than a wail. Lici leaned over and picked him up. She cooed and rocked him against her shoulder.

“Here,” Lici said. She turned him gently around to face me and tried handing him over to me.

I didn’t take him. I couldn’t. My eyes were burning, brimming with something that felt like fear and love and apprehension. “Are you sure?” I whispered.

“Yes,” she said, and she placed him in the cradle of my arms and patted my shoulder. I looked down at his tiny face. He looked just like Alexander at that age, chubby and innocent and full of promise. The realization hit me hard and I couldn’t help it. Sorrow and joy welled up in my eyes and I let the tears fall unashamed. “What’s his name?” I asked, as I looked into the baby’s hazy, grey eyes.

“Her,” Lici said, smiling. “Her name is Sarita.”

A shiver ran up my spine and I held the baby tighter in my arms. “Sarita?” I tried the name out. It fit. It fit perfectly.

“I named her after Mamá,” Lici said, stroking Sarita’s curly dark locks aside, over the curve of her forehead. “She looks just like her. Don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I let out a choked, little sob that just couldn’t be contained. “Yes, she does. I love that about her.”

After cooing over Sarita for what seemed like hours, Lici finally took her away from me, fed her, and put her back on the bed, so she could go back to sleep.

“So, back to you,” I said, as I watched Lici fawn over the baby. “What are you going to do now?”

“Well, it’s not like I have many choices, Grace,” Lici admitted. “This is where he left me. So I’m kind of stuck here for a while. Until I get a job, I mean. But it’s hard, you know, to get a job in Mexico. It’s almost impossible if you’re from the states.”

“What about going back?” I asked. “You don’t have to stay here. You have a family, Lici.”

“I don't think going back home is an option,” Lici said. “Papá wouldn't want the burden of raising any more children. You have to admit he almost didn't raise us. If it hadn't been for Guelita Rosa, crusty and ornary as she is, I don't know what would've become of us.”

"You could always come live with me," I said, taking my sister's hands in mine, to stop her from wringing them nervously in her lap. "I have a good job at a hotel in Alpine. We could get our own place in town. I don't have to stay in the dorm anymore, not after this semester. You could apply for financial aid and go to school with me like we always planned.”

“College. Classes? Homework?” Lici shook her head. “That’s more your thing. I was never very good at that, Grace. You know that. Besides, I doubt I would make it without a job, now that Sarita is here.”

“That’s not a problem,” I said. “There's special assistance for unwed mothers who want to go to school. We could take classes on different days, and I would help you with your homework. You know I would. We could make it work, Lici—we could raise this baby together.”

My sister's eyes filled with tears as she took in everything I’d said. Then she leaned over, hugged me, and whispered, "You’re such an optimist. I love that about you. You know that, don’t you? That I love you. I always have.”

“I love you too,” I said, and I hugged her tight, squeezed her.

Chapter 25

“What are you doing?” Lici asked from the back seat where she was sitting with Sarita in her arms because she didn’t have a car seat.

I drove her car south, away from Eagle Pass, toward the outskirts of Piedras Negras. “I have a surprise for you,” I said, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

“Where are we?” she asked. She looked out the window at the postecito by my grandmother’s house.

“I have someone I want you to meet. But we should pick something to eat first,” I said, parking the car in front of the tiny store and turning back to look at her. “You can’t make milk if you don’t nourish your body. Besides, it’s not nice to show up empty-handed. How about some pan dulce. Can you eat that?”

“Pan dulce sounds wonderful. We’d love some, thank you,” Lici said, looking down at baby Sarita and smiling.

In the postecito, Lici asked me if she could borrow money to buy some formula. “I’m not making enough milk,” she whispered. “I can’t keep up with her.”

“Sure.” I said. Then I picked up a pair of thongs and put several molletes, an empanada, and two marranitos into a paper sack. At the counter, the girl who’d called me a pocha the year before took my American dollars and gave me change in pesos and centavos.

“I remember you,” she said as she handed me the coins. “You’re the girl that stayed at that old, abandoned house.”

Before I had a chance to ask her to give me change in American money, a woman stepped out from behind the curtain to the left of the counter. She was plump and short, with gray

hair and horn-rimmed glasses, an older version of the cashier. “Mamá,” said the girl. “This is the Americana I told you about. The one staying down the street, in that haunted house.”

“Buenas tardes,” the girl’s mother said. She stepped behind the counter and just stared at us.

“She doesn’t understand you,” the girl said, flipping her hair back, away from her face and smiling primly.

“Haunted?” I asked, in perfect Spanish.

“Oh, you speak Spanish now?” the girl asked.

I ignored her and concentrated on the mother. “What makes you think the house is haunted?”

“It’s common knowledge,” the woman said. “Everyone knows the old woman who owned the place is haunting it. But she’s not the only one. The girl who used to take care of her is there too. It makes sense with the way they died. Their souls can’t reconcile themselves to such horrible deaths.”

“Died?” Lici came up from between two aisles. “Who died?”

“The old woman, Doña Estela and her caregiver, Lucia. Such horrible deaths. Horrible.”

“How did they die?” Lici asked, putting Sarita over her shoulder as she turned to face the woman.

The woman tapped her daughter on the shoulder, and the girl moved aside, let her mother put her arms on the counter and lean into it for support. “They were murdered,” she said, quietly, like it was a secret. “Twelve years ago, during the lunar eclipse. It was a nightmare. What everyone fears but nobody will talk about. He came in and cut their throats open and bled them out right where they lay in their beds, like lambs in their stalls.”

“Murdered?” I asked. My mind spinning. “No.”

“Why?” Lici asked, rubbing the baby’s back in small, circular motions.

I shook my head. “No,” I whispered, turning away to look out the window, toward my grandmother’s house. “It’s not true.”

“Who would do such a thing?” Lici asked.

“Nobody really knows,” the woman at the counter continued. “But there were strong speculations, especially because it coincided with the escape of that man, the one who raped the old woman's daughter and went to prison for it.”

“What?” I flinched.

“It's so sad, so much pain and suffering happened in that house,” the woman turned to face me. “That's why it's still sitting empty, why nobody will ever buy it. Who wants to live with the horror stories people tell? Who wants to live with those kinds of ghosts wandering around in the dark when they go to sleep at night?”

“You’re lying!” I cried out. “Don’t listen to her, Lici. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“No. It’s true. My husband used to work there.” The older woman stepped away from the counter and rested her heavy forearms on the wooden top of a table to the left of her. “He was their gardener. He worked there all his life, stayed on long after the murders. I never understood that. Why he kept up with that garden. It was like he couldn’t reconcile their deaths in his mind. He was over there more than he was here, at home. There was no one to pay him, but he kept tilling the land. He didn’t just take care of the garden, either. He used to take care of the animals too. He used to make goat cheese for them. He brought some home too. I miss his goat cheese.”

“He made cheese?” I asked. “For them?”

“Every Sunday,” the older said, smiling at me. “He used to leave it hanging in the corner of their kitchen.”

“Grace?” Lici rocked Sarita side to side in her arms. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, in English. “Let’s go.”

We got in the vehicle and I drove down the street. When we got to Guelita Estela’s house, I stopped, put the parking brake on, and turned off the engine. “This is the house they were talking about. It’s where I stayed,” I whispered. “During Christmas break.”

“You stayed here? Why?” Lici asked, looking at my grandmother’s place.

I got out of the car and walked toward the house. Lici followed me. Sarita was asleep in her arms as she stood beside me, staring out at Guelita Estela’s house. It looked different now. The shrubbery was overgrown and the windows were bare.

Lici followed me as I opened the iron gate and walked into the yard. Like my mother had done all those years before me, I scooted along the wall, looking in every window at the empty rooms. It was clear to me now. Nobody had lived there for years. Lici turned the doorknob and pushed at the front door and it opened with a creak. She stepped inside and peeked around. I followed in. “Did you ever see anything?” she asked, her pupils dark and large in the darkened interior.

“I did,” I said. Then I wandered off to the rest of the empty, ruined house, with its cobwebs, missing interior doors, and broken, moth-eaten furniture.

In the guest room, I saw the cot I had slept in and felt a pain in my chest. I walked hurriedly past Lici and rushed out of the house. I stood on the back porch and looked out into the overrun garden with its brown patches of crabgrass and bramble weeds and my stomach churned and twisted. Feeling dizzy, I grabbed onto the side of the wall and spit out the bile in

my mouth. Then the water I'd had earlier came up and I spit it out, spasm after vile spasm, until my stomach was empty and I was dizzy and feverish and cold, all at the same time.

My vision blurred and, suddenly, I was inside the house again and my grandmother was calling me all kinds of names. "You're a slut and a whore," she hissed. "You should kill yourself before the child is born, because to bring a bastard into the world is a sin. You'll go to Hell if you do it! Do you hear me? Hell!"

My grandmother eyes were dark and luminous and intent on murder. "If I were you, I'd take a rope and hang myself from the bridge."

"Are you all right?" Grace asked standing beside me, holding Sarita in her arms, helpless to do anything but stare at me.

I nodded. "Yes," I whispered. "Yes. I'm all right now."

I heard a noise and looked up at the neighbor's new roof, only it wasn't new anymore. It was old and moldy, like it had never been worked on. A shiny, black raven was walking around on it on stilted legs. It pecked at something within the ruined shingles and then looked down at us.

"Let's go," I said, turning away and heading back to the car quickly. I sat in the driver's seat, and turned on the engine. I pressed my forehead against the top of the steering wheel and took deep breaths while I waited for Lici to come around. My heart was pounding, roaring in my ears.

Lici came back to the car and got in next to me in the front seat. She touched my arm and asked, "What happened to you in there?"

I lifted my head and looked at Lici. "Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked.

“I don’t know,” Lici said, looking down at Sarita, squirming in her arms. “Maybe. Sometimes. Yes.”

Then, because I didn’t say anything, she put her hand on my arm. “Tell me,” she whispered.

“They’re here, Lici. They’re with us, living their lives, in the same way we live ours. Day by day,” I whispered. “Guelita and Lucia and Alexander, they’re all still here. I can see them.”

Lici wiped away an errant tear off my cheek. “What about Mamá? Have you talked to her?” she asked.

“No,” I whispered. “Not yet. But I remembered her. The way she felt the night she jumped. She was dead inside, Lici. She needed to go. To escape what happened here, to her and to her mother. I can’t explain how I know that. But that’s how she felt.”

Her eyes bright, Lici put her arms around my shoulders, pulled me close and kissed my temple. “Were you scared?” she asked, her breath warm against my cheek.

“Yes.” I whimpered, turned to her, and wrapped my arms around her and Sarita. She looked so much like our mother.

She pulled back, kissed my forehead, stroked my hair. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“We should go,” I said, pushing my hair behind my ears and taking a deep breath. “We need to get to the Pulga before they close.”

Lici nodded. She lay Sarita on her lap and put her seatbelt on before she took her in her arms again and held her close to her chest. “La Pulga? What for?”

“You’re going to need a car seat,” I reminded her. “We can’t drive all the way to Alpine without a car seat. It’s the law, you know.”

We drove away. Sarita cried out. Lici fixed her a bottle with the formula we'd bought at the postecito and tried feeding it to her, but after a few seconds Sarita stopped sucking. She tried pushing the clear, plastic nipple out with her tongue. Then, as if she'd changed her mind, she began sucking eagerly.

"Is she taking to it?" I asked.

"Yes," Lici said. "I thought for a moment, she wasn't going to, but she's drinking it now."

"You better get used to it, little lady," Lici told Sarita as we sat waiting for the light to turn red at the intersection that would take us back to the United States. "I can't breastfeed you in class."

When we got to the bridge, there was a long line. "I don't think we'll make it to the Pulga in time," Lici said.

We waited patiently, paid the toll, and then waited some more. We were halfway across the bridge, when it happened again. I was looking at the top of the fence when the sun hit my eyes just so, and I felt myself fading, falling into that state of awareness I'd experienced outside my grandmother's house earlier.

I stepped out of the car and went to stand on the spot where I remembered my mother stood that night, where she stopped to look back at me. I touched the chain-link fence and felt a small, electric shock go into my hand. It traveled up my arm and into my shoulders. I closed my eyes and saw my mother leaving the car and walking away from me. She was crying.

I was in a car, shivering, whimpering, afraid. My mother was leaving and there was nothing I could say or do to stop her. She was carrying something in her hands, a long piece of rolled up rope. Her bare feet moved slowly, one step at a time, as she stepped onto the sidewalk.

I called out to her, “Mommy! Mommy!” but she couldn’t hear me because the windows were up and the doors were locked. I watched my mother slip a noose around her neck and then everything went black again and my chest hurt, a heavy, hard pain that made me panic.

I took a deep breath. Oxygen filled my lungs, coursed through my veins, and I heard my grandmother crying. “You should just kill yourself!”

“Doña Estela!” Lucia cried out. “Please don’t say things like that.”

My grandmother pushed Lucia away and stood wavering on her own two feet, suddenly frail and delicate again. “If your father was alive, he would have shaved your head, walked you down to the bridge, and done it himself,” she whispered. “You should be glad he’s dead!”

“Grace!” Lici’s voice called out to me from far away. “Grace? Can you hear me? What’s going on? What’s wrong with you? Talk to me, Grace.”

I opened my eyes and looked at Lici. My body quivered as I tried to shake the visions away, to regain my sanity, to come back to the present. “This is where it happened,” I told Lici. “This is where she jumped.”

“I know,” Lici said, putting her hands on my arms and rubbing them vigorously. “You’re freezing. Come back to the car where it’s warm.”

“I understand it now. I never told anyone, but I used to be mad at her for doing it. I was mad at Papá too, for not taking care of her, but that’s all gone now. I’m not mad anymore,” I said, looking down at the water, shivering as the wind picked up speed and dragged my hair over my face, my eyes.

Lici wrapped her arms around me and we looked down at the water together. “She might have made it,” she finally said. “If she had just jumped a few feet further down there. She might still be alive if she’d only hit the water.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “She hung herself. I saw her put the rope over her neck and tighten the noose. There was nobody out here but us. It was the middle of the night.”

Lici let me go and turned to look down at the water again. “The rope snapped, Grace,” she finally said. “You didn’t know that? She landed on the ground and hit her head on a rock.”

“No, no...I was there. I saw her,” I said, gripping the chain-linked fence so fiercely, so tightly, the wires felt like they were cutting right through my fingers. “It’s not true. Is that true?”

“It is. That’s what happened,” Lici whispered. “You just don’t remember because you were so young.”

I looked at my sister then. Her eyes were bright. Her dark pupils shone and shimmered as she winced against the sunlight. “But you’re younger than me,” I said. “How do you know that?”

“Guelita Estela told me,” Lici said, taking my hands and gently prying my fingers off the chain-links on the fence.

I didn’t ask her to fill in the blanks. Everything made sense now. “I didn’t know that,” I whispered.

“Are you okay?” she asked, after a few minutes of rubbing my cold hands between hers.

“Yes,” I said and I took her hands and kissed them. “Yes, I am.”

“Good,” she said. “Can we get back in the car? It’s cold out here. I don’t want to get sick. I have a baby to take care of.”

We got back in the car just in time. The line started to move and I put the car on drive and we crossed the border. As we drove up, over the overpass on Garrison Street, I looked in the rearview mirror.

In the hazy horizon, I could see the bell tower for the Santuario de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe. Its toll an ancient call for faith and communion. Between us, the international bridge,

a grey, petrified caterpillar, extended across the border. It awakened and wavered to life, undulating up and down gently against the sky, each segment separating then reconnecting as the people walked back and forth along its spine.

THE END

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