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## Flirting with Fate

J.C. CERVANTES

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# Flirting with Fate

J.C. CERVANTES is the *New York Times* bestselling author of books for children and young adults. Her books have appeared on national lists, including the American Booksellers Association's New Voices, Barnes and Noble's Best Young Reader Books, as well as Amazon's Best Books of the Month. She has earned multiple awards and recognitions, including the New Mexico Book Award and the Zia Book Award.

She currently resides in the Land of Enchantment with her family, three spoiled dogs, and a lifetime collection of books. But she keeps part of her heart in Southern California, where she was born and raised. When she isn't writing, she is haunting bookstores and searching for magic in all corners of the world.

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Ava Granados—self-professed skeptic—will never forgive herself for being late to her beloved nana’s deathbed. For generations, mystical blessings have been passed to the women in her family upon death, but due to a freaky flash flood that leaves Ava in a fender bender with a mysterious boy, she arrives seconds too late for her grandmother’s blessing. Instead, all she gets is the wash of regret on her sisters’ faces; they now have magical gifts that Ava could only dream about.

Until Nana pops up with a challenge from beyond the grave. As it turns out, Nana did give Ava a blessing, but it missed, landing with the boy from the night of the storm. If Ava can’t straighten out the mistake, Nana will linger in limbo as a memoryless ghost forever, which she’s not exactly excited about. To help her on her quest, Ava will have her two older sisters and Nana’s rather bumbling spiritual guide, Medardus, who is, of all things, the patron saint of teeth.

For guarded Ava, befriending some random boy is the last thing she wants to do. She’s gotten along just fine protecting her heart; keeping people at a distance is a great way to ensure no one ever hurts you. But as Ava and the gang embark on their mission to retrieve the lost blessing, she starts to wonder if what she might gain by getting close to thunderstorm boy is worth the risk.

In her swoony and lighthearted young adult debut, *New York Times* bestselling author J.C. Cervantes invites us into the Granados sisters’ glitzy, glamorous LA world and weaves an unforgettable tale about family, fate, and unexpected romance.



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# *Fate's Prologue*

On July 7 at precisely 9:01 p.m., a boundless, unforeseen storm claimed one life, two hearts, and six destinies.

The Southern California skies had been a brilliant blue dappled with wispy threads of white. A warm, easy, splendid kind of day where you'd think nothing could go wrong. Ah, but one's fate is not always built on solid ground. And wrong is always a question of perspective. Take, for example, the girl at the center of this tale, Ava Granados. She is stubborn, quick-witted, was born into a mystical family, and, well, she thinks very little of me. Perhaps things would have been different for her if she had afforded me an ounce of respect.

On this summer day, like most days prior, Ava woke early and suffered through SoulCycle with her older sister Carmen. Boring, routine, sweaty. She spent the afternoon making a Pinterest board with monochromatic bedroom ideas and ended up spiraling down a rabbit hole of DIY crafts for the tactically deficient, like tiny shoe pom poms and rag wreaths.

In two months' time, she plans to begin her senior year and get a jump start on college applications. Until then, she is committed to one thing: joyous boredom, much to her father's consternation. He desperately wants her to go to college nearby and work for the family's design firm. Raul Granados is always ranting and raving with some version of "Mija, why write

about the people doing great things when you can be the great one? Look at our firm, right there in Architectural Digest. Eh? Someone wrote about us.” He would poke his chest with his thumb as his face lit up brighter than the Virgen’s altar.

Little does Ava know that in precisely five minutes and sixteen seconds, I will launch a lightning rod into her life. Death. Death always gets humans’ attention.

Ava has always hated thinking about death in any capacity. When she was a child, she would pray for all the dead animals’ souls to go to heaven. Then she began to include all the dead insects, because their ends always felt so untimely and unfair. She thought that the only thing those poor creatures had to look forward to was being squished under a shoe or flattened on a windshield.

I almost pity her—hunched over a dim desk, reading the black-and-white memories of strangers. With no idea that her life is about to be derailed in a way she’ll never see coming.

It is 8:16 p.m. now, and Ava is at the LA Times, organizing digital archives. It is her ideal summer internship: words, spines, photographs, paper. An introvert’s paradise.

Fifty-nine seconds to go.

Ava leans over her messy worktable and scans a 1959 photo of some young guy carrying a banner that says Marry Me. No name, no other descriptors. A seemingly innocuous object. Or is it? She, of course, does not yet realize its significance. She merely looks at the date and thinks it is ironic that it is the same as today. Oh, humans.

She wonders, Did she say yes or no?

And this is all I need to strike the match.

# One

Ava's cell phone buzzed, and a clap of thunder vibrated her bones. She reached for her phone, turned it over to see her sister's name on the screen.

"Hey, Carm."

Lightning lit up the night sky in great unpredictable flashes. The wind howled violently.

Carmen's garbled voice was swallowed by static and unceasing gales. Then, in a voice heavy with urgency, "Ava!"

The call was lost.

There was a moment of silence, stillness, nothingness. It was as if the universe had paused to take a breath and ask, What are you going to do now, Ava Granados?

A long shiver crawled up Ava's legs, and in the space of a single thought, Something is wrong, her phone lit up again. The single buzz prompted the sky to split open and unleash a torrent like Ava had never seen or heard.

"Carmen?" Ava couldn't control the tremble in her voice. "Is everything okay?"

"Where are you?" Carmen demanded.

A peal of thunder.

"My internship."

"This late?"

"Trying to impress the boss. Where are you?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Then why'd you ask me?"

"Why do you always have to be so immature?"

Carmen was twenty, three years older than Ava, but she acted like she was everyone's mother. She had an opinion about everything under the sun—an opinion no one could count on because it was likely to change by the next moon.

Rain pounded the roof. Lights flickered. The very air seemed to sizzle with an ominous energy that set Ava on edge.

"It's Nana," Carmen said. "Dad says this is it . . . as in . . . the end."

"Is he sure this time?" Ava's heart crawled up her throat. "I mean, Nana's been on her deathbed five times this month alone."

"Yes, pendeja! But I'm in the middle of a gel fill, and I don't know if I should leave or not."

Lightning flashed. Then again. The rain came faster, harder. More determined than before.

"Seriously?" Ava chided. "If this really is the end, who cares about your nails!"

"I do! And remember the last time I was at the salon? I was still processing my highlights, ran out, and ended up looking like a fried version of J. Lo? But you're right . . ." She took a breath. "This is Nana. How could she leave us like this? Hang on," Carmen was gone for a moment, and when she returned, their oldest sister, Vivienne, had been looped into the call.

"Are you on your way, Ava?" Vivienne asked.

"Carmen just called a minute ago," Ava grumbled as she began to make piles of the photographs and notes on her desk. "How can I be on my way?"

She lowered her voice, remembering the cubicles around her were filled with nosy people probably looking for a welcome distraction.

“That’s a minute you’ve wasted on the phone because you don’t move fast enough, and that’s why you’re late everywhere!” Vivienne nearly shouted.

“Hey!” Ava argued, accidentally knocking a few photos and documents onto the floor. She quickly retrieved them and tossed them back onto her desk as she headed toward the exit, past the roving eyes of her co-workers. “I was at the last seven deathbeds. You were only at three.”

“What does it matter?” Carmen groaned. “Nana didn’t die all those times, so no one missed the blessing!” She hollered the last word, as if any of them could forget what Nana’s death really meant.

“And I need my blessing,” Vivienne reminded her. “Like, bad.” Twenty-two-year-old Vivienne worried she would never find Prince Charming. Ava worried, too, but not because her sister wasn’t beautiful or smart or a newly minted architect who was also the most talented designer at the family’s firm. Viv was . . . Viv. Hard-hitting, stubborn, picky. She’d probably demand a résumé before a first date.

“Same,” Carmen chimed in. “I just hope I get something really good.”

“Is that all you guys care about?” Ava said, her heart sinking.

“As if you haven’t thought about it,” Carmen accused. “And she’s the one leaving us!”

It was so Carmen to make this about her. It was also so Carmen to deflect to ease the pain.

The lights flashed once, then croaked, plunging Ava and the entire office into total darkness. Groans rose up. Quickly, Ava turned on her phone flashlight. “I have to go,” she said.

“No!” Vivienne shouted. “You can’t drive in this storm. Are you crazy?”

"You just said—"

"Forget what I said," Vivienne argued. "It's getting worse. Dad just came in. He told me to tell you to stay where you are or he'll take your car away."

"She's right," Carmen agreed half-heartedly.

Ava asked Carmen, "Well, how come you can drive home?"

"I'm at the salon point five miles away," she countered. "You're all the way downtown. This thing came out of nowhere, and it's too dangerous. No blessing is worth your life, Ava." Then, "Hey, you think Nana will give me yours too?"

She was joking of course, because Nana had made the fine print clear—only one blessing per person. All the women in the Granados family had this keen, odd, otherworldly ability to pass along blessings to their female descendants. But here was the catch: they could only do so from their deathbeds.

And if they died suddenly? Tough luck.

Ava's great-grandmother had graced Nana with an angel's voice. Before that, Nana couldn't even sing off-key. Ava's dad always said Nana used to sound like a dying cat in a Tijuana alley. And after the deathbed blessing? It was like listening to a Mexican Pavarotti when she opened her mouth to sing.

Ava rolled her eyes. "You joke at the worst times, Carm."

"Who's joking?"

"I don't care what you say. I'm coming," Ava insisted. In her mind's eye, Ava saw Nana lying in her linen-draped bed, wearing the gold bracelet she wore every day, saying only that it came from Fate. She remembered the long walks down the shore—always in the evening, because Nana loved the nighttime best. Ava set her jaw. Blessing or no, she wasn't letting Nana take her last breath without her. Yes, she was curious about the blessing her

grandmother had chosen for her. She had begged her to tell her about it, but Nana had only said, “I won’t know until the moment is upon us.”

Pushing through the double doors, Ava’s heart rate began to rise. What if Carmen is right? What if this really is it and not a death rehearsal?

The lights flicked back on as Ava came to her boss’s office at the end of the hall. Drawing nearer, she saw him stacking another World War II book on the bookcase. The guy is obsessed with warfare, Ava thought.

Grant was twenty-five-ish and looked like one of those guys who sold overpriced T-shirts at a rock concert, except that he was a super-smart features editor who had made it clear that he had lost the coin toss when they were handing out the intern supervisor title this summer. He had two burner phones, so Ava thought he either worked undercover for the CIA; had a lot of girlfriends, boyfriends, or both; was a drug dealer; or he was just paranoid. Ava asked him about the phones once, and all he said was, “I like my privacy.” Ava wasn’t sure if he was telling her to buzz off or if that really was the reason.

Even though Ava had only been interning at the newspaper for three and a half weeks, she and Grant had already arrived at this exact moment several times. The call. Ava’s quick exit. The deathbed. The miracle recovery. Ava making up hours, and then some. Grant definitely knew the drill.

“Should I wait to say sorry?” Grant asked after she told him why she was leaving.

Ava shrugged, searching for the yes, but all she felt was no, no, no rattling around her chest.

He opened his mouth, hesitated. Then he turned his expressive hazel eyes on Ava in a protective, geez, sorry, kid kind of way. “You really going to drive in this wicked storm?”

Ava felt a mother of a headache coming on. “I have to.”

“Came out of nowhere,” Grant said, stroking his chin and looking at the blank wall as if there were a window there. “You want an umbrella?” he asked.

“I’m parked close.”

“That’s good,” he said. “I don’t think I even own an umbrella. Want me to drive you?”

“It’s only a few miles,” Ava lied. “I’ll be fine.”

With a full shrug and half nod, Grant threw his gaze back to World War II. “All right, but text when you’re safe.”

Outside, the turbulent rain came down not in drops but in sheets. Lightning flared, forcing Ava to shield her eyes. Unearthly shadows bent and writhed, leaped and thrashed. If she didn’t know better, she would think this damned storm was trying to keep her away from Nana.

One, two, three breaths, and Ava sprinted into the squall, hoping she wouldn’t be struck down by the fearsome bolts intent on killing the dark.

She ran, awkward and half-bent, splashing through ankle-deep puddles, using her thin arms for pathetic and useless cover while simultaneously soaking her brand-new Golden Gooses.

Finally, she found her Jeep, unlocked it with the remote, and hopped inside. She craned her head to look out the windshield at the storm-shredded sky. “Perfect timing,” she groaned.

Another thunderclap shook the earth, making her jump in her seat.

For the first time, Ava was afraid. Afraid she wouldn’t make it in time to say goodbye.

Ava squeezed back tears and started the car. Fifteen miles, she thought. Hold on for fifteen miles, Nana.

I-10 was nearly empty. It didn’t surprise Ava. People in LA only know how to drive in two types of weather: sunny and cloudy.



“She’s okay,” Ava said to herself, leaning forward, bent over the steering wheel as she struggled to see beyond the torrential rain. The windshield wipers were on the fastest setting, and barely helping.

“Listen, God,” Ava said. “If you get me home with enough time, I’ll go to confession for . . .” She hesitated. She hated confession, but these were dire circumstances, and she didn’t think God was going to be impressed with anything other than something monumental. “I’ll go for a whole week.” She swallowed the promise like it was poison. And then realizing she hadn’t been specific enough, she clarified, “Home in time to say goodbye.”



Fifteen miraculous minutes and ten stiff knuckles later, she pulled off the highway and into the seaside city of Santa Monica. Her phone, sitting in the cupholder, buzzed. Ava cursed herself for forgetting to turn on Bluetooth.

Glancing down, she saw that it was Loretta, her not-stepmom, but she was afraid to take even one hand off the wheel to answer. Maybe it was better. She wasn’t in the mood to get sucked into a drama-mama moment.

Buzz. Buzz.

Ava came to a red light. Looked at the phone’s blinking screen. What if it’s about Nana? Swiftly, she pressed the speaker button.

“Hello?”

The only response was an earful of static.

“Loretta, can you hear me? I’m only a couple of miles away.”

There was silence, and for a second Ava thought the phone had disconnected, until she heard Loretta say, “She’s fading fast.”

Fading? No! Jeans fade. Memories fade. Not people. Not Nana.

Ava hung up and accelerated, trying to balance speed with safety. A

terrible combination under the best of circumstances.

“Please hold on, Nana,” she whispered, so low she couldn’t hear her own voice over the battering storm.

Ava had always known she was her grandmother’s favorite. Although, Vivienne had worked really hard to dethrone Ava. The oldest Granados sister had even considered becoming a nun once. And poor Carmen was third in line for Nana’s favor. Carmen had once been in second place, until she got a fake ID at fifteen just so she could get a heart tattoo on her hip.

The rain pounded unrelentingly.

And then, one mile from the house, the one thing Ava didn’t want to think about, the one stupid word that plagued everything in existence popped into her head: Destiny. If Nana were in the front seat (refusing to wear a seat belt) she would tell Ava to quit fighting, that Fate had played her hand. And won. But Ava refused to believe she wasn’t in control of her own life.

Wiping a tear with the back of her hand, she pressed her foot against the gas with more force. It was exactly 8:51 p.m.

The Jeep hydroplaned.

Ava braked, skidded, fishtailed before she righted the vehicle.

Too late to see the brake lights in front of her.

There are moments that define people’s lives, moments that are wedged in between before and after, then and now, here and there. And some of those moments are balanced precariously on the steep precipice of what if.

Suddenly and without expectation, the storm ceased as if the collision had consumed the echoes of thunder, had swallowed the wind, had cast out the lightning and rain.

It took several breaths for Ava to realize that the impact sounded worse

than it was. She was okay—the airbag hadn’t even deployed.

In the headlights, she saw a white guy hopping out of the truck she had hit. He looked around Ava’s age. Tall, loose-fitting jeans, unkempt hair, angular nose, defined jaw, and big feet. He wore a fierce glare, the kind that seemed capable of scaring a happy-go-lucky puppy.

Ava jumped out of her car. “What’s wrong with you?” she cried, indignant. “Why were you just . . . sitting there?”

The guy scowled. “See the big red octagonal sign? It means stop.”

Ava wanted to choke him. Twice. Hadn’t he ever heard of a California stop? Roll and go? “I don’t have time for this!” Her voice escalated as she realized she was wasting time arguing with a sarcastic someone she already didn’t like.

The guy started in on how Ava should watch where she was going, and then his dark eyes caught hers, locking her in place. She felt a drop in her stomach just as his thick eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Oh, um . . . you’re crying. I . . . uh . . . look, you didn’t even dent my truck. It’s all good.”

“It’s the rain,” she said, wiping the tears away. No way was she going to snivel in front of some stranger who didn’t know how to drive. Correction: he didn’t know how to stop.

But then he said, “Hey, are you okay?”

The dam shattered. Ava broke down sobbing, telling him her nana was dying at this very minute, and the harder she tried to shut up, the more her mouth kept churning out words. “And now I’m late all because of you, and if I miss saying goodbye . . .”

He looked terrified, and was urging Ava into her car before she could blubber another word. “You need to go,” he said. “Are you sure you can drive?”

Still sniveling, Ava nodded her head, closed the door, and took off. When she looked in the rearview, the guy was standing in the middle of the road, his truck headlights shining behind him, hands in pockets, watching her drive away.

Forty-five seconds later, she turned down the secluded cul-de-sac and pulled through the long driveway's wrought iron gates. By the time she made it to the backyard casita, everyone was gathered around Nana's bed: Dad, Carmen, and Vivienne, who strangely looked away when Ava entered.

Nana was sitting up, wide-eyed, gripping a pillow, rocking back and forth as she repeated Ava's name over and over and over.

"I'm here," Ava cried, rushing over.

As if no one else was in the room, Nana's eyes alighted on Ava, and with great effort, she rasped, "No . . . can't be." Then she grimaced, squeezed her eyes closed, and said, "Meteors, stars, 8:51. Collision. And the hummingbird. ¿Me escuchas?"

Ava's throat tightened. She wanted to tell her nana that yes, she heard her but that she wasn't making any sense, but what did it matter now? Ava merely nodded.

The old woman broke into a coughing fit.

Ava's dad reached for the glass of water on the nightstand, but Nana waved him away, gesturing for Ava to sit on the edge of the bed.

A rumble of thunder shook the house. The sky unleashed a greater fury than before.

Nana grasped Ava's hand, gripping it with surprising strength, tugging her closer.

"Ava . . . you are . . . you are . . ." Her voice was broken by another, more violent bout of coughing.

“It’s okay,” Ava told her, stroking her forehead. “Don’t try to talk.”

Urgently, Nana tightened her grasp. She held her granddaughter’s gaze, silent and unwavering. The lights flickered. A window blew open. “You are . . .” Suddenly she seized. Gaspd. Fell back with a heavy thud. And the last words to fall from her lips were “too late.”

# Two

After the shock of losing Nana, after the shock of being too late, Ava dragged herself to her room, fatigued and puffy-faced. Falling into bed, she felt an unexpected upsurge of emotion in the center of her chest: Grief? Frustration? Anger? Resentment?

Yes, definitely resentment. It was the same feeling she'd had when her mom walked out ten years ago. Ava was only seven. Caroline Granados had said she was going to the grocery store for some eggs, but as she drove away that night, Ava saw stacks of luggage through the car's backseat window.

She had left on a Tuesday. She took her clothes and her shoes and her handbags, but she didn't take her girls. And she didn't take her fairy tale. She left that in the center of Ava's memory and heart. But Ava didn't want to think about ridiculous fairy tales or her mother's soft, soothing voice whenever she told Ava the story she had created just for her.

Ava stared up at the ceiling's carved beams, shoving the tears and resentment back down into that place between her ribs where nothing could hurt her. It didn't stop the ugly truth from gurgling back up, though.

Ava had been too late.

Stupid storm. Stupid truck. Stupid boy! If she hadn't rear-ended that guy, she could have had more time with Nana. But did it even matter? she wondered. Short goodbyes were better. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

She pondered briefly whether she had to keep her promise to go to confession. Technically, she had made it in time to say goodbye. But that's the thing about goodbyes: there is never enough time. And besides, Ava never said when she would go. Only that she would.

Just then Carmen and Viv popped their heads into her room, turned on the light, and tiptoed in like toddlers scared to wake their sleeping parents.

"We need to tell you something," Viv said, contorting her face into that revealing expression that usually meant You aren't going to like it.

"I'm tired," Ava said, throwing an arm over her eyes to block out the light. "Can you . . . tell me your blessings tomorrow?" She knew that's why they were here, and she didn't begrudge her sisters . . . or at least she didn't think she did, but she just wanted to collapse into a world of sleep and darkness and forgetfulness.

Carmen crawled under the covers and put her head gently on Ava's shoulder. "It's not about that. It's . . . it's something Nana said."

"To be fair," Viv reassured, planting herself on the edge of the bed, "I didn't hear it, but I told Carmen we had to tell you. That no way could we keep it a secret."

Because the number one Granados sister truth was that secrets rip families apart, and after their mom walked out, the trio had pinkie- and blood-sworn that they would always tell each other the truth; they would never ever lie, no matter how bad it was or how much it hurt.

"What is it?" Ava inched out from under Carmen's small frame so she could sit up.

"Go ahead, Carmen," Vivienne said.

Carmen sat up, folding her legs beneath her. She picked at her unfinished gel manicure. "I didn't think we should tell you what happened . . . I

mean before you got to the house tonight. I thought it would make things worse, but Viv is making me.”

“Mm-hmm,” Ava uttered, “since when can anyone make you do anything?”

“Since she got the blessing of persuasion!” Carmen’s eyes popped wide, and she threw her hands over her mouth. “Shit! I wasn’t supposed to say that.”

Viv groaned. “Way to go, idiota.”

Ava’s eyes darted to her oldest sister. “Persuasion?”

Tugging on the strings of her silk hoodie, Viv said, “It’s not like Carmen thinks. It’s not like I can go around making people do anything I want them to. Nana said I would just be able to help others see my side of things.”

“Like a vampire,” Carmen put in.

Viv threw eye-daggers at Carmen. “Stop putting wild ideas into her head!” Then to Ava, “She’s being dramatic as usual. I can’t compel people, but we didn’t come here to talk about our blessings, I swear.”

Ava’s spirits sank lower as the memory of you are too late hovered like a thundercloud. “Well, now I want to know what you got,” she said to Carmen.

Carmen twisted her full lips into a pout, turned her gaze upward to the ceiling. “It’s totally . . .” She hesitated before the certain complaint left her mouth. Then, as if she couldn’t control herself, she blurted, “It’s so pitiful! I got the blessing of memory, which I guess means that I can recall details, read or hear or see something once and remember it verbatim. I already tested the reading part, and it’s weird—like having a camera in my head. I don’t even like to read, and half the things I already remember I want to forget, so it’s not exactly a blessing! What was Nana thinking?”



"I could seriously smother you with that pillow," Viv said as she shoved Carmen's hips out of the way to make more room on the bed.

"And I'd remember every awful detail of it," Carmen cried.

"At least you guys got blessings," Ava said, trying to swallow the fat lump in her throat. She wondered what motivated Nana to give Ava's sisters persuasion and memory.

I'll know the right blessing when the time is upon me, Nana had said.

Except when it comes to me, Ava thought. It wasn't necessarily the gift itself that mattered so much, it was the promise that Ava had held on to her entire life, a promise to have a piece of Nana forever: The *benedición* is a single thread that connects us all.

"Well, for once," Vivienne said, rolling her eyes, "we can trust Carmen's memory. Tell Ava the rest."

Carmen frowned. Opened her mouth to say something like she might argue, and under normal circumstances Ava was sure she would, and she would win by sheer determination and fiery temperament alone. Neither Ava nor Vivienne liked going head-to-head with the hurricane that thrashed inside of Carmen. It was too dangerous and too unpredictable.

"Right after my blessing," Carmen began with dramatic flair, "Nana sat straight up." She stiffened her own body to demonstrate. "I was still sitting next to her, and she said it in such a low voice, I swear it was like she only wanted me to hear, but she whispered, 'I can't wait. Ava. Ava, where are you?' And then her eyes got all creepy and faraway and she stretched out her hands kind of Frankensteinish, and . . ."

"And what?" Ava said.

Leaning closer, Carmen uttered, "And she said, 'I give you the blessing of . . .'"

Ava jumped to her knees. Her stomach twisted in agonizing knots.

“Blessing of what?”

“I didn’t hear the rest,” Carmen admitted with a wince.

“What! Why?”

“I . . . I . . . sneezed.”

“Carmen!” Ava grumbled. “How could you?”

“How could I sneeze?” she asked incredulously.

“It’s not her fault,” Viv said.

With a defeated breath, Ava sank back down. “It doesn’t even matter because, guess what? I wasn’t there to get the blessing anyways, so joke’s on me.”

“But aren’t you curious?” Carmen said. “To, like, know what could have been?”

Ava hated those words, what could have been. They were better left in the made-up worlds of stories.

Viv sighed. “Don’t listen to Carm. It’s fate. If you were meant to—”

“Don’t even start.” Ava felt sick. “You know I don’t believe in fate and destiny and meant-to-be.” They were excuses for people to do bad things, to break people’s hearts, to leave their families.

Carmen tugged a diamond hoop out of her ear and rubbed the lobe. “Well, I do believe, and you’ll see—there’s going to be a lesson in all of this.”

“You sound like Nana,” Ava whispered. She couldn’t believe her grandmother was actually gone. She would never travel Mexico’s back roads with her again. She would never take walks down to the ocean just because Nana loved the feeling of sand between her toes. She would never listen to Nana’s velvet voice belt out Spanish ballads again. Never. Again.

As if by intuition, Viv rubbed Ava’s shoulder gently and said, “And if Nana were here, she would agree with Carmen. She would tell you to

trust that everything happened exactly as it should.”

“Whatever,” Ava said, hardening her heart. “All I know is Nana isn’t here, and obviously I wasn’t meant to know what blessing she wanted to give me, so what kind of cruel fate is that?” And now I’ll be forever disconnected, she thought.

Vivienne and Carmen exchanged a knowing glance, then Viv said, “Wait . . . you’re not getting it. We think she did give the blessing.”

The walls seemed to be closing in on all sides, and Ava suddenly felt like a bird flying toward a window it doesn’t see until slam.

“Maybe you were close enough to the house,” Viv said with an uptick in her voice that sounded more hopeful than Ava dared to feel. “We can try and figure this out, Ava . . . but only if you want.”

Ava chewed her bottom lip, thinking about the words no one had heard. Did she really want to know what she had missed, or was it better to not know? It’s not like knowing would deliver the blessing. It was too late. Nana had said so.

Viv and Carmen each placed a hand on top of Ava’s. The Granados sisters were exceptional at reading each other’s minds, anticipating words, and reading expressions like letters on the page. Viv and Carmen stared at Ava expectantly, their breathing big enough to fill up the room. They probably knew what Ava was going to do before she did.

Ava had the choice of two words: yes or no. She was better built for the no, better built to forget and to move on. But that tiny space between her ribs quivered. “I’m not sure it matters now.”

Carmen was doing that open-mouth breathing thing she always did when she was excited. “Well, I am sure, and Nana spoke your blessing at exactly 8:51. I remember because I looked at the digital clock right when I reached for a tissue.”

“Do you remember where you were at that exact moment, Ava?” Viv asked.

“Driving home.” Ava’s memory tugged a crumb loose. “Wait. Nana said 8:51. And something about meteors and a hummingbird or . . . Carmen,” Ava said, “What exactly did Nana tell me when I got here? Word for word.”

Carmen blew out a long breath. “I can already see you guys are going to take advantage of my memory.”

“Just tell me!”

“Fine. Nana said, and I quote, ‘Meteors, stars, 8:51. Collision. And the hummingbird. ¿Me escuchas?’”

“Collision. That’s it!” Ava cried. “I was in an accident. She must have known, right? That was about the time I hit the guy’s car.”

“You hit someone’s car?” Viv said, switching into mama bear mode. “Was anyone hurt?”

Shaking her head, Ava explained, “It’s why I was late. It was totally his fault. He was just sitting at the stop sign like he had nowhere else to be.”

“A crash isn’t a blessing,” Carmen said.

Viv nodded. “What do you think Nana meant by the hummingbird and meteors, Carm?”

Pulling an exasperated face, Carmen adjusted her pink hair scrunchie. “How should I know? I have super memory, not super-spy skills. Maybe Ava is going to space on a rocket named Hummingbird or something.” She yawned, fell back onto the pillow, and closed her eyes. Carmen could fall asleep anywhere, and once exhaustion settled into her bones, she was lights out.

Viv threw a woeful look to Ava. “Listen, Greeyo . . .”

Ever since Ava could remember, Viv had called her Grillo, Spanish for cricket, and ever since she could remember, Ava would ask her sister why

she chose that nickname. It wasn't because Ava was quiet. She wasn't. And it wasn't because she was small, Carmen was a lot more petite. "It's because I annoy you," seven-year-old Ava had guessed.

Viv only smirked and offered, "Someday I will tell you."

"But why not now?"

"Because surprises make life so much better."

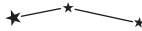
Except that Ava hated surprises.

Now, Viv said, "I know we can figure this out."

Ava wasn't betting on it. Most good things came in bite sizes. Not enough to fill anyone up. "I don't want to think about it anymore," Ava sighed. "Nana already said I was too late, so let's just forget it, okay?"

Forget, forget, forget.

A few minutes later, Ava killed the lights, and they fell asleep, curled onto the bed like three snuggled bears.



Sometime after midnight, Ava blinked against the silent dark. She wasn't sure what had woken her. A sound? A dream she couldn't remember? A pain under her ribs? And just as she was about to steal her pillow back from Carmen, she heard it. Nana's voice: Mija, are you there?

Caroline and seven-year-old Ava sat on the beach, scooping up cool, wet sand for a castle. The waves were gentle that day, sweeping to shore with a soothing rhythm while seagulls floated across the silvery sky.

"First you have to dig the moat," Caroline said. "Like this."

Ava watched her mother's capable hands digging a chasm deeper and deeper. "Why?"

"To protect the princess."

“And the castle too?”

Caroline smiled softly.

“Someday,” Ava said, “I’m going to live in a castle.”

“Well,” her mother said, brushing a stray hair back with her arm. “Castles are very pretty, but they are dangerous too. Some princesses get locked in them and they become prisons.”

Ava tried to shape a pile of sand into something that resembled a tower.

“But not this one, right?”

Caroline laughed. “Would you like to hear a story about a special princess?”

“Why is she special?” Ava said, more interested in the tale than the sandcastle now. “What happened?”

“She threw away her destiny,” Caroline said slowly. “And she never wore the crown.”

# Three

**I**t had been four days since Ava had heard her dead grandmother's whispering voice. But when Ava spoke into the dark that night, "Nana?", all she got was Viv's elbow to her spine. Ava was, of course, glad her sisters had been asleep. They would have thought she had officially lost it. She could hear them now. Carmen: I always knew you got the weird genes. Vivienne: Your mind is on overdrive.

Ava decided she had been dreaming, and, thankfully, she didn't hear Nana's voice the rest of the week. The Granados family spent the following days planning the funeral, meeting with Father Conrad, ordering Nana's favorite white roses, hiring caterers, and edging through the world half-dazed in a fog of disbelief.

Ava's dad insisted on having a grande celebration. The man did nothing small-scale. He had worked his way up from "nadaville" as a contractor to build his company, and swore he would never reduce himself or his family to nothing status again. Which meant that their eight-thousand-square-foot Spanish-style home replete with seven bedrooms, nine bathrooms, and a kitchen any chef would die for was now filled with at least two hundred people who let their hands touch things that didn't belong to them as they swept through the casa: silver frames, hand-carved san-

tos, tin retablos, fine crystal vases . . . even the crucifix hanging in the entry, or more specifically Jesus's worn feet.

Two hundred people who didn't even know Nana, Ava thought resentfully as she stood on the exterior balcony, staring down across the multi-terraced backyard, a palm-lined sanctuary that had been photographed for magazines, style blogs, and even a few design books. The carefully cultivated garden of lemon, carob, and pomegranate trees was often described as "a step back in time," or a "stroll through Tuscany." But to Ava it was, and always would be, Nana's oasis.

Wishing she were anywhere but here, and in a less itchy skirt, Ava watched the strangers flow in and out of the house, mingling like rats eager to dig their next path to some influential somebody. Ava watched their eyes light up with forced amusement. Their voices carried mind-numbing small talk regarding kids (growing, Ivy-bound, married, promoted), trips to Europe (delightful, enchanting, magical), house projects (exhausting, delayed, expensive), and endless gossip (divorce, face-lift, bankruptcy).

And in the center of it all, Ava's dad and Loretta, the woman he married three years ago. Loretta was nice enough—a petite woman with pale eyes and bright white teeth. She lived in yoga pants and turtlenecks because she "hated her jowls." She used no makeup except for mascara, and spent most of her time saving the whales or the elephants or the coral reef. But the *número uno* thing Ava liked about her? Loretta never tried to fill Caroline's shoes. And *número dos*? She made Raul happy. Not in a forever Titanic kind of way, but in a Timon and Pumba kind of way. Friends. Companions. I've got your back, buddies.

Loretta and Raul floated effortlessly. Loretta with a pleasant smile that looked real to the untrained eye, but Ava knew it was painted on with care-



ful precision. And Raul? His silver hair was perfectly combed. His Brioni suit impeccably tailored for his broad frame and average height. His smile was small, sprinkled with grief, but honest and open. He loved people, loved the grab-handling, the politicking of it all. “How do you think I built this business?” he always said.

Nana would hate all this, Ava thought. Of course, Nana’s heart could always be swayed. For example, she really didn’t care for Caroline because she was only half Mexican and acted like more of a gringa than a Fox News anchor. But then Caroline birthed Vivienne, and Nana melted an inch, and an inch and an inch.

Vivienne stepped onto the balcony. “If you’re going to hide, the balcony probs isn’t the best spot.”

“Why are there so many of them?” Ava asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Moscas at a matanza,” Viv said, tugging her exceedingly long dark ponytail over her shoulder to examine it for split ends. “But it’s business,” she said, frowning at her hair.

“You think sucking up to Dad really works?” Ava asked. “Like, does the firm actually take on projects—”

“Don’t be naive,” Viv huffed. “That’s how the world works. Scratch my back; I’ll scratch yours.”

“That’s depressing.”

“Only if you’re not getting any back scratches.”

All the LA elites wanted the eminent Granados firm to design their homes, summer cottages, and sprawling villas. But really? Ava thought they just wanted someone to redesign their lives. Fill in the edges of their hearts. Raul understood the value of supply and demand, and when he hit it big fifteen years ago, he made himself desirable, appealing, and above all, selec-

tive. That was the bait. Then he wrote a few coffee-table books, started an online store, built the company to one hundred strong, and made strategic decisions as to who to take on as clients—aka, recognized names who were style leaders with big pockets and bigger mouths.

Carmen sauntered out just then. She was wearing the body-con dress Raul had called “unbefitting” a funeral and had made her take off before they left the house that morning.

“Dad’s going to kill you for putting that back on,” Ava said, raising a single brow.

“He said I couldn’t wear it to a funeral, and technically this isn’t the funeral. It’s the after-gathering thing.” Carmen pushed a honey-blond strand behind her ear. “Besides,” she added. “This is Balmain, and I spent a fortune on it, and I figure to get a return on my investment I have to wear it twelve and a half times before it’s not the it dress anymore.”

“Balmain isn’t going out of style anytime soon,” Viv said. She knew all about lasting style, since she favored a classic timeless look herself.

Ava adjusted the gray pencil skirt she had borrowed from Viv because her own closet was filled with joggers, jeans, and more joggers. “How do you wear a dress half a time?” she asked.

“Today is the half,” Carmen said matter-of-factly.

Viv slung her arm around Ava’s shoulders and pulled her in, planting a kiss on the side of her head. “Dad sent me up here to get you.”

“Please don’t make me,” Ava groaned. “I already did my penance and said hi to at least like thirty people.”

“He wants to make an announcement and wants us all there.”

“What kind of announcement?”

“Probably for a photo op,” Carmen said as she swept her gaze back to the crowd. Then her eyes lit up. “Who’s that hottie?”

Ava followed her sister's gawk to Grant. He was gliding through the crowd like a well-fed shark. Ava had never seen him in anything other than jeans and stretched-out tees, and wondered where he had gotten the threads. "My boss?" Ava said, wondering why he'd come. Not that anyone needs an invite to a funeral, Ava thought, but he didn't seem like the kind of guy who liked hanging around with this type of crowd. Scratch that. He didn't seem like he would hang out with any crowd.

"Can I get an internship at the paper?" Carmen batted her eyelashes shamelessly.

Viv sighed. "Seriously, Carmen. Don't you have enough boyfriends?"

"Look," Carmen said, "there are a lot of boys to kiss in this world."

"He's not your type," Ava said. Not that she knew anything about Grant other than that he liked war, was really good at his job, and worked tons of hours. When Ava had first started the internship, she thought it was important to get her boss to like her, because when the summer was over, he would write her college recommendation letters to some competitive far-away schools like Columbia. So she always worked extra hours, did things outside of her copyediting internship, like archiving photos when no one else wanted to. And for insurance she would bring him coffee or muffins. Grant always said thank you, but then he'd add something like, "Is there anything else?" or "Can you close the door on the way out?"

"Hot is always my type," Carmen teased as she looked down at her buzzing cell.

Ava caught the name that flashed there. "Honey Badger?"

"It's code."

"For what?"

Carmen sighed. "Right now, I'm talking to Damian and Daniel. It's hard to keep those names straight, and worse, what if I called them some ex's

name?" She visibly shuddered to make her point. "So, I only call them honey or some variation of it. Like Honey Bear, Honey Bunches of Oats, or Honey Badger."

"I don't get it," Ava said. "Won't Badger get mad if you call him Honey Bunches of Oats?" She was genuinely interested. She knew zilch about boy-friends, and didn't really see the point of having one. Relationships always ended badly, with goodbye and a broken unmendable heart . . . at least for someone. But last year she did kiss Bryce Wellington on the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland just to get it over with. Because she really hadn't wanted to go into senior year without knowing what that felt like. Sadly, it felt unimpressive.

Carmen smiled. As the family serial dater, she adored explaining love dynamics. "They will never know as long as I call them some version of honey. And they think the nicknames are cute. Win-win."

"But then how do you know who's calling?"

Carmen deadpanned, "Does it matter?"

Viv shook her head, then laughed. "Let's go."

The sisters made their way downstairs and into the backyard. Just as they found Raul on the raised deck by the pool, a group of twelve mariachis paraded out of the house singing "Cielito Lindo." Nana's favorite song.

"Girls." Raul smiled, extending his arms to welcome the sisters while the crowd seemed distracted by the live music. "As soon as the song is over, I want to make an announcement."

"Like what?" Ava said, terrified it would be humiliating, like the time he announced Vivienne's engagement at a party before Vivienne had thought about marrying her college sweetheart. The relationship fell apart after that, and the doomed couple never made it to the altar. Ava

was secretly happy, because Doug was a douche with a capital D.

“You’ll see,” Raul said, his deep brown eyes twinkling. “Stand here next to me.”

“Are we going to hate it?” Cameron was already scowling.

Raul studied her dress with narrowed eyes, then pulled a face that said, How could you ask me such a foolish question?

Easy, Dad, Ava thought. We hate most of your announcements. Their dad had a lot of excellent qualities, but modesty wasn’t one of them.

The song ended, and the lead singer bowed and then told the crowd that Señor Granados had a few words. A hush fell over the scene. Dramatic and overdone like a Bachelor rose ceremony. Cue the suspenseful strings.

Ava’s cheeks warmed. She tried not to fidget, but she couldn’t stand all those eyes on her. Her strappy heels started to dig into her ankles.

“Good afternoon,” Raul was saying. “I would like to thank you all for being here to honor the life of an incredible woman.”

Ava’s blouse suddenly felt tighter. Her dad’s voice sounded far away.

“And in her honor,” he said with a small tremble in his voice, “I am gifting . . .”

The afternoon sun beat down on Ava, making her feel woozy. She kept her gaze down, staring into the pool, wishing she were under the water, swimming deeper and deeper away from here.

“ . . . one hundred thousand dollars to Saint Bernadette’s food kitchen.”

Everyone erupted in applause, ooohs, and ahhs.

Nana might not have liked this whole affair, but she would definitely love Dad’s generosity, especially to the place where she spent every Saturday, feeding the needy and offering prayers like candy.

Ava squinted against the setting sun. Shadows dipped beneath the

pomegranate trees. A figure emerged from the orchard a mere thirty feet away. Wide-eyed, dimple-cheeked, perfect auburn coif. Nana?

Ava blinked. Gasp. Blinked again. Nana was still there.

I'm so freaking tired, I'm seeing things, Ava thought as her heart thundered.

Raul continued spouting his mother's praises. His mother who was still standing there, smiling at Ava. For a second, Ava stupidly wondered if this was part of her dad's announcement. Surprise! My mother is back from the dead.

Instead, Raul said, "And now I thought this would be a nice time for the girls to say a word about their grandmother. Ava, would you like to go first?"

"Huh?" Ava forced herself back to the moment. But I'm the baby. Why do I have to go first? She threw a pleading look to Viv, who gave her a hard you can do this stare.

Clearing her throat, Ava wiped her sweaty palms on her blouse. "Um . . . hi . . . okay. So, my nana was . . ." She inched forward on those stupid skinny heels, looking up toward Nana, who was now weaving between the people, heading in Ava's direction.

"She . . . is . . ." Ava's tongue twisted as dizziness swept through her.

"Ava?" Raul said quietly, gently placing his hand on the small of her back.

Twenty feet.

Who's that old man in the orange robe trailing Nana?

The crowd waited.

The world slanted.

Why is she walking so fast?

Fifteen feet.

Nana's lips were moving.

Ten.

Her hands were flying.

"Nana?" Ava barely got the word out before she fainted. Right into the pool.

# Four

First came the throbbing pain.

Then the voices, worried and rising. Carmen: “Wake her the hell up!”

Dad: “Ava?”

Viv: “We’re here, Gree.”

Slowly, Ava opened her eyes. Three Granados faces hovered like the fruit their name derived from.

“Pomegranates, ghosts,” Ava whispered dazedly from the sofa in Nana’s casita. The leather stuck to her still-damp skin. Her wet hair clung to her neck. And more than ever she regretted the itchy, now clingy skirt.

“Don’t try to sit up,” Ava’s dad said in his usual take-charge way as he laid a hand on her shoulder.

A woman appeared then. Thick bobbed hair, painted eyebrows. “I’m Dr. Vermouth,” she said. Ava remembered her from the gathering. Or more specifically, she remembered the very regrettable taffeta pantsuit.

Ava could tell the doc was trying to reveal a small smile of reassurance, but too much Botox painted a frozen expression on her face like those creepy clown dolls that gave kids nightmares.

Ava sat up slowly.

“Just take some deep breaths.” Dr. Vermouth held a glass of water to



Ava's lips, which Ava gulped greedily as her head began to clear. Who knew fainting into a pool could make you so thirsty?

The doc ticked off several demands as she held Ava's wrist, checking her pulse. "Breathe deeply. Follow my finger." Then came the questions, all of which Ava answered in the negative: "Dizzy? Have you ever fainted before?"

Once the doc finished checking Ava out, she gave Raul the thumbs-up and left.

"What happened to you, mija?" Raul asked.

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the fully painted memory of Nana gliding through the pomegranate shadows came back to her. Ava's eyes darted around the room as if she might see her grandmother pacing there, wearing down the wood floors with her three-inch wedge slippers.

"You passed out," Viv said softly, her face a full moon of concern. That's when Ava noticed her sister's hair and dress were both wet. Leave it to Viv to jump in while Carm probably screamed from the sidelines that she would be forever scarred if Ava drowned.

Loretta's clickety-clack heels carried her closer. She wedged between the trio and peered down at Ava, blonde waves falling around her thin face. "I have some arnica for you," she said, holding out a small plastic bottle. "It helps with trauma."

"I don't have trauma." Not exactly. Not unless you count hallucinations.

"It will make me feel better," Loretta said. The woman had a remedy for everything. Headaches, sleeplessness, allergies, upset stomach. The list of ailments went on and on. And even though Ava had never known homeopathy to work, she didn't want to argue, so she took a few tiny pellets under the tongue as Carmen shooed everyone back, took Ava's hand, and

climbed into the tiny sliver between Ava and the back of the sofa, sticking her bare feet beneath her sister's legs. Then she whispered, "Good thing you have on nice calzones."

Heat flushed Ava's cheeks. Did everyone really see her underwear?

"It's okay," Carm said, patting Ava's leg. "I don't think anyone saw, but why the fainting? Did you forget to eat, jita?"

"I . . . I saw Nana," she blurted. "She was here. Under the pomegranate trees."

Viv said, "You definitely need some carbs."

"It's very normal," Loretta said, nodding to Ava over Raul's shoulder. "Grief does surprising things to people's minds."

"Let's get you something to eat," Raul said. To Dad, food fixed everything. Got a bad grade? Cookie dough ice cream. Fighting with a friend? Chicken enchiladas. All-around bad day? Spicy tuna rolls from Sakura. There was only one time that Ava could remember this not being the case: the night her mom left. That night was just air and tears and bad dreams. And memories of her last words, of that dark, sad, fairy tale she always told her.

Viv's golden-brown eyes soaked Ava in. If eyes could hug you, tuck you into bed, tell you a bedtime story, they were Viv's. And right now, they were telling Ava everything would be okay. The only problem was—for the first time in her life, Ava didn't believe her sister's eyes.



After considerable convincing, Ava persuaded her family to let her take a shower, get changed, and just be alone. But even alone in her room, Ava could hear the sounds of the house and everyone in it. At least until the

house was emptied of guests, and the cleaning crew swept in. Ava changed into a pair of black sweats, Birks, and a white long-sleeved tee before sneaking out the side door.

She needed air and distance and perspective. She needed to look at the bigness of the ocean and she desperately needed a Venti hot black tea with almond milk, steamed, and two Splenda. The stronger, the better. Not in the mood to drive, she struck out on foot. Maybe a nice long walk would clear her head and any hallucinations that still lingered there.

The night air carried the salty, crisp scent of the sea only a few blocks away. Santa Monica came alive at night with tourists in search of bougie restaurants and bars, high-end boutiques, and coffee shops that could be found on every corner. And some people just wanted a thrill ride on the pier's roller coaster or a turn on the Ferris wheel. Ava very much preferred to keep her feet on the ground.

Like now, except that each step brought her closer to a dreadful fear: I'm losing my mind. But each heartbeat brought her closer to a reality she could accept: Stress made me see and hear things that weren't there. There are no such things as ghosts. And then terror struck her to her core. What if Carmen and Viv are right? What if Nana's blessing somehow reached me, and it's seeing ghosts? No, that wouldn't be a blessing. That would be like Sixth Sense hell. Definitely a curse.

Pretending that last thought had never occurred to her, Ava hooked a right onto Montana Ave., where she stopped at Starbucks for the tea, then headed west toward Ocean Ave. Just as she was coming up on an Italian restaurant with sidewalk eating, she froze.

Blinked, then did a double take.

It was him.

Truck guy.

He was sitting at a table not fifteen feet away with two glammed-up girls who looked like they just stepped out of a blow dry bar. He was laughing at something the skinny blonde was saying, like she was the most entertaining human in the world. She must be the girlfriend. But wait. Why then was he slinging his arm around the brunette while the blonde leaned on his free shoulder? Ava didn't know why, but the entire scene annoyed her.

She was about to cross the street to avoid the love fest when he glanced up. His eyes locked with hers. Dammit! Ava searched for something to hide behind, but there was nothing other than a small woman tipping the valet.

In the span of three seconds, three thoughts occurred to her.

Should I wave? Ignore him? Pretend I don't know him?

Before she could decide, her mutinous hand was flapping. The guy glanced over his shoulder, then back at her, pulling a face that said, You're a stalking weirdo. He whispered in blondie's ear, and before Ava knew it, the trio was staring at her, snickering.

The painful heat of humiliation swept through Ava, making her feel sick. And all she could think was Flee, flee, flee.

She spun into the street. Her phone flew from her hand.

The sound of screeching brakes. The black SUV missed her by mere inches. But the honk and curses landed with force.

Ava reached down for her smashed, very dead phone and stumbled to the other side of the road.

Heart racing, pride shrinking, she ran all the way to Ocean Ave. a few blocks away. By the time she got there she had spilled half of her tea on her white shirt and had banked mountains of hate thinking about that jerk. Seriously? Did he really despise her so much that he couldn't even wave? I didn't even dent his stupid truck, she thought angrily, so what's his deal?

He had been rude the other night too, but then he had softened and told her to go without making a big deal about hitting his car. Why? Maybe he was terrified of hysterical females.

Then, remembering her summer goal, she thought, This is so not joyous boredom!

Ocean Ave. was brimming with lights, cars, and animated pedestrians. Across the way was Palisades Park, a long lingering band of green that sat atop the sandstone bluffs. From here, the ocean view was breathtaking. And this, this view was the reason Ava and her sisters had organized a hunger strike when Raul had suggested they move to dreadful Beverly Hills. It took three days of convincing, several hidden packages of popcorn, gummy worms, graham crackers, Cocoa Puffs, and numerous stomachaches until Raul threw in the towel.

Ava leaned against the wood railing, peering at the dark rippling sea as she sipped her lukewarm brew. She wondered for the first time if she was making the right decision applying to colleges on the opposite coast. It seemed too soon, too sudden, too far. She still had her entire senior year in front of her, but Ava was built for worry. And then there was Elijah, her closest friend, who had been in every single one of her honors classes since middle school, was her right hand at the school paper, and had always been there, for every cut, scrape, bruise—the invisible and the visible, including Ava's all-night cry fest after her mom left. That Elijah had up and decided to spend his summer studying Spanish in Peru with a host family just so he could get college credits and improve his chances at the foreign service, his ultimate dream.

"Do you really have to go?" Ava had pleaded. "I can teach you Spanish, and what about our plan to do nothing?" Because they had busted their butts all year long at school, and this was their reward.

“Aves, we can still do nothing, just from different places.”

Except that doing nothing with someone is a whole lot better than doing nothing with no one. And besides, nada really meant lazing around the beach, eating their way through every flavor of ice cream at Sloan’s, having a John Hughes marathon, and plotting to be the lords over yearbook. Mostly Ava just wanted to enjoy and stretch out what felt like her last summer at home. Next year she’d be dorm shopping, moving, and big-time panicking.

Worst of all was that Elijah was in the countryside somewhere and the cell service was lousier than a distant planet’s. But at least Ava had her sisters, who were her truest best friends, because sisters are loyal, and sisters can always be trusted. But mostly, sisters have to stick by you and love you even when you suck.

Ava laughed to herself at the image of her fainting into the pool and what Elijah would have done if he were there. He would have snapped a pic for “posterity” and found a way to plant it in the yearbook somewhere. She had thought about calling him to tell him about Nana, because he loved her too, but she knew he would fly home, and she didn’t want to ruin his summer. He was like the grandson Nana never had. Stupid boys. They didn’t have to worry about blessings and broken threads and . . . ugh!

Then another thought occurred to her.

What if Dad needs me to fill in for Nana? But Ava pushed the thought away. Viv was already at the firm full time, working with the architectural design team. Carm was half interning there this summer, bouncing from the catalog and online marketing to human resources and accounting before she went back to her I have no idea what I want to do independent studies program at USC in the fall. Besides, Ava could never fill her grandmother’s slippers.

Nana had been instrumental in building the business. She had an ex-

ceptional nose for artistic talent and was the one who had taken Raul to tiny towns all over Mexico to source unique products. Within two years she became known as Reina of Discovery. To Ava, Margarita Alana Cortez Granados was also the queen of hearts, believing in things like soul mates and love at first sight. But what good had it done her? She had left her husband right after Raul had been born, incurring her father's wrath and causing him to then cut her off from the family both emotionally and financially. And as far as Ava knew, Nana had never found the love she so fiercely believed in. Seemed like a big fat waste of heart space.

Ava looked down at her phone's shattered screen. There was a dim green flicker, and if she peered close enough, she could see three small faint digits: 8:51. Her heart did a little dip. Just last week she was driving in a freak storm, slamming into a truck she hadn't seen. Minutes away from saying goodbye to Nana. To hearing her last words:

Meteors, stars, 8:51. Collision. And the hummingbird.

Tears stung Ava's eyes. The world went blurry just as a voice swept past her ear.

"Hello, mijita."

Ava whirled.

And there she was. Bright, healthy, not at all dead-looking Nana. And she was smiling, as if it was entirely natural to sneak up on someone when you're supposed to be six feet under.

Two seconds passed. Five, maybe. Until Nana's snapping fingers shook Ava out of her trance.

Ava jerked back, dropped her drink, and shouted, "Jesus Christ!"

"No, just me," Nana said as she climbed onto the fence and planted herself there. She looked ten years younger. Her auburn hair was swept into a loose bun. Her dark eyes brimmed with both longing and delight.

"I'm seeing things," Ava said, squeezing her eyes closed, then peeling one open slowly as if Nana might disappear. She didn't. Ava backed up.

"Please don't scream again," Nana said, glancing around. "Someone might think you're drunk or a loca and you might get arrested."

"You're . . . you're dead."

"Don't remind me." Nana folded her arms over her purple cashmere sweater. The one Raul had bought her two Christmases ago. "Now," she said, "you need to *cálmate*, Ava. I must talk to you, and I can't do that if you're screaming all over the place like La Llorona."

Trembling, Ava inched close enough to poke her index finger into Nana's arm. It came up against not flesh and bone, but something softer, squishier, like a down pillow. "Holy shit!" Ava cried. "Why isn't my finger going through you?" God, the movies are such a lie, she thought.

Nana scowled. "If I were still alive, would you use such terrible unbecoming language?"

"But . . . you're not alive," Ava reminded her.

"That doesn't mean I'm not here." Nana looked around at the people milling about. The cars cruising past. "Should we go someplace private?"

Nana or not, no way was Ava going to follow a dead person anywhere private. She found herself shaking her head incredulously as she poked Nana's arm again and then her cheek.

"Please stop jabbing me," Nana said, flopping her gold slipper against her heel.

"You feel like a pillow or firm flan or . . ."

"People are starting to stare."

Ava glanced to her right. A couple sitting on a nearby bench was gawking at her with raised eyebrows, but the moment she caught their gaze, they got up and headed in the other direction.



"They can't see you, can they?" Ava said, her voice quivering.

"Of course not. Now, we need to talk about why I'm here."

Ava heard the words, but her brain was trying to process the impossibility of it all. "How . . . how do I know I'm not imagining this?"

"I told you she wasn't going to believe me," Nana said over her shoulder.

Ava's eyes flicked about suspiciously. "Who are you talking to?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Nana said with a sigh. "Entonces, about the blessing."

A tiny thrill rolled down Ava's spine. "You're here to tell me what it is?" Her speech was unnaturally fast. Maybe it was the shock, or maybe it was the elation that Nana hadn't abandoned her, that at the end of everything Ava was going to get her blessing after all.

But then Nana said, "I don't know what the blessing is."

"What?"

"No recuerdo."

"How can you not remember?" Ava said. "It was just last week."

"Time is different for me. It's taken me quite a while to accept all of this," Nana whispered.

"You mean being . . . dead?"

"Among other things."

Ava's heart began to bend, to make room for the possibility that her grandmother really was a ghost visiting her here on this breezy cliff. The possibility made room for reality, and it was like a blow to the gut. Without another thought, Ava threw her arms around Nana. Tears stung her eyes. It was a strange, impossible thing, holding a ghost.

The moment Ava gripped tighter, Nana vanished, making her granddaughter stumble into the fence.

"Abrazos are for later," Nana said, reappearing next to Ava. "There is

strict universe business to attend to. And if I don't follow the rules," she whispered, leaning closer, "I could get in serious trouble."

"What . . . kind of trouble? You don't mean like . . ." Ava winced and pointed to the ground before lowering her voice and adding, "being sent down there?"

Shaking her head, Nana sighed, "Are you ready to get down to business?"

"Right. Okay," Ava said. "But if you can't tell me the blessing, then what are you talking about?"

Nana's jaw twitched. Her eyes narrowed. Her lips parted enough for a small breath to escape.

"I've made a terrible mistake."

# Five

Mistake, Ava could live with. But terrible mistake? That sounded like a recipe for catastrophe in ALL CAPS.

Ava felt like she was barely holding on. To reality. To her sanity. But Nana, she was the dead one, and she seemed to be doing pretty bueno. If the matriarch of the Granados family could kick the bucket and come back as a ghost, surely Ava could mute her logical brain under the half-moon in her tea-stained shirt and listen patiently without totally flipping out.

Surely.

A group of hooting kids on scooters zipped past, and one cruised right through Nana before she could get out of the way. The not-collision made a sucking sound like shhlurrrpp.

“What the holy hell,” Ava gasped. “He . . . he went right through you, but you’re a . . . pillow.”

Nana glared as if the insult was too much even for a ghost.

“I mean . . . you feel like a pillow,” Ava corrected.

“Apparently only for you.” Nana’s whole face tightened. “I truly despise being a ghost, mija, and do not recommend it.”

I’m definitely keeping my promise and going to confession, Ava thought as she led her grandmother to a bench under a wide, drooping tree, where the two sat. “About the mistake,” Ava said, eager for the truth.

Nana hesitated, then stuck her hands into her cashmere jogger pockets. “My second recommendation,” she said, eyeing Ava, “is to avoid tea if you’re wearing white. Have I taught you nada?”

“Nana.”

“Sí. Sí.” She stood and began to pace in front of the bench. “Apparently the afterlife has rules. One is that no soul is allowed to remember their deathbed scenes or their moments of death. Too traumática apparently.”

“Okay . . .”

“The last thing I remember is that violent storm. The wind howling my name.”

“The wind called your name?” Ava asked, even though she wasn’t prepared to believe Nana if she said yes.

“That isn’t what matters,” Nana said. “My memory of dying is so muddled, which is why I can’t tell you your blessing. Not that it would matter at this point, but it seems I somehow . . .” Nana fidgeted, twisting her fingers uncharacteristically. Ava had never known Nana, Reina of Discovery, to be a nervous woman. Which made Ava doubly nervous. Were afterlife mistakes exponentially worse than ones made on Earth?

“It’s okay, Nana. Just say it.”

“This is muy difficult.” Looking down, Nana paced lightly in her heeled slippers as if one misplaced step would split open the earth. She threw her gaze back at Ava and said, “I gave your blessing to someone else.”

“What?!” Ava’s voice flew across the park. She felt like she was swinging between two poles: anger and shock. Someone else. Someone else.

Nana twisted her face into a pathetic expression. “I know. It’s a tragedy, corazón.”

“Is that even possible?” Ava said shakily, taking it down a notch. “But . . . wait! How do you know if you can’t remember?”

“Mira,” Nana said, regaining her self-possession as she planted herself next to Ava again. “I am going to introduce you to someone, but you cannot scream or faint again. Do you promise?”

“I don’t really want to see another ghost,” Ava said.

“Ava, promise me.”

“Fine. I promise.”

Nana clasped her hands in front of her like she did in mass right before the communion ceremony began. “You can come out, Medardus.”

Ava had a split second to think, What kind of a name is Medardus? when the man in the orange robe, the same one who had been trailing Nana earlier, materialized. He was shorter than Ava, maybe five foot five with gray hair and a long thick beard. Under his robe was a white gown and on top of his head a gold pointy hat like the one the bishop sometimes wore for special occasions.

Ava kept her promise. She didn’t scream, and she didn’t faint. Although she definitely felt woozy.

“Ciao,” the man said, flashing an enormous smile and leaning forward with a sort of mini bow. “I am quite pleased to meet you, Ava Granados. Although I do certainly wish it was under better circumstances.”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, my manners,” he said, touching his chest like he was going to break into the pledge of allegiance. “I am Saint Medardus, but you can call me Meda. I am the patron saint of weather, vineyards, brewers, captives, prisoners, and teeth. Mostly people call on me for toothaches. You wouldn’t believe how many people have teeth problems. It’s astounding,” he said, still smiling. “I hail from the fifth century and am Margarita’s guide, here to help her with this blunder.”

Ava looked at Nana, dumbfounded. Nana stood, threw her hands on

her hips, and shook her head. “I spent at least half of my life calling on Cecilia, the patron saint of music. Lighting candles, speaking novenas, singing songs for her, and can you believe she was too busy to be my guide?”

“We’ve been over this,” Meda said. “Just because I am not as popular as Cecilia does not mean I am not stellar at my job.” The guy looked genuinely hurt. “I’ll have you know that teeth and prisoners are just as important as music.”

Nana looked away. “Hmph.”

“Teeth are pretty important, Nana,” Ava said, worried that maybe Nana wasn’t supposed to talk to a saint like that. Seemed kind of sacrilegious.

“Now for the second part of the news,” Meda said. “We must find out who got your blessing.”

“And get it back,” Nana put in sharply.

Ava had spent three years in a magnet journalism program at her high school. She knew how to dig, how to ask the hard-hitting logical questions that led to real answers, not the fake ones that people usually gave to twist the truth.

“I’ve got two questions,” Ava said, putting on her journalist hat. “First, how did someone else get my blessing, and second, how can you be sure that I didn’t?”

Meda cleared his throat like he was about to make an important speech. “If the blessing had landed on you, then I would see a faint aura of light around your head. Margarita should have known better than to just let one fly. A very dangerous deed. Very dangerous.”

Nana pushed her shoulders back and lifted her chin. “I thought I could only give a blessing to my female descendants!”

“Yes, well, that is obviously not the case,” Meda said. “Although it is

quite curious that anyone else could receive the blessing,” he added. “Very curious.”

Or maybe the other someone just needed it more than me.

“You cannot persecute me for something I don’t even remember,” Nana argued.

“You wouldn’t believe how many prisoners have spoken those exact words,” Meda said.

Ava took a deep, steady breath. “How do you know Carm or Viv didn’t get my blessing?”

“Your sisters cannot receive two blessings, which means it went to someone not in the room that night.”

“Wait,” Ava blurted, realizing that something wasn’t adding up. “Let me get this straight. When you spoke my blessing, because I wasn’t there, it went to someone else. But how did the other person get it if they weren’t there either?”

Nana shifted awkwardly and glanced at her watch. Ava followed her grandmother’s gaze to the tiny black hands, frozen at 9:01—the moment of Nana’s last breath, and her heart sort of buckled.

“I can only guess,” Nana said, frowning, “that perhaps I thought I could throw the blessing far enough. A blessing is energy after all, and energy travels quite fast. And knowing myself like I do, I believe I would have thought that if all the stars were aligned, and the fates were kind, the blessing would have sailed right to you. But that’s the problema with fate, Ava. Sometimes there is interference that no one is expecting.”

“Interference?”

“Like someone out for a walk with their dog,” Nana said.

Ava tried to imagine a world where you could be out walking your dog and a blessing just falls out of the sky, and you don’t even know you’ve

hijacked someone's whole future. "But it was raining," Ava argued. "No one was out that night, Nana."

With another bright smile, Meda added, "I am anticipating your next question, Ava, and to save you the trouble, no, you cannot leave your intended blessing with someone else. The universe is about balance and truth and really does not approve of such abandonment."

That was not Ava's next question, but she wasn't about to argue with the saint of teeth.

"I'm not abandoning anything," Ava insisted. "I didn't even know about any of this until like thirty seconds ago." Her voice rose, calling the attention of an elderly lady out on a stroll with her exceptionally groomed poodle. The dog started barking in the trio's direction, but its eyes were pinned to the exact location of a certain saint and ghost.

Ava waved at the woman, who scowled and jerked her pup away. Once she was out of earshot, Ava turned to Nana and Meda. "How are we ever going to find the person who has my blessing? Do you have any idea how many people live in LA?"

Glancing around, Meda said, "Yes, I do have an idea, and I also have the idea that I am dressed entirely wrong for this place." He removed his hat and smoothed back his white hair before tossing the hat into the sky. Ava watched it vanish into the darkness. "If I'm going to be here, I should look the part."

"Oh, so people can see you?" Ava said.

"Only you." Medardus straightened. "But it is the opinion of self that matters most."

"That is of little importance, Medardus," Nana growled. "What matters is fixing this."

"And if we can't?" Ava said. "What happens then?"



Meda looked up at the tree, stroking his beard distractedly as he began to whistle, while Nana shot him a glare, cleared her throat, and said, “I will remain a ghost . . . until this is made right.”

“You’ll be stuck like this?” Ava’s stomach twisted into knots, scared and tense. “That’s the worst rule I’ve ever heard!” Then a more pleasant, albeit selfish, thought occurred to her. “But . . . I mean . . . at least you could stay with me. With the family.” That would be better than any blessing, Ava thought.

Nana placed a hand on Ava’s arm. Her voice lowered to a hush. “You won’t be able to see me or talk to me, and I will lose all memory of who I was here on Earth. I won’t be able to move on.”

Ava thought being a ghost would be terrible, but being a lingering ghost with no memory sounded worse than every twisted catechism story of hell.

Meda nodded sympathetically before breaking into another vaguely proud smile. “Would you like some good news? I have hundreds of years of guide experience, and in all that time, all my souls have gone on to mostly better places. Therefore, our chances of success are quite good.”

Mostly?

“Why were they stuck here?” Ava asked.

Meda wasn’t smiling anymore. “Unresolved business. Punishment. They didn’t know they were dead.” He shook his head sadly. “Those are the foulest.”

They all went silent, watching the traffic buzz back and forth, and all Ava could think was, Those poor drivers who have no idea about ghosts and rules and screwed-up blessings.

“Okay,” Ava finally said, “but how hard were those situations? Would you say they were worse or better than our situation?”

Meda's salt-and-pepper brows pinched together. "Certainly not as difficult as this whoops," he admitted. "But I am up for the challenge."

"Whoops?" Had Ava actually heard him right? "A whoops is spilling tea on your shirt because you almost get run over by a car," she spat. "A whoops is sending the wrong message to a group text!"

"Yes, excellent examples," Meda said, unfazed. "Now, we must work quickly. The clock began ticking days ago."

"Clock? What clock?" Ava said, feeling queasier by the moment.

"Ava." Nana spoke gently. "You must remain calm if we are to succeed. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, but about the clock—"

"We must find your blessing by August sixteenth."

"That's . . ." Ava did a quick calculation in her head. "That's four weeks from now!"

"That's the deadline," Medardus said. "On that evening there will be a glorious meteor shower. Energetic forces will be powerful and—"

"Did you say meteor?" Ava clenched her fists at her sides.

"Meteor shower," Medardus corrected.

Nana said, "What is it, Ava?"

Ava hit rewind, taking herself back to the moment she ran into Nana's room, a sopping, blubbing mess. Then she hit play and watched it all unfold just like it had that night, but this time with a different perspective. On this go-around, she noticed the way Nana's face had looked so worn and pale, the way the room smelled like roses and Chanel No. 5, the scratching of a branch against the window. The way Ava knew, the second she had arrived, that this was no death rehearsal. And then Nana's last words bubbled up from her memory. She didn't want to see the truth of it. But there they were, those words, staring at her with knowing eyes. They meant some-

thing. They weren't the incoherent ramblings of a dying woman.

"Oh my God!" Ava collapsed onto the bench.

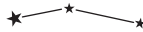
"What is it?" Nana said.

"When you were dying . . . you told me something," Ava recalled. "You said, ' Meteors,' which must have something to do with this deadline, and then you said, 'Stars, 8:51. Collision. And the hummingbird.'"

"Ay, how cryptic of me," Nana groaned.

Meda said, "What does it mean?"

Ava looked from the saint to the ghost and took a long and deep breath before she uttered, "It means I know exactly who got my blessing."



Caroline sat at the edge of Ava's bed, her fine features lost in the shadows from the nightlight.

"Tell me my fairy tale again," Ava said.

Tucking her daughter in tighter, she said, "It's such a sad tale."

"But we can change the ending."

"If only that were true," she whispered.

And so her mother began, and as always, her words, the soothing tone of her voice, carried Ava away to a place where magic and witches and dragons were real.

"The princess was beautiful," Caroline said. "Smart and talented. But she lived in a world that didn't know her true worth and power. Still, to possess the crown, to become queen, she had to marry.

"Many princes journeyed far and wide to try and win her heart. But, like everyone else, they didn't know her worth.

"Only one knew that: the dark bruja from the poison forest. And she

knew something else. The princess's terrible future."

Ava had heard the tale so many times, and yet she still breathed in small, shallow, terrified breaths, feeling as if each were the very first. "What future?"

Caroline combed Ava's hair slowly. Were her fingers trembling? She took a small breath, then whispered, "The princess's kiss would kill the first prince she let into her heart."