If Lost on the Roads and Other Stories

by

Christopher R. Alonso

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Christopher R. Alonso

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Christopher R. Alonso, Student Date

Approvals:

Christopher Barzak Thesis Advisor Date

Caryl Pagel, Committee Member Date

Imad Rahman, Committee Member Date

Dr. Salvatore A. Sanders, Dean of Graduate Studies Date

ABSTRACT

The four short stories and portion of a novel in *If Lost on the Roads and Other Stories* use magical realism, fabulism, and a lyrical style and voice in order to explore themes of love, acceptance, chosen family, and loss within the Latinx and Hispanic communities, centering on queer people within said spaces.

Table of Contents

“Not Things Lost”

Mami used to take us to la bodega on the corner of the corner under the condition that we never went without her until she decided we were ready.

“Your abuela did this with me,” she said. “Took me here on my first time.”

We walked there from our house in Little Havana, passing tabaco shops, comida de cantina, and stands of café with women whipping sugar and fresh brew, molten molasses of brown gold, like they were calling us home. This was our first time going to la bodega, and we were excited, giggling and teasing each other on the sidewalk, poking each other’s sides until mami threated to pull us home by our patillas.

The air was heavy. It felt like the kitchen when mami or abuelita cooked, which they always told us to stay out of, but there was always a reward at the end, the tastes, garlic and onions, platanitos maduros, arroz blanco, picadillo with rasins in it. We knew waiting was worthwhile.

When we arrived at our first visit at the bodega, mami knelt down and looked at us straight in the face. She tucked wavy strands of dark hair behind her ear.

“Augustino. Adriana. I want you to listen to me very carefully,” she said. We knew she was serious when she used our full names, but this was different. It wasn’t like the times she’d punish us for misbehaving. I know now but not then. Adri and I were too young then. “You do not leave my side. You do not talk to anyone I don’t talk to. Entienden?”

We looked at each other and nodded.

“Adri has her coral earrings,” she said, making sure my sister had them on, identical to mami’s. She turned to face me. “Do you have the collar your abuela gave you?”

I showed her the metal chain around my neck and the black rock hanging from it.

“Good. Always remember to have these when you go into la bodega,” she said, fixing our hair and wiping invisible crumbs from around our mouths.

“One more thing,” she said. “Unless I tell you to, never give anyone your name. This is the most important rule.”

She kissed our foreheads. She stood, adjusted her purse over her shoulder, and reached out for our hands. We held on tight and walked in with her.

Inside, there was a woman to our right behind the counter. She a lot of rings on her fingers, almost each finger, and gold bracelets that jingled and chirped when she thumbed a stack of money. She smiled while doing it. She had gold teeth that glittered when sunlight caught them. When she finished with the bills, she stuffed them in a drawer then counted off three bills and tucked them in her bra.

“Buenas, Clara,” she said to mami.

“Buenas, Odalys,” said mami.

“Ay, y you brought los niños,” she said, smiling.

Odalys had deep wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, and I couldn’t tell if she was smiling at us or the money, but I learned that was Odalys, and I learned that she only ever smiled at people she liked.

“Como se llaman?” she asked.

Adri and I looked up at mami, and she nodded like saying it was alright.

"I'm Adriana," said my sister, always the first to jump at some new experience.

Odalys reached into a pocket. Her hand seemed to down forever, like she was reaching into a well for something until she pulled a strawberry candy, and it always seems like abuelas have an infinite supply of them. She handed it to her, and Adri swiped it and remembered to say thank you.

"Y tu," said Odalys, dark eyes looking down at me.

Mami pushed me ahead, until I whispered, "Tino," and I wasn't sure if anyone had heard me. Odalys waved me forward until I was close enough that she could ruffle my hair if she wanted to. She moved a hand across my face, traced my hear snapped her fingers, another candy in her hand. She held it out to me, and I took it. I looked at her face half in sunlight, which said you're welcome here, which said I'll be watching you.

"Remember, what I told you both," mami said into our ears, and she tightened her hold on our hands, enough to remind us.

She motioned for me to grab a shopping basket, and the three of us walked left from the counter and Odalys, toward the far end of the bodega, crossing every aisle along the way. Some of the overhead lights were spotty, flickering on and off in quick bursts. It was cold inside, and I wondered why mami brought my sister and me to such a place, but she answered in that way like she always knew what Adri and I were thinking.

"They have the best fruit here," she said. "Your abuela swore this is where she got her limónes that made her natilla the perfect sweetness."

We walked to the end of the bodega. There were people in every asile. A woman with hair down to her waist picked through sugar. Her feet were on backward. An old couple argued over which cereal to put in their basket. They were there one moment and

disappeared the next, coming in and out like a candle flame, like a breeze could just take them the sway breezes sometimes do.

The fruit aisle was full, flowing with colors in every basket, green guayabas bursting with bloody insides, mangos that blushed when touched, fruta bomba bigger than newborn babies. Adri and I helped mami bag some fruit, oranges for the juice in the morning, bananas for our school lunches, platanos for the tostones we love so much. A shadow passed next to mami's hand, but she ignored it and continued bagging fruit. I looked at Adri, and I knew she saw it too.

"Hola, señora," said an older man's voice.

Mami looked over for a second and disregarded the person standing there. I looked to see what made her so disinterested. He was the tallest man I'd ever seen. His clothes were dirty, and his face was dusty, and he had a large bag hanging from his shoulder. I stepped closer to mami.

"You brought los niños," he said, and he smiled. He was missing a few teeth. I thought all he'd be able to eat were boiled vegetables and soup. "Como se llaman?"

Adri opened her mouth, and mami almost gave her a tapaboca right there.

"Hombre, you really should be going," said mami.

I couldn't stop looking at him. There was something about him that felt like I'd seen him before, but I knew I had never seen him before, not in the eight years until that point. There was something about his eyes that made me feel seen in some way, and I learned that even as a kid I still had things to hide.

The tall man looked at me, through me. All my insides were on the floor, wet and waiting for someone to slip on them. He shuffled back, smiled, and he walked toward the dark end of the aisle and stood there.

"Que asco," said mami, tying a plastic bag of limónes and placing them in the basket. "Vamos. We've got a few mote things to get before we leave."

Mami wove in between the aisles. She picked two cans of black beans, a bag of white rice, tomato sauce, and a small bag of sugar. She added a block of chocolate to grate for her chocolate caliente the always made during the one cold night in Miami winter. Every asile we turned into, the tall man was standing at the other end. Mami and Adri continued to ignore him, but I couldn't. He seemed to be looking at me, only me, and I wondered if I was the only one who could see him, if thinking about him was enough for him to see me and follow me.

Once Mami checked that we had everything she led us to the opposite end of the bodega, away from the man, but I knew he was still watching us, watching me. We walked passed the woman with the backward feet, another woman with green skin dripping with water and pond scum but smelled like the sea. There was a door in the back wall covered by a curtain. Adri and I followed mami through it. We came into a room filled with herbs, bottles and glass jars of things everywhere. There were shelves stocked with candles in different colors, dull stones and shiny stones. I thought I smelled sage, rosemary, rue, anise, orange, lemon, something sweet, maybe honey, and things couldn't name. I could still feel the man staring at me, but not as strongly as on the other side of the doorway.

A woman stood to one side of the room. I thought it was Odalys, but there was something about her that wasn't Odalys. It was a tug at my insides. They were dressed the same, a scarf tied around her head to keep her hair back, golden bangles and bracelets jingling and chirping.

"Hola," said mami. "I need some cascarilla."

"Ya," said the woman, and patted mami's hands on the counter. Behind her were shelves with jars arranged in some way only she knew.

"What is this?" asked Adri.

"La botanica, mi hija," said the not Odalys woman.

"I thought we were in la bodega," said Adri.

"Aye, but you are," said not Odalys. "It's two sides of the same place, but this is not the same place. Aquí o allá, but never at the same time."

Not Odalys didn't speak the same way the real Odalys did at the bodega entrance. She smiled, too, but it felt far away.

She looked over her shoulder at me and said, "No, mi niño. I'm Ofelia, her sister."

Ofelia opened a jar and scooped white powder into a small plastic bag. She came back and told mami, "It's for him, isn't it?"

Mami nodded.

"I see he's got una piedra hanging around his neck. Rub this in the soles of his shoes."

Mami slipped a few bills across the counter and put the bag in her purse.

"Buy yourself some yellow and white flowers," said Ofelia. "Keep them by your front door."

She grabbed a small notepad and a pen, and when she finished writing, she ripped the paper and handed it to mami.

"On the night with no moon, rub an egg over your body and light a white candle. For the smoking," said Ofelia.

Mami took the paper and folded it into her purse

Ofelia motioned Adri and me to the counter. She gave each of us a cowrie seashell and pressed them into our palms.

"For good luck," she said.

Adri and I followed mami out the doorway, and the moment we walked through the curtains, I felt him there. I couldn't see him, but he was there, in the air, breathing against my skin. We went to the front of the store where Odalys was. She was helping an elderly man who was solid enough to be seen but transparent enough to see through him. Odalys handed him his change, and the man smiled and disappeared through the door.

Odalys checked mami's items and bagged them. She looked down at me and said, "Sometimes, things will follow you until they don't follow you anymore."

I looked over at mami, at Adri, and it was like they didn't notice, like Odalys hadn't said those words in front of them.

She turned to Adri, and I heard her say, "Take care of him."

When we walked out of the store, I turned around and saw the man standing behind the glass door, his backpack still slung over his shoulder and a smile on his face.

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Twenty years later, I was living in an apartment somewhere between Little Havana, the Grove and Brickell. Jacob and I could never tell. People were always telling

something different, argued that the neighborhoods ended and began on different streets, but we were happy living in between things.

"Aquí o allá," I said one day when the conversation came up while we cooked dinner.

"What?" he said, laughing, chopping onions and peppers.

"Just something I heard once as a kid," I said.

After the first visit to the bodega, we went a few more times, my mom, Adri, and me, never alone, always two of more of us. Adri would put her red coral earrings on, and I'd wear the necklace my abuelita gave me. As we got older, we visited less until we stopped sometime when we were in high school. Mom started going out less and sent us on errands when she felt too weak. When we were in college, Adri and I would do everything for her. I'd go buy milk and eggs on Mondays after class, Adri would get the bread on Thursday afternoons when the bakery claimed to have the freshest rolls, but we'd never go to la bodega.

The last time Adri and I went to the bodega was during our first year of college, just graduated from high school. Adri reminded me to put powdered eggshells in my shoes, but I didn't. She wore her coral earrings, and then she tugged on my shirt collar to see if I had my necklace, said mom would be disappointed if I didn't wear it, that it was the least I could do. She was right.

Odalys was still at the bodega, bangles and scarf.

"Como esta su mamá?" she asked.

"Esta bien," said Adri. She turned to me and said, "I'm going to the back to get some things. Pick up some fruit and milk for mami."

She walked toward the back end of the bodega, to the curtain where the botanica was. People stopped to look at her, a young woman from a world they were once part of. To them, maybe there was something familiar about her, something or someone one they had once known. I grabbed a basket, went to the fruit aisle, and bagged what I thought mom would like. Oranges and lemons for juice, guayaba for desert, platanos that I'd never been able to cook as good as she did.

Around me, people grabbed their fruit and vegetables. A ghost grabbed some boniato and malanga. A fireball floated around the batata and zoomed away and came back inhabiting its old withered hag skin. She licked her lips at me, but I didn't look at her. I remembered what my mom had told me as a kid. Then I wished she were with me instead of at home.

"Buenas," said a voice.

I knew. I didn't have to look at him to know it was him. I felt his gaze on me like old mattress springs against my back. He slid to my side, let his hand hover next to mine over the onions.

"You're here without your mamá," he said, not like a question.

"Leave me alone," I said.

He lingered there, old, unwashed clothes left in a damp corner too long. I could smell the old earth off his skin, something rotten and cold and intimate.

"I know you haven't forgotten me that easily," he said.

"I'm not afraid of myself, so you can go," I said.

He took an apple, rubbed it against his smudged shirt and took a bite, juice catching the dirt on his face. He had a gold tooth where one was missing years ago.

"I'm surprised your mother stayed home," he said.

"How could you know that?" I asked.

"Now you're interested in what I have to say." He wiped the juice away with the back of his hand and put the apple back in the crate. "Dime, what's your name?"

"Oye," said Adri. She came marching up the aisle and stood in front of me.

"Que guapería," he said. The man sized her up and took a step back. Then he turned to me and said, "Say hi to your mother for me." He walked away, like he always did in those moments he knew what terrified me the most.

Adri looked at me, hard, and I thought she'd slap me right then. We didn't speak on the way out. We never talked about that day, we never went back in there together, and then ten years passed.

This is what I thought about while cooking dinner with Jacob. He hadn't met Adri or my mom. I avoided the question the first time he asked about family. I downed my favorite rum and Coke and bummed a cigarette at our favorite bar one night when he asked me a second time. He drove us home and never asked again. Jacob invited me to his family's Noche Buena two years ago, and like any Cuban-Dominican family, they wanted to know about mine. Jacob's parents didn't ask because I know he told them, but I knew they wondered.

Cooking with Jacob reminded me of cooking with my mom. She said she learned everything from "tu abuela," like how to empanizar a steak, how to fricasé chicken with the right amount of spice, and they'd float out of the cabinet when she called their names. Adri and I would hand her things she asked, a potato for the stew, a lemon for the natilla,

a can of leche condensada for the tres leches, which she always said wasn't Cuban, but it was her favorite.

"You know," said Jacob. "My birthday is coming up." He hummed to Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holiday. I could never tell who was who. Mom teased me as a kid, said I had no natural ear for music but could learn with practice. Jacob liked listening to music while he cooked, and I smiled when he sang along because it came so easy for him.

"I know," I said.

I thought of what I was going to plan for him, what to cook, what gift to buy, what places in the city to take him to that we already haven't been to. It was odd, though, that his birthday and my mom's were a day apart and fell on the same weekend that year. When we were old enough to use the stove, Adri and I made pancakes for mom on her birthday. I did the same for Jacob one year, made a tortilla Española, too.

My phone rang.

"Could you get it for me?" I asked.

Jacob danced over to the other side of the kitchen counter, ruffled my hair on the way.

"Hello?" he said. "Yeah. Yes. He's here."

I knew there was something off about the whole thing. I knew that when I turned around I'd see a look on his face that made him seem like a scared little boy. He put the phone to my ear.

"Tino," she said from the other end. "It's Adri. Mami needs to see you."

The phone call didn't last much after that. I told Adri I'd be there the day after, that I'd bring whatever she needed.

I poured myself some rum from the bottle Jacob bought me a few months ago and took a swig. I stood by the window and looked out to the street and swore I saw him standing there under the banyan tree, a sack over his shoulder and his gold smile glinting in the late afternoon light. This wasn't the first time I'd seen him outside the bodega. I'd see him out when I was still living with my mom and Adri, at school in a crowd of other students, at the movie theater in line to buy a ticket, the afternoon I met Jacob at my favorite coffee shop. Soon after that, I'd moved in with some roommates. Jacob wasn't the first, but Jacob stayed, and then we moved around until we settled into the apartment in between. I hadn't seen the man in a while, hadn't thought about him. The moment things felt right, he disappeared. When I moved out, I thought never to look back on it, on mom and Adri, who didn't move out, who never left her.

Jacob sat next to me and grabbed my hand. I told him about the man, everything I could remember from the first time I went to la bodega to that moment sitting with him.

"I've seen that man, too" said Jacob. "I think we all have. We all have to meet him one day, sometimes more than once, sometimes every day."

"Will you be there?" I asked him.

"Of course," he said.

The day after I packed a bag and, with Jacob, headed south to Lakes by the Bay where mom and Adri moved to after I moved out. The tropical storm from a few days ago left tree branches and mounds of dirt and palm fronds scattered along the sides of the road. Crabs scuttled across the pavement. There were more of them when mom and Adri

moved down, hordes of them crossing the streets, looking for a mate during the sunset, and the seagulls and hawks circled in the sky, waiting to find one that just too slow, just small enough to rip through it for dinner.

Adri opened the door for us. She looked almost the same as the last time I saw her. Her hair was shorter, but it was like looking at myself with a worried look. Most people said she looked more like mom than I did, the dark hair, the eyes that mixed care and concern all at once.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

She looked over at Jacob. She hadn't met him before, only seen him in the few pictures posted online. She went to him, kissed his cheek and embraced him.

"Thank you for taking care of him," she said.

Adri led us into the living room where mom was sitting in a large cushioned chair and respirator tubes in her nose. The skin on her neck clung to the muscle. She had wrinkles where she never had wrinkled before, next to her eyes, on her forehead, along her hands, around her lips. She turned her head and saw the three of us.

"Tino," she said.

She smiled, and I was eight years-old again, cutting open mangos in the kitchen, pouring milk and cracking eggs and cooking food only found in the world she created.

I walked over and held her hands.

"Mami," I said.

"I've missed you," she said, laid a weak hand across my face and wiped away the rivers under my eyes. "You don't have to say anything. It's very nice to see you."

"How are you?"

"As good as I can be. You know your mama is stronger than an ox. You remember those bedtime stories I used to tell you and Adri. The time I made the ghosts leave your abuela's house or the time I beat a chupacabra away from the neighborhood with a broomstick."

"And the one where you slapped la ciguapa for making a move on papi," I said.

She started laughing and then coughed for a long time. Adri rushed over to help her sit up straighter. Mami cleared her throat and patted Adri's arm.

"Y éste debe ser Jacob," she said, waving him over.

Jacob sat with her and took her hand in his. "Un placer," he said.

"Encantada." She turned to me, but she was talking to both of us. "He's handsome. It looks like you've taken good care of him while he's been away, and that makes me very happy. I was wondering if you and your sister would do something for me, if you would go to la bodega and get me some ingredients for a tres leches."

I looked over at Adri, who was standing at the end of the room, one hand over her heart.

"But please stay for dinner," said mami. "It's been a while since I had my kids cook for me, and I'd like for you to stay."

"Claro," I said.

That night, Adri and I worked away in the kitchen to make mami as big of a meal as she used to make when we were kids, tostones sprinkled with salt, arróz blanco served with picadillo, aguacete drizzled with olive oil and pepper. Jacob stepped out of the house and came back with a bottle of red wine and rum. When mami sipped the wine, she said

Jacob knew his liquor better than I did, which was true. He also made his mojo de ajo to dip the tostones in.

"Who made this?" mami asked during dinner, pointing at the mojo.

"I did," said Jacob.

"Tino, apunta, que you could learn something." She laughed so hard she started coughing, and Adri bolted from her seat to help her.

After dinner, Adri and I cleaned the dishes while Jacob stayed at the table talking to mami about his job at the university.

"You haven't been back there since the last time we went, have you?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Have you?"

"No," she said. "I've seen him, too. That man."

"Since when?"

"Since the last time we went. Since I knew mom would die during a time we'd remember most."

"I thought Branden would be here," I said.

"He was lucky I stuck around as long as I did. That or I was stupid enough to let him stick around."

We didn't say anything for a while. I scrubbed the dishes, and Adri put the leftovers into containers and into the fridge. She poured herself another glass of wine then grabbed my glass and poured one for me.

"You're wearing the coral earrings," I said.

"And I don't think you've ever taken off your necklace," she said.

The next morning, Adri and I drove to la bodega. Jacob stayed to watch over mami. Once in Little Havana, we parked on a side street we couldn't decide if we remembered or not. It felt like we had walked through there when we were kids, but it felt like we'd never seen it at all, the two-story walk-ups, the roosters in people's front yards, the flamboyán flowers falling like flames. The air was heavy, the way it always was, and pressed against us like memories.

We walked in to the bodega, and there was Odalys. She looked just like she did when I first met her, gold bracelets jingling around her wrists and a white scarf keeping her hair back.

"Buenas," she said. "It's been a while since I've seen los gemelos. Como han crecido."

"Buenas, Odalys," said Adri, the first to make a good impression.

"How is your mom?" She knew before we answered. Of course, she did. "You should see Ofelia."

Adri and I walked to the end of the bodega where the botanica was still covered and the lights flickered above us, and the smell of old earth followed us. Then we saw him. He was standing next to the veiled doorway, unmoving and tall. Others shopping looked at the connection between us, the almost visible rope connecting us to him or him to us. He was in front of us and behind us. He pressed into my wrists and into all the soft parts of my body.

We walked passed him and through the curtain where he couldn't follow, and there was Ofelia, busy separating herbs into packets. She lit incense and sage and put them on a small altar in the corner of the room.

“Odalys said we should speak with you,” Adri said at the counter.

“Your mother never stopped those cigarettes, and now look where it got her,” said Ofelia. “You know what will happen, and yet you’re here.”

“How do we get rid of him?” I asked her.

“You can’t,” she said. “You can only remember where you come from and where you go from here.”

I remembered the words she said when I was a kid, aquí o allá, how far away that felt and how close it all was.

“Reach into your back pockets,” said Ofelia.

I felt something small, and when I pulled my hand free, I found a cowrie shell sitting in my palm, smooth and clean.

“What does this mean?” asked Adri.

Ofelia smiled and scratched the top of her head, the bangles jingling and singing.

“Ún descuento,” she said. She gave us a long white candle, a pouch of cascarilla, and dried rose petals. “Your mamá is waiting for you to get back there.”

Adri and I walked out of the room and into the bodega. We collected the ingredients for mami’s tres leches and a few extra vegetables for malanga soup. The man was there, gnawing on roots with teeth made of gold.

“I thought you two would have learned by now that I’d follow you wherever you go,” he said.

I knew I couldn’t stop him. I knew he knew what I would say. He lived inside us, inside of Adri, and me, and Jacob, and mami, and every single person that has ever feared losing anything. He lived inside every worry and every nerve-breaking moment, every

shiver of the body. I knew what would happen. I forced myself to think of everything as things I've had to hold, not things lost. That would be it.

"I know," I said.

His smile fell, and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing dirt and dark across his lips.

"You're one of those," he said. He melted into the shadow and flickers, but his scent lingered the way it always would.

Adri and I left him there. We paid Odalys for the food and walked out into the street. The sun was high, and I started to sweat with the first few steps. I fingered the shell in my pocket on the walk back to the car. I'd return to Jacob and to mamí, and I'd cook the things she liked to much. It was the least I could do then. A lone breeze washed my face, and I thought I smelled the faintest scent of the sea.

"Rules for Communing with Spirits"

1. Your intentions must be clear before initiating contact.

Before we broke up, Caro and I used to attend funerals together so that we could talk to spirits before their bodies were locked away. That was the closest they were to their bodies before they went away to wherever it was spirits or ghosts go. Some of them stayed behind. I could never talk to them, but Caro did. I only saw them.

She'd ask me what they looked like, and I'd describe them, and I'd ask her to tell me what they said. They were all different.

We listened to their stories, or Caro would. I'd gauge their reactions. Most stood still, some looking at their caskets.

"Are they wearing anything?" Caro would ask.

Most times they did, usually the clothes they were buried in. Other times they were wearing something they liked, at least that's what it seemed like to me. One older man would be wearing a guayabera and khakis. An older lady would have a simple blouse and a skirt or pants, or sometimes they'd be wearing casual clothing. That was more common with the younger ones. Some of them were so loose and smoky that it was hard to tell whether or not they were wearing anything at all.

Caro always said I was chismosa. I always found out something about someone, her sister who went on dates with guys just so they could treat her to drinks and dinner, my tío-abuelo who had an affair with his secretary and his mechanic (the family doesn't talk about that one), but Easter at the Fumero house was filled with lots of wine and beer, and there's something nice about being the niece who could handle her liquor.

As I got older and a little less naïve, my abuela told me that there was such a thing as being too chismosa, that I shouldn't go looking for things that weren't there. At the time, she didn't know about what Caro and I did on our days off, but she knew why I'd sit with family. I liked listening.

"Cuidado," she said. "You may end up finding someone's ghosts."

"Like un muerto?" I said.

"Chica, people aren't the only ghosts lingering around."

She did find out at her own funeral. During the wake I caught her making faces behind family and friends. She seemed surprised, eyes growing wide when she saw me staring. Then she put a finger over her lips and smiled. Everyone in the family knew her as tremenda jodedora. I was glad to finally see that side of her.

Sometimes Caro and I would stop at Versailles for an afternoon treat, maybe something sweet. She always had her café with plenty of sugar. We'd listen in on the old men having their coladas and pastelitos talk of Cuba, most of them about Cuba, or about the friend of a friend who was a dentist at some point, fled the island and left everything behind but secretly cleaned and removed teeth from his kitchen a few blocks away.

Police cars and fire trucks and ambulances were common on Calle Ocho, speeding through at every hour, sirens wailing loud enough to shake the dead in the cemetery about two blocks away.

One day at the cafeteria four months into dating, I turned to Caro that day and asked what she'd think if we followed the sirens, see what would be waiting for us when we got there.

"Xenia," she said. "Your chismosería has reached a whole new level."

“But think about it, you don’t know what you’ll find unless you go there and do it.”

“I don’t know,” she said, clicked her tongue in that way that told me she’d end up doing that thing she was thinking about not doing.

“It’ll be fun,” I said. “Maybe we’ll find a robbery or a street fight or some kid who burned his hand trying to light a firecracker.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind by ear. That felt safe here.

We drank our coffee and listened to the old men shout.

A few days later, someone from my graduating high school class passed away, and while I didn’t know him personally, I had friends that did, so I asked Caro to come with me, if she could. She didn’t ask me why. She just nodded and squeezed my hand.

That was when we communicated with first spirit together. I had to tell Caro where he was. She said she could hear him the closer we got to him until he stood next to us. Caro and I linked our arms together thinking the air around us would grow cold, but it didn’t. We ended up sweating more, the heat from our bodies meting through us.

Danny was always a good-looking guy, a nice smile that took up the whole bottom half of his face, but he looked sad, almost disappointed. According to Caro’s conversation with him, Danny wanted us to know that he loved his parents very much, that he’d be sure to party with the other Cubans and Dominicans wherever he ended up. He also told her to please tell his mother he was sorry about breaking her grandmother’s vase and blaming it on the dog. We learned that ghosts regretted different things.

Caro told his mother, and I watched her burst into sobs. She reached out for Caro and hugged her. Danny's mother was shaking, and she kept whispering, "thank you" and "perdón" over and over again. Caro decided never to relay another message after that. We never could know where they did end up, and I tried my best not to think about that. We agreed to keep this to ourselves. After that, Caro and I scrapped the idea of following the police cars and ambulances. We even made sure to dig around online to learn how to properly communicate with ghosts. We attended every funeral we could, friends of friends of friends, the tía-abuelas of the kids I used to tutor for the SAT while I was in college. We went even though we didn't know the dead. We went because I wanted to know what they wanted.

We attended different funerals. Most of them were for the elderly, some with huge families where we could blend in, and some with small families where we'd sit in the car and debate whether or not to be seen. We went to funerals for middle-aged men, middle-aged women, young mothers and fathers. Some funerals were for children. Those were the most difficult. I remember watching Caro sit in the passenger seat. She didn't like those. They weren't good for me either.

"I know we don't deliver messages, but think of what they'd want their parents to know," I told Caro one day.

"Xenia," she'd said. "I don't think I want to know that. It's just too much."

I never forced her to get off the car, so I'd tuck her hair behind her ears, and we'd turn around the moment we saw children standing alone. Most of the time, they were crying, which made it hard to tell if they were doing so over a family member or because no one could see them. I saw them.

People grieved, and we watched them. It was hard sometimes. Family and friends don't always accept things so quickly. One time an older lady flung herself on the casket. I watched the ghost of her sister shake her head. The ghost of the woman turned to Caro and spoke to her. Ghosts want to be listened to.

I wanted to listen.

#

2. You should be clear in body and mind for safe communication.

We went out for dinner the night Caro and I broke up, or the night Caro broke up with me.

"I don't think I can see you anymore," she said.

"Why?" I said. The wine wasn't even served yet, and there we were at Hillstone's because we had been dating exactly two years, and I wanted to take her out some place nice.

"I just don't think I like you in the same way I did when we started this," she said.

Part of me wanted to believe her, take her word for it. Part me of didn't want to believe her. She'd push my hair away from my face.

"So that's it?" I asked

"I think so," she said. She reached for my hand, and I let her take it. "Xenia, I'm sorry. I don't think my heart is in the same place yours is."

"I'm still trying to understand all this."

"You weren't listening hard enough."

The server came around and poured the wine. I'd tasted it before drinking it, never knowing exactly what I was looking for, but I pushed the glass toward him and asked him to please fill it.

Caro didn't drink. Her gaze dropped to her lap, and she turned her head to her right, to the profile I saw so many times sitting in my passenger seat, spritzing herself with Dolce and Gabbana, the yellow-gold bottle with the red cap because her mother taught her a woman should always smell good.

I wanted to reach out and tuck a loose curl behind her ear.

The server left.

"Are you okay?" Caro said.

I heard her, and it all came down like a storm, like a hurricane that was predicted to pass us by but crashed into land at last minute, and I was caught at the shore, swept out in the surge.

She dug into her purse and slid a twenty-dollar bill across the table.

"For the wine," she said.

I shook my head and passed it back to her.

She stood, kissed my cheek, and walked away. She left the money on the table.

I finished my glass, poured myself another and drank that one. When the server came back, I asked for the bill and the wine, and left him Caro's twenty dollars, so maybe it was best I didn't take it.

It rained in the few minutes I was in the restaurant, the air heavy and humid and steamy. I sat in my car and uncorked the wine, drank some more, and with my head lighter than smoke, thought about finding something to follow.

#

3. Be sure to control your emotions before calling to spirits.

I sent Caro a message a week after our dinner. I wrote, “Hi, I just wanted to know how you were doing, so hello. I hope you’re well.”

She responded with, “I am, thank you,” and that was it.

I waited a month before I sent another message saying, “Hey, it’s been a while. I went to Versailles today and had a cortadito. Remember those times?”

She wrote back, “Yes, I do. Take care.”

Then I offered to buy her some coffee and take it to her, wherever she was, but she said that she felt she’d owe me something if I did, and she didn’t want that kind of pressure, but I reminded her of the twenty, and she never responded. She pulled a Matías Pérez, floated away into the air and the sea, and I couldn’t find her voice in the wind no matter how hard I tried. She made me think about a hurricane, how is comes and goes, how sometimes it stays. Maybe that’s why storms have names.

We met through a mutual friend, two days before Hurricane Sandy formed. Our friend’s girlfriend planned a birthday party for him on a yacht, and we sailed up and down the coast, around South Beach. Caro was wearing a white dress because it’s Miami, and we’re allowed to wear white after Labor Day. I asked her what she was drinking, she a whiskey ginger and I a Cuba Libre. We traded. We held on to each other and shouted and cheered at the tourists and locals walking by the marinas along the coast. The DJ played Celia Cruz. We danced on a ship the way I imagined my ancestors did, swaying to their salsa and guaguancó because they were finally free and still didn’t know how

difficult exile would be. That could be why my grandparents had music playing from their Hialeah kitchen every afternoon.

#

4. Have courage when communing with spirits. Eliminate all fear.

I continued to send Caro a message every month, just one. I'd send it on different days so that she wouldn't know when to expect it, but she knew it was coming. Sometimes she'd respond. Most times, she didn't. I started going to all the places we used to call ours, like the bay at Deering Estate where we skipped rocks and watched old men fly fish, waved at the couples kayaking over glassy water There was Twelfth Street on South Beach where the crosswalk is painted rainbow and we'd chugged bottomless mimosas with drag queens dancing on the sidewalk. I lingered on the corner of Miracle Mile and Salzedo, taking walks by myself after the sun set. I'd go at 2:37 in the morning, when people are leaving or have left the Gables, where Caro and I kissed at the intersection after our first date. Some part of me hoped she would be there waiting to see me.

I started attending funerals alone, stood close to caskets hoping to hear the spirits. I whispered to them, prayers for miracles that I couldn't perform. I'd wait in my car, waited for everyone to leave so I could approach the plot and see the spirit standing over their own grave. I'd ask questions, like how they felt, if they remembered anything, if they could reach out and say something, anything. Sometimes I felt I wasn't listening shard enough, and sometimes I felt I was listening too hard.

One day while I picked coffee at Versailles again, I saw it, all of it, the length of cars escorted by policemen on motorcycles and led by the that one station wagon with the

body inside. They filed out of the Caballero Rivero funeral home and drove west. I ran to my car and followed them, inserted myself into the end of the line and followed them through Coral Gables, then way south to the cemetery just off the Palmetto. It had been just over four months since the dinner, and I hadn't attended a funeral alone.

It was a huge a procession of several dozen cars, eight motorcycles, maybe ten, and I wanted to know who it was that was going to be given to the ground. From the number of police escorts and the cars entering the cemetery, whoever was in the hearse must have been an important person.

People parked along the curb deep into the cemetery. They were all dressed in black, some men in casual suits, some ladies in pantsuits because even if someone died, people still had things to do. Once they were all out of their cars, I jumped into the backseat and pulled a black dress from the emergency going-out after work bag I kept hidden, something Caro had taught me. Then I slipped on a pair of heels, made sure my makeup was still okay, and splashed some perfume on my neck.

I heard sobs and sniffles, saw a few viejitas dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs, the occasional burst of color from one of their blouses or jeweled broaches older Latina women seem to be so fond of. They all reminded me of my abuela in some way. Then I wondered what my family would think if they knew I was there, attending someone's funeral without being asked to because I didn't know them, but I wanted to know who they were. Maybe this time things would be different between me and the spirit.

I wondered what Caro would have said if she knew I was here. I don't think she'd be happy. I stepped to the back of the gathering anyway, listened to the priest say his

prayers, bless the casket, sprinkle holy water on it from the aspersorium. Close family and friends each laid a rose on the casket. Some of them let their hands linger, gave it two tap the way friends would pat each other on the back after a hug.

An older man was the last one to leave a flower on her casket. He seemed to be in his sixties, very grey hair, wrinkles around his mouth and neck, a ring on his left hand. He placed his hand on the casket and stayed that way for a while. His wife's spirit stood next to him. I saw her place her hand over his.

Most people there stepped up near the casket, crossed themselves, and nodded their goodbyes. Words flew through the air, more crying. Some people took the flower arrangements, mostly the abuelitas. I thought that maybe I would too once I reached that age.

An older woman came and stood next to me, large glasses hiding her face. She was short and thin, and her roots were going gray. She held white roses in her right hand.

"You see her, too," she said.

I thought I felt my voice box fall into my stomach.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"They told me," she said, pointing at her ear. "What's your name?"

"Gabi," I said, using the fake name I'd use when I'd go to clubs.

"Mentirosa. No, it isn't. What's your real name?"

"Xenia," I said.

"Ah," she said and turned to her side, like talking to someone who wasn't there. "Por fin, she tells the truth."

"What's your name?" I asked. I didn't see any spirits other than the dead woman's.

"Nuria," she said. "You shouldn't be here, not because you didn't know Marta but because you can't do what you want." It didn't sound like a warning, more like a pleading.

"Did they tell you that, too?"

"Claro," she said. "Sometimes you can't change things, tú sabes?"

Nuria gave me a rose and pointed to the casket, but I turned and left.

I wished Caro was with me. I wished she could speak to Marta, listen to her words, listen to the spirits around Nuria and tell me what they told her. More than that I wanted her next to me. I know Caro promised never to relay messages between the dead at the living, but I think that would have helped somehow. Dead things need to be acknowledged.

#

5. Be prepared for anything.

Whether it was good form or not, I still sent Caro a message, every two months instead of every month. Sometimes it was a song that I heard and thought she'd like. Other times it was something I laughed at, so maybe she'd laugh at it too. We still followed each other on social media, which I thought gave us some kind of friendship or relationship. Like she'd done before, sometimes she'd respond and sometimes she wouldn't.

I asked her if she'd like to meet, just to talk. I'd bring coffee, but she refused. After that I stopped reaching out. I still checked up on her social media just to see if she

was alive, which I knew she was, but still, it always felt a little intimate looking to see what someone was doing in their everyday life.

If it wasn't for me checking in on her, I wouldn't have known her tío Rolando passed. I remembered the first time Caro brought me to a family party. Most of her family wasn't thrilled to meet me, but Rolando gave me a glass of the rum he reserved for special occasions, and no one said anything after that. Caro used to tell me how much he asked after me, that she better take me to dinner at his house. I had to go.

I missed the wake but not the funeral service. The next day, I parked at the Sedano's near the funeral home, bought a bouquet of white roses, and waited for the procession to make its way out of the parking lot. I trailed behind the last car and turned on my hazard lights. The police escorts stopped at all intersections as we headed west through Coral Gables. Several people crossed themselves when they saw the procession. Mamá always said it was a very catholic thing to do, especially with the older generations, like if they didn't, the dead would find them and cause trouble in their lives.

We kept driving westward on Calle Ocho, passed the Palmetto. We turned north and drove into Doral. I was thankful for the police escort. Caro always said if anyone wanted to know how not to drive in Miami, they should head to Doral. La creo.

I followed the procession into Our Lady of Mercy Cemetery, the only Catholic one in the city, and it made sense to me why Rolando would have asked to be buried there.

People filed out of their cars. Men stood at the back of the hearse, and with the help of the driver, pulled the casket out and carried it into the prepared tent, flowers arranged around it, red and white roses, lilies and carnations shaped into giant crosses

with messages in small, yellow and pink flowers. I saw Rolando walk behind his casket, dressed in the suit his body was probably wearing.

There was Caro, black pants and black blouse, her hair tied and draped over her right shoulder.

Rolando turned around to look at the people gathered for him, because of him. I stepped out of my car and caught him looking at me. Spirits always seem surprised when they realize someone can see them. His gaze flickered between me and Caro. He must have known. I felt sweat drip down my back. My whole body was a heartbeat. He nodded and smiled a half smile.

I walked toward the casket. I met Caro's eyes, bright and brown and light.

Then I heard, "Thank you for coming."

“Strange Mercy”

Every day at a las tres de la tarde, we remember Lola. We remember the woman they told us to forget. They will tell you different stories depending on who you ask. It’s always the men, este said this, el otro said that, but we didn’t believe them because we know she died. We all know how she died.

One story goes that Lola was a beautiful woman who married a wealthy man. She had an affair with another wealthy man, and her husband found out and killed her in a jealous rage. Another story goes that she was a beautiful prostitute with multiple lovers and one man got so attached that he wanted no one else to have her, so he killed her. In every story about a woman, it’s always a man who says she’s beautiful. This is the first thing most people remember.

Both these stories are true and not true. We know that. It’s what we choose to remember that sets a story apart. Yes, Lola was married, and yes, Lola needed to find a way to feed herself, and yes, Lola died, but there is so much more to it than that. This much is true.

We gather every day to remember. We gather every day to keep her alive. Then we decide to bring her back to life. Claro, we do this in secret because we don’t want others to find out. There is hesitation. It has been years since we’ve seen her, and we want her back. We want the woman that meant so much to us, who was robbed of so much.

We teach each other how to make candles. We warp the silky molds. We shape them into long, ivory things, like moonbeams in our hands, like sunrays peaking behind clouds, like that. We keep them away from the fires. We don’t want the things to melt

and come undone. We need them here with us. We want to light them and offer them to her, to our mother, our sister, our caretaker, who's no longer here. These silky things will burn with what we feel, and we make it so.

Days later, after they have cooled and coalesced and made real, we take them out with us toward the sea. We burn the tops of their heads and think of Lola when we do it. The soft, waxy shapes tingle our fingers with warmth, and as they burn, their drippings fall onto our skin, caking our wrinkles and cracks and lines of life and love. Our hands join together in eternal supplication, wishful. Then we break from the molds and wax, watch the flakes fall into the still water. We think Yemaya will accept these prayers, or maybe la Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre. We don't know, but it gives us comfort somehow. The water hugs us, waist deep, like children, and in some way, we were children to Lola. Lola, who clothed and fed us, who taught us to read and write.

She took us in from the streets. We were dirty and tired and hungry. At first, Lola would visit us. Sometimes she'd bring us food and clean water. Just bread was enough to satisfy us, and we savored every bite of the soft, flaky loaves. She came into the bad parts of town. She was one of the few with shoes on, but when she noticed we had none, she took them off, and she walked barefoot por las calles. Then she'd remember her life from before the time she lived in the brothel. We knew that wasn't something Lola liked to talk about, but she told us, anyway. Lola said she had men flock to her. Most of them weren't there for sex. Some went to listen to her tell a story. Some went to have her embrace them. Some went to feel something of what they might have called love. We know better. Lola loved us in a way we had not known.

So, claro que we want her back. We want to feel her with us again, to smile the smiles we once did when she walked with us.

We wait for a night of the half-moon, a waxing moon, because the moon grows full, and so will our lives when she returns. We are all witches in our own right. We all want something, and we will do what is necessary to get it even if no one understands us, even if we are condemned. Isn't this exactly what witches are? We are already condemned by everyone else in the town for leading the lives we live in order to survive.

Some of us reminisce on the past during our walk to the sea. Some of us talk about our individual memories with Lola. She brought a mother pastelitos and taught her to make them for her family. Then Lola returned three days later and taught more of us. She showed a boy how to sew buttons and fix the seams of his clothes so he could help his brothers and sisters look more presentable as they sold their wares on the streets. For those of us who had no other option but out bodies to work with, Lola taught us how to protect ourselves from unwanted pregnancies. She taught us how to make a mixture of sour milk, honey, and parts of crushed plants to put inside outselves in preparation for the more violent, unforgiving men. Because there are, and always will be, violent, unforgiving men. Unlike what the doctors always told them, Lola said the mixture should be applied before and not after sex in order to help prevent pregnancies. For the new mothers, Lola used her husband's money to buy azabache bracelets for their babies because she thought that every little bit helped. Every good thought put into action is worth something no matter how small.

We arrive at the sea, the waves and water under the ground and the rush of it all. It is three in the morning. We know this. We believe the lack of prayers at this time will

allow ours to be heard. We bring our candles and light them and watch the flames dance over our fingers under the dark sky, a half-lantern above us. Our words are heavy on our tongues, mouthfuls of honey and coconut milk. Smoke rises around us. Some of us smoke to feel calm, to empty our heads and make our thoughts freer. We do not stop them if it'll help porque we'll allow anything to bring her back to us. We pray to our god and gods and spirits and ancestors. We pray to Lola, for Lola. We pray for intercession. The candle wax burns our skin, but we endure. This is a small discomfort to bear, and we accept it if it'll bring Lola back to us. Those of us without candles leave things for her in the shore and let the tides pull them. El frutero leaves mangos in the break. The cigar roller sprinkles dried tabacco leaves. The children toss flowers into the water, roses white and full, hibiscuses soft and pink, gardenias, fragrant and strong. Lola always liked flowers, we remember. These are her favorites.

Then in happens, no flourish, no explosion of petals and sea foam. She is there, in the not distant shallows, walking toward us, her heavy dress soaked through.

From our flickering candlelight, we see her, skin shimmering with moonlight, and her cheeks are damp and sallow, eyes like dark holes in the earth waiting to be given seeds that she'll nourish.

"Mis niños," she says.

We drop the candles into the water and wade into the foam. We cry. We pray. We reach out to her, climbing and stretching over each other as if to receive benediction. We are enriched and full just by being in her presence.

Lola follows us up the sand, through the thicket of palm trees and into town, where we float toward the streets we've known since we were born. Buildings, once

white, are grey with dust and age and something else that we've never been able to place. Paint chips off in giant flakes. We find new cracks up the walls where there weren't before. On any day, this would worry us, wonder when a building would topple, but that doesn't matter now. We have Lola. We have our mother, our sister, our saint.

She seems to tower above us. She holds our children's hands. We surround her in a halo of our own, and she accepts us like she always has, like we know she always will. We take her to our homes and show her that we have survived through everything she's taught us. She smiles, teeth like starlight.

"You've done so well," she says. "Todos."

From a stash of laundry, we draw a clean nightdress for her so that she does not sleep with her wet clothes. It is real fabric, as real as the lines on our palms.

We grow tired. It is late, and the night has taken so much but brought us something in return for our suffering. Most of us return to our homes. A few stay awake to keep watch over Lola. We need to take care of her the way she did for us. We are afraid that when the morning comes, she'll be gone, and then what do we do?

Morning does come, though, and Lola is there, sleeping on a mattress in the middle of what we'd consider a living room, and we think of how we've never seen such a beautiful sight, our first in a long time. The sun creeps through the cracks in the windows between the broken slats of the shades making crosses of light on her skin. We get to work preparing breakfast, tostadas and café and fired eggs with slices of ham and fruit cut in slivers. With little money we have, we send the children out to the streets to buy flower.

In the center of the room, a stirring and we know Lola has awoken. We bring her a plate high with food, a glass of water, another of juice, and a cup of café. Whispers travel through the windows and streets, and we pour into the room.

Lola is surrounded by us. The children sit closest to her, looking at the woman they had only heard stories of. They ask if she is their other mother.

"She is everyone's mother," we say to them. "And sister, and daughter, and aunt, and cousin," we echo.

Lola takes a few bites of the food we've prepared.

"Please," she says. "Share this with each other. You all need it more than I do."

How like her. Of course, she would put our needs before hers. Like Lola told us, we share our food and eat. We thank her for this. We relish every bite, the grease from the ham, the sticky sweet of the mangos. We our fingers clean and wipe the corners of our mouths with our tongues.

The morning the sun rises three days later she says, "Please, take me to his house."

Her husband, we have not forgotten about him and what he did to Lola. We refuse to think about him because of his actions, but there's no way to separate him and Lola. She is and is not because of him, but she's here because of us, and we decide that is what matters.

Outside, the morning unfolds in front of us. Humidity steams off the ground, rising in pillars where cracks of light spill from the sky. Butterflies and zun-zuns sweep through flowers, their jewel of wings slick with dew.

We lead Lola to where she wants to go, but we know she knows the way. Today we've told the children to stay home, but we know that will not happen. They will follow us, and we will let them. Growing up where they have, there are few truths that will scar them. Villagers around us wake to church bells. They sweep their storefronts along el prado until they see us with Lola standing in the center of it all.

We don't pay attention to them, just as they do to us. Together we were collective sinners, trash, rotten. With Lola, we are strong. We believe in her, and she believes in us, and this is why we march.

We see the house at the edge of the town, a road lined with bougainvilleas. its petals falling like stains in the wind. From the sea we can smell the clouds coming. This we learned on our own in order to best hide form the storms and stay as dry as we can. That man's house rises tall and white, its windows open to allow the smell of gardenias and sea spray in with each breeze. Gardeners tend the lawn, trimming flowers and shrubs. Across the sky, a flock of flamingo cuts through, pink and burning, a gash of feathers.

Lola stops at the edge of the property she once knew and looks at the sky. She breathes the air, and the wind encircles her. We stay as close as we can because we do not want her to fly away. Some part of us knows this won't happen, but still, she's been taken from us before. Watching her, we breathe deep, like she does, and try to make out something other than the coming storm.

She begins to walk toward the house. We part like a curtain for the light and let her pass ahead of us. We follow behind her, some of us smoking our cheap cigars, some of us holding each other, our arms looped as if we are seeking warmth. She crosses the edge and stands still, looks down at her feet and sinks them into the dirt. She walks, and

we follow. We will always follow her. One by one, the gardeners look up from their work. One of them drops his machete. He recognizes her. They all do. Lola wears a face as blank as the moon and as steady as the tides. We feel that, if she wanted to, she could disappear into the sky at any moment.

We see him from the window, smoking from a pipe. He does not notice we are here. He does not notice the woman he murdered. We stand there, not sure what to do, not sure what Lola wants from being here. There is still plenty we do not understand.

"There is something I need you to do for me," says Lola. Her eyes gleam and glow, catch the sunlight.

The air hums and buzzes, and we wait for her words.

"Burn it."

We never thought she would ask something like this of us. We are not prepared. Then someone begins ripping the wooden floorboards from the porch. All once, we are upon the house, collecting as much dried material as we can. We work in a fury, in a flock, a horde of sweat and fingernails and zeal. It does not take long to light the fire. The gardeners are nowhere to be found.

Smoke rises. It's not long until we hear stomping from inside the house. The door bursts open, and there he is, older than we remember him but still recognizable, combed hair, a plain white shirt tucked into his pants, his belly a little larger than before. He looks like any other man in the village but dress him in finer clothes and how could anyone dressed like that ever murder someone. He sees Lola, and his face turns to ash, pale and dry.

We are waiting for him with crude torches and the gardeners' tools. There is nothing he can do. He is surrounded. Setting the fire has filled us rage. Here, in front of us, is the reason Lola was no longer in this world.

Lola stands in between us and him. The man steps away, but there is little room for him to move. The fire grows and begins to take the furniture inside, the curtains at the windows, the rugs on the floor. Smoke thickens. It makes our eyes water. We try our best not to rub at them and stand by Lola. From the sea, a breeze kisses the fire and gives it strength. It growls now. The house groans and creaks. It is everywhere.

We push him toward the door and into the fire. This is what he deserves. Claro que sí. How we must look to him, faces smeared with soot and dirt. How we have suffered and prayed and suffered again.

The house collapses, slow, like baby teeth.

We stand next to Lola and watch the wind take the flames into the sky.

“The King of Storms Is Howling”

One night, two years after his older sister, Nicole, had passed away. Gabriel sneaked into her room after his parents left him home alone. They kept it closed, said it hurt too much. Gabi went into her closet and pulled out dresses and laid them on her bed, a black one for that birthday dinner in Coral Gables, a sundress with pink and white flowers, and there it was, the flamenco costume she’d worn for Halloween, un traje de lunares. Gabi remembers it was so windy that Nicole had to wear a jacket over her shoulders even though she didn’t want to because she wanted to look as real as possible. She wanted the prize money for the costume contest at school, which she won and put toward her trip to Italy. Gabi’s parents had to use the money for her funeral. Gabi slipped into the dress, fit his arms through the ruffles and smoothed the skirt.

He looked at himself in the mirror and thought that if he had hair past his shoulders, he’d look like Nicole, just as flaca and lanky as she was. What he thought would have been some life-changing moment wasn’t. Nicole was a good student. The family loved her, todas las tías y primas always sing praises about how good she was, and how smart, and how she’d make the family proud in college, que she was gonna go places, and Gabi couldn’t imagine what they’d say if they saw him vestido the way was. Que, that he wants to be a “cross-dresser?” No. That he’s just being silly? No. That he looks just like his sister and has taken on everything she was without asking? That he could never be like her? The dress was heavy, and all the folds and layers weighed him down. He put the dresses back in the closet. He closed the sliding doors then heard the front door of the house open, the sound of his father dragging his feet across the front rug. Gabi ran from his sister’s room and into his, closed the door behind him, still in his

sister's dress. He was careful taking it off, making sure the fabric wouldn't rip and tear. He folded it, flattened it as best as he could, and tucked it in his closet.

He thought about it often, worried his mother would find it on a Saturday morning when she'd decide to clean his room. She'd open the sliding door, and she'd see the ruffles hanging just enough from behind a corner of winter coats Gabi never uses. She'd question him, ask why it was there, ask why he went into Nicole's room in the first place, and how he shouldn't, that he should know better, and how could he, and that Nicole would never hide anything from them because she was so good, it wasn't her fault, she wasn't driving, and how could Gabi keep something like that, betray them and lie and hide and what else was he not telling them and on and on and on.

#

Gabi lies to his mother again, and he realizes that it becomes easier every time he does it, but that still doesn't make it feel any better.

"Ay, mi niño learning to be a tremendo salsero," she says when he reminds her he'll be getting home later than usual every Monday night.

His dad says, "Coño, this one's going to get all the girls' attention. That's a man's dance."

This is the safest way to go where he goes—give them something familiar, something practical, something the family would approve of, because this is acceptable. Gabi knows he can't say anything, and he tries his best to keep it to himself. It would be okay if his sister had decided to do it, but he knows they'd be furious if they knew, never mind that he'd rather dance with the boys.

“Oye,” says his dad. “Remember that when you come home, you go to your room and finish your homework after dinner.”

“I know,” says Gabi.

“Mí hijo isn’t going to flunk out of the tenth grade, carajo.”

Every Monday, Gabi takes the bus from Hialeah to Little Havana, makes it there a few minutes before his flamenco class with Doña Pilar. Each time, he watches her from the doorway of her studio and waits to be let in so he can learn how to tame the weather. Pilar is short, with long, thin fingers and hair always pulled back tight in a neat bun. She smells of violets and incense and sweat. She terrifies him, but he comes back every week.

Ramón sits in a wicker chair in the corner of the room, legs crossed, guitar tucked in his lap. He’s there every class, playing for the students, playing to Pilar. He sings and hums the palos she calls to him, alegrías that rise high into the sky, soleares that sink into the deepest parts of the ocean, bulerías that build a fire in Gabi’s stomach. Ramón scares Gabi for different reasons.

He’s noticed that neither of them wears a ring, and Ramón had never spoken of a woman in front of him, and all of that sent Gabi’s thoughts racing, wind whipping waves that crashed against his thoughts.

Gabi watches Pilar call the wind through the cracks in the windows, how she twirls it like sewing thread between her fingers. Every brush of her feet against the wood floors brings a soft hush of rain. Every stomp is thunder and lightning and a raising of the dead. Gabi has never seen any spirits in the room, but he wouldn’t be surprised if they are there, floating up from the ground behind him, wisps of people swaying to la guitarra and remembering.

Pilar finishes, stomping the floor so hard she chips the wood.

"Chica," says Ramón. "You know I have to fix that."

"Ay, it's fine," she says. She kisses the top of his head.

When she walks, her dress swishes in all its layers and folds. Gabi can't look away from it, dark fabric like a piece of night ripped from the sky. Underneath, the leather shoes unlike his old, used ones. He could never afford those, could never ask his parents for the money. He's thankful the classes are free.

Pilar and Ramón like to say they "found" him. They'd spent years after that terrible thunderstorm in '94 when lightning struck the ground three times, once in a cemetery, and that's when they knew they had to find him. Gabi liked to think he found them when he and his family went to visit his tía abuela, who was Pilar and Ramón's next-door neighbor before they moved her to a home. They were gardening in their front yard, and he heard a hum, rising and falling, algo he couldn't understand, pero it called to a part of him that felt right. They asked Gabi to come to their house one day for galletitas and cafecito, and they spent the afternoon talking about flamenco, how she and Ramón discovered it, how sometimes, for fun they'd go to Lincoln Road on the beach and dance for the tourists. The weather, always the weather, and how good the winds felt on certain days, how soothing the thunder could be. Right was the only word Gabi could find to describe it. His body ached and pulled, a kite reeling to the hands it belonged to.

"Remember when I made it snow here?" says Pilar.

"Claro," says Ramón, tuning his guitar. "That was twenty years ago. Que pasa?"

"No se," she says. "It feels good to remember her."

She walks over to the row of chairs on the opposite end of the room, grabs a black mantón draped over one of the chairs and wraps it around her shoulders.

"Dame un minutito," she says to Gabi. She waves him in, and he sits on one of the empty chairs.

"Tócame una soleá," she says.

Ramón picks at the strings, finds a chord and catches it between his fingernails, sends it pulsing through the room.

Gabi folds his arms over his chest, rubs himself because the room has chilled. He feels the goosebumps rippling over his skin in waves. He concentrates on Pilar, how the smallest change in her expression cambia el aire and how, if she wanted to, she could make it snow like the time before he was born, when his parents were his age, maybe. He's never been good at math. This, the room, the wood, the metal nails under their shoes, all that matters to Gabi is there in front of him, and if only he could wear the skirts Pilar wears and drape the mantón over his shoulders. He'd make the winds bring in the smells of the sea, lift gardenias from their trees and fill the world with their scent. He sits and watches, and Pilar is arching her arms like wings, and the room is still cold.

Gabi has only been taking classes since last year, but Pilar has never seen someone advance the way he did. Ramón is convinced there was no other, that Gabi was the one they'd been looking for. He could tell the difference in palos, the way Pilar stresses different beats when she claps while Ramón strums in his corner. Since beginning his lessons, he'd take the bus to the public library, never his high school's tiny library. He was afraid what the other students would say if they saw him reading about dance, afraid that if he had to explain, his wrists would give him away or that his voice

would sound too high-pitched. Then all the guys would make fun of him, even David from English class, with his beautiful, cruel smile that made his hazel eyes look catlike. He destroyed boys like Gabi before. Gabi kept his distance.

When was alone, he read everything he could on flamenco, watched all the films he could and learned about the greats, Antonio Gades, Cristina Hoyos, José Greco, qué hombre. Men wore high-waisted pants, jackets perfectly tailored to their bodies, and women wore heavy, beautiful dresses, flowing like rainwater. Then he found her, Carmen Amaya, and she was wearing a suit like all the men he'd seen. There was nothing about it that made it seem like it was made for a woman. She had the same tailored jacket, the same the high-waisted pants, the same boots as the men. In some videos, she was wrapped in a mantón, her hair pulled tight in some pictures, wild and undone in others. He could almost see the wind gathered around her.

At home that night after class, Gabi bathes and sits with his parents at the dinner table. When lifting food to his mouth, he's careful to keep his wrist straight, creating a neat line from his hand to his elbow. He doesn't want a repeat incident from the night before when his father slapped his wrist and spilled Gabi's picadillo on his lap.

The next week on a cloudy afternoon, Pilar asks Gabi to follow her steps. She calls out a series of footwork combinations, and he perfects it on his third try.

"Vamos, again" she says and signals for the guitar.

Gabi stomps in his worn, black boots, boots Pilar gave him, said they belonged to Ramón once, and Gabi was grateful for them. The boots are his exact size, snug and tight on his ankles so he can plant himself to the earth without feeling like the wind will take him.

"Hace años," she tells him. "Pero, he learned he was much better at singing and playing than dancing."

By this point, he knows the wind, knew it by the hundreds of names carried in it, as many names as there are people in the world, and can call wisps to encircle his shoulders like one of Pilar's mantones. He smiles, and the air warms around him, and he feels safe in his invisible cocoon, but it still doesn't feel like enough. He wants the winds to lift him like he had wings of a thousand colors.

"The thing with flamenco is that without emotion…" says Pilar, and she waves her hand away from her, and the air vanishes. The room grows empty. "Nada."

Gabi mimics her footwork, una escobilla he shouldn't be able to follow but does, golpe, tacón, punta, repeats and shuffles, shot-gunning and fire-cracking deep into the ground. He closes his eyes and imagines he is dressed like Pilar. She could wipe the clouds from the sky and wrap herself in a rainbow if she wanted to. Gabi knows. He's seen her do it. But he keeps that to himself because he's afraid what she'll think, what she'll say—and Ramón. He can't. When he started learning to speak to the winds, Pilar told him what it represents, that air, wind, its power, it's all change and transformation and unpredictable, and Gabi knows this is all happening inside him, the parts of his head he's been sealing off, air-tight.

"Eso es," says Pilar, counting the rhythm with her palms. "Let it take you somewhere. Go with it."

#

In between each beat, Gabi breathes hard, breathes air too deep, remembers how sometimes, cuando era chiquitito, he'd wait for everyone in the house to fall asleep, his

parents and when she was still alive, his older sister. Once he knew that not even the smell of maduros could wake them, he turned on the nightlight his mom said he didn't need anymore, enough light so he could make his way through his room. He'd tie a blanket around his waist and pretend he was wearing one of his mother's dresses, like the one she wore to his prima Jackie's wedding, which he didn't go to because his parents said que eso no es 'pa niños. In the half-light of his room, he remembered the way his mom looked that afternoon, in a dress red like the sunset after a hurricane, her diamond drop earrings that caught all the light in the room, the way her long hair was pulled back and tied in a bun at the nape of her neck. He'd never seen his mom so beautiful.

Then he thought of his sister and that one Halloween where she dressed up as a flamenco, covered de pies a cabeza in red and white, ruffles on her shoulders, a headpiece of roses and carnations in her hair. Her boyfriend at the time dressed as a torero because he wanted to match, but all Gabi saw was the dress. It made him feel warm. So he'd spin and twirl, grab a fistful of the blanket in one hand and wave it in front of him. He waited until the room got too cold for a Miami summer night, all that humidity sneaking in through the cracks. Even before he spoke the language of air, it warned him in the smallest ways, too cold for summer, too cold for winter when everything should feel heavy and sticky and sound full of frogs, so he'd spin one more time and let it fly off him, like he was revealing some new person underneath it, but he was still the same and still knew that this was his secret he only let know at night.

#

Gabi is panting now. The wind has kicked up, and tree branches whip against the roof of the house. The end of his fingertips tingle, like static on cold metal, and around

him, buzzing. He misses a beat, un golpe too short, and the wind disappears and outside, the clouds slow. Pilar and Ramón both stop.

"Perdon," says Gabi, breathing heavy gulps of air.

"No, no," says Pilar. "I let you wander too far. I should have called you back."

Ramón leaves the room and comes back with a glass of water.

Gabi takes it and sits on the floor. His breaths are deep and slow, and he downs his glass. Pilar moves a chair close to him, adjusts her skirt and sits.

"Remember what I told you about staying in control?" she says.

Gabi can't look at her. Instead, he nods.

"Oye," she says. "I'm not upset. Everyone goes through this."

Gabi still can't meet her where she wants. He crosses his legs, withdraws into himself.

"I don't mean to be chismosa, pero I think I know what happened just now."

Pilar had told him when he started taking lessons that the wind knows and remembers, and that if he tried and practiced hard enough, he could know what people felt by breathing the air they expel from their bodies.

"There's something you're not telling me," she says.

"Sí," he says, still looking at the floor, tracing the lines and nicks in the wood.

"Just breathe," she says, twirling her fingers until the wind snakes between them. She catches the gust in her fist, and says, "Mira pa' esto." There it is, writhing, struggling to get free. She motions for Gabi's hand and places it there. "Aguanta," she says.

Gabi holds the wind in both hands. It pulls, like a fish on a hook, but this is Gabi's gust of a memory. He called it, so he needs to deal with it.

“Some of us can talk to monsters, some of us can hear what the cards say, and some of us, like you and me and Ramón can call and feel the winds,” says Pilar.

Ramón hums again from the corner of the room and picks at the guitar, building a ripple. Gabi pulls again, plants his feet into the floor, and wraps the wind around him. He opens his palms, lets the wind fall through his fingers and coil across his skin, circling his arms. He remembers this isn’t something that he can force his want on. He can only learn to direct it.

Something falls over his shoulders, soft, a deep breath. He sees one of Pilar’s mantones draping over his arms. She has one, too, and she moves her arms in wide arches, urging Gabi to do the same, and the room is breathing. Gabi takes everything the wind has brought with it and everything he’s put into it, and for the tiniest moment he thinks this is the closest he’ll ever come to flying.

The weeks pass, and with every class, Gabi learns to shape the wind into its forms. He lets it speak to him, lets it tell him what it wants, and then he breathes back at it. In every class, he builds on everything he’s learned. Pilar shows him how to sing with the rain using castañuelas, látigos for a flash of lightning, and Ramón plays in his corner. At dinner one night, his parents ask if they’ll be able to meet his teacher or if he’ll dance somewhere where they can watch. His father puts a Celia Cruz CD on the stereo. The bongos start and her raspy voice booms with the trumpets. Gabi’s parents start dancing.

“Vamos, Gabi,” says his dad.

“I can’t,” says Gabi.

“Cómo que you can’t?” says his dad.

“I mean, I can’t when you’re both looking at me.”

“Pero, aren’t there other people in your class? Don’t tell me you’re going to get nervous in front of las muchachas.”

Gabi tries to laugh it off, shakes his head and smiles.

“Ven acá. Don’t be such a sissy,” says his dad.

If he’d ever known what it was like to get blasted in the chest by a hurricane gust, Gabi thinks this moment is as close as he’s come to it. All the wind leaves his lungs, and he has to call all the wind back to him. He can see it seeping into the living room where his parents are still dancing. He does what Pilar has taught him, slow, deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth. The wind will listen to those that ask. He removes the dinner plates from the table, takes them to the kitchen and begins washing them. He steadies his breathing. The air around him calms, and he asks it to leave the house, through the open window above the sink.

“Oye, have you finished your homework?” says his dad.

“I’m going now,” says Gabi.

He can feel his parents sweeping the wind with their feet and their arms, his dad twirling his mom, and her, con una sonrisa as big as the moon.

The next class, Gabi shows up later than usual, traffic on Calle Ocho thanks to a car accident. When he gets to Pilar’s house and lets himself in, he hears Ramón playing his guitar, something slow, like a ritual, una seguiriya. Gabi recognizes it from its reversed beat, so slow his heartbeat can’t follow. Then he sees Pilar in the studio wearing a bata de cola. The dress trails behind her, ruffles and folds pulling at wisps of wind and threads of clouds and buzzing with the scent of ozone. She has a mantón draped around her like a cape, and she’s the queen of storms. Her dress sweeps against the wood, and

the wind whooshes from her feet, swirling with colors only the three in the room can see. With a single stomp and wave of her hand, she dismisses it all.

"Who were you thinking about this time?" says Ramón.

"I think I'll keep you guessing," says Pilar. "You were thinking of someone, también."

He laughs and picks the strings, and little ripples of wind play through Pilar's hair. "Ay, dímelo. Was it Elena?"

"No," says Pilar, tucking her hair back into place. "She was so long ago. Y tú? Was it Silvio."

A breeze brushes across Gabi's cheek. "Clara and Luis," he says.

Pilar and Ramón turn to him.

"How did you know that?" says Pilar.

"I heard it," says Gabi.

He looks at the two of them, and they looked so much older in that moment than he'd ever seen them, the wrinkles on their foreheads more pronounced, their skin softer, but their light was still there, whirring bright.

Pilar drags a chair and asks Gabi to sit, and then the three of them are huddled in a close little circle. Ramón says that was right that Gabi was el brujito they'd been looking for. Pilar laughs. She tells Gabi, that no, she and Ramón are not married, but it's easier to live together because rent is more affordable.

"When you dance, you think of your past, no?" says Pilar. "So do I. So do we."

She tells him that, to her, every palo in flamenco is like a different woman she's loved. Elena was a soleá, things just didn't work out with her. Sonya was a bulería, so

many smiles and laughs and good times, pero Clara was a seguiriya, serious, playful, the only time she'd ever seen another soul outside her own.

"Qué pasó?" says Gabi.

Ramón sighs so deep the room grows cold. He places a hand on Pilar's shoulder. Gabi breathes out of his mouth and sees foggy cloud disappear above him.

"Sometimes," says Pilar, "we need to let people leave porque when you love someone that much, why would you stop them from becoming the person they need to be?"

Gabi clasps his hands together and wills warmth to return, but it's too cold, and he thinks of his parents and Nicole, and it's not until now that he wonders what she'd say if she knew he was keeping so much from their mom and dad.

"Do you think you'll tell them?" says Pilar.

"I want to, pero I don't know how. I think they're beginning to suspect that I'm not going to salsa classes."

"That's a choice you make when you feel ready, sabes?" says Ramón. "No one can take that from you."

Pero his parents have already taken so much from him and replaced it with all the things they want from him, not for him. Gabi wishes Nicole were still alive because that way he could float under her wingspan.

#

For days, Gabi thinks of his conversation with Pilar and Ramón. Walking into his own house makes him sweat, so he tries to make the air cooler around him, but it stays warm and sticky. He spends more time alone in his room pretending to do his homework.

He finishes his dinner before his parents, waits until they're done then picks up their plates, so he can rush into his room and stay there for the rest of the night.

One Sunday night, Gabi's mom comes into his room with a duffel bag in her hands, the same one Gabi takes to his flamenco class. He keeps his boots and castañuelas in it. His mom unzips the bag and pulls them out.

She says, "I don't think you dance salsa in these, no?"

Gabi couldn't say anything.

"Where have you been going after school?" she says, and when Gabi doesn't answer, she says, "Gabriel Reyes, me dices ahora mismo." Then she says, "What else have you been hiding?" like he knew she would.

She checks the drawer of his mesita de noche, the desk drawers, looks under his bed, opens his closet and rifles through his clothes, stops. Of course, Gabi knows what she finds. His mom removes it slow.

"Mami, I can explain," says Gabi.

"Why is this here?" she says. "Are you wearing this? Do you put this on? What were you doing in her room?"

"No," says Gabi, but his mom doesn't let him speak because she wants answers to demasiado preguntas.

Then his father walks through the door. He sees Gabi sitting at his deck chair, mom with their daughter's dress in her hands, boots on the floor with heels too-high.

To Gabi, it's like his parents have been waiting for this moment, like his parents have known all along. Gabi can smell it, their breath coming in tiny flurries. He can smell that they've known, of course they've known, but they've never said anything because it

was better that way—to keep their secret thoughts from him and pretend like none of it existed.

His dad picks up the boots off the floor and looks them over, flicks the metal nails on their heel and toe.

"Sabes…," says his dad, "que if I'd done this, your grandfather would have beat me over the head with this." He drops the boot on the floor. "So, what? You've been going around playing con esta mariconería?"

"Yes," says Gabi.

"So you're gay and you want to play dress-up?"

"I don't play dress up, papá."

His father walks closer. Gabi stands from his chair. He can see the blood vessels in his father's eyes, the gloss of tears.

"You're going to stop whatever is you're doing after school," says his father.

"I don't want to," says Gabi.

His father takes another step toward him. Gabi stomps, and thunder crashes. He can see his own breath forming in front of him, rising from his mouth. Rain begins to patter at the windows, then hail.

"Stop that," says his father.

"I can't," says Gabi.

He sees his father's hand clenched at his side, and the moment he moves it, Gabi stomps again, pushing his father back.

The room whirls, and Gabi tries to control it, guide the swirling thing away from him, but he can't even he wanted to. Thunder roars in the distance. Gabi wishes he could fly into the sky, into the thunder because it was familiar.

He takes a bus to Pilar's house. He knocks on the door, waits and knocks again. No one answers. He looks up to the ochre sky and sees the clouds moving fast. They're low, the lowest to the ground he'd ever seen them, but it's May, and Gabi knows that hurricane season doesn't start until June. The clouds were moving out to the ocean, to the beach, a place he'd only been to a few times when he was younger, when Nicole was still with him. He bites back a sob, wipes his face.

Gabi replays his father's words over and over, and they circle his brain like moons pulling at his tides, feeding the storm. He hears them. He looks at the clouds and hears the wind, can make out the sounds they make moving through the banyans and the palm trees, the whispers and knows where Pilar and Ramón are. The winds start to swirl on the ground and pick up debris. He doesn't hum to ask them to stop. Los pajaritos rush into trees, groups of them. The clouds are so low now.

His head feels like it's expanding, and his fingers and toes buzz. He can't connect with the earth, can't plant and root like Pilar showed him. His feet and the ground are opposite ends of magnets. The winds circle around him, drop from the sky and vortex into a funnel, and Gabi hovers, floats, and lifts into the sky. Sirens blare and scream, and he's dancing. He is rising above everything. The city is a collection of constellations, streetlights twinkling into existence.

He can hear everything. He can hear the music coming from the college kids on the shore, the cat giving birth under a bush. He can hear his parents' breaths, frantic and

Pilar and Ramón, playing and dancing on Lincoln Road, una alegría to fight the winds, calling them to stop and go away, someplace else, away, away.

Gabi flies over downtown and collects seawater. He sees people cowering from him, getting out of their cars and hiding under bridges, huddling together beneath highway overpasses. He wonders if this is how life will be from now on. He sweeps down the bay, swipes a cruise ship, but he follows the sound, the words, the beat and the strings connecting him to her. He cries into the sea. He howls.

Then he feels himself being pulled, like there's a rope around his torso. The closer he gets to the ground, the louder it gets, Ramón playing and singing the winds away and Pilar, grounding herself in the wood and concrete, cuts the clouds apart. One golpe of her shoes, and the winds are gone, laughing and crying all at once.

It's just the three of them, Pilar and Ramón towering over Gabi, who's kneeled over on the ground, salty cheeked and knuckle bruised.

"I made everyone run away," says Gabi.

"Ay, Gabriel," says Pilar, wiping his face. "You were lucky you came to us."

He nods, stands and steadies his breath.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"You have nothing to apologize for," says Ramón

"My parents know everything," says Gabi.

"They would have found out eventually," says Pilar. "Todo a su tiempo."

"You're safe now," says Ramón.

Sirens are wailing in the distance, but Gabi can still feel the ripples in the air, currents and words still humming above him. He knows things will behave the way the

winds want it to, that little by little, it changes the shape of things. He takes another deep breath.

He calls the wind to his fingers, and he wraps it around him like un mantón, like wings.

If Lost on the Roads

Chapter One

I was eight years-old when my mother forced me into an open coffin. We traveled to Las Nieves one summer, joining with a group of other pilgrims along the road. They were all going to the same place, to celebrate Santa Marta de Ribarmete. One of the women, older than my mother said that she had fallen down the steps of her town's church. She said there was a bright light, that there was singing and warmth, but she said she couldn't leave her family behind. Not like that.

Now, at 23, I am making the same pilgrimage with Xabi next to me, our first voyage away from the village. He has a newspaper headlining the end of the ten-year war against Cuba tucked under his arm. Before we left, Úrsula, the old, lone woman, gave us both a piece of black jet to put in our pockets.

On the way to the Las Nieves, I tell Xabi what happened that first time. My mother told the pilgrims I drowned, was thought dead, said she told villagers to call the doctor and the priest while my father dangled me by my ankles and shook me to force the water out of my chest. I remember when the water did come, gushed out of my mouth with my breakfast. She said the priest had already blessed me with the sacrament. That same summer we journeyed south on her insistence. My father didn't want to. In the spring, we had buried my grandmother in earth she didn't want a few months before.

Las Nieves is small, and the day is hot, and there are so many people there that I feel like I am suffocating all over again, not with water but with the weight of everyone breathing prayers and resurrections all over each other.

We make our way toward the church. Flowers filled every corner. Their smell was like a haze hovering over the space. Candles glow everywhere, and the coffins are lined up against the right wall. As a child, I did not want to lie in it, but my mother said I had to because it was a miracle I was there. Everyone that was going to lie in a coffin had a near death experience. They came back from the other side, and so they all came to give thanks for continued life, to honor Santa Marta de Ribarteme, to touch and be touched by her. They asked for her intercession and her grace. My mother wanted to thank her for bringing me back from the watery grave.

The priest and church volunteers direct everyone to their coffins. I hear one volunteer say that he has not seen such a large group of people request to be carried in the procession. Several men and women scatter to find their own bed.

Xabi pats my shoulder, his breath against my ear.

"Don't worry, Lucas," he says. "I'm here."

Knowing he will be one of my pall bearers comforts me. Knowing he will be carrying me on his shoulders while I lie like a corpse. This time, I'm lying in a coffin because on this same day my parents died on their wedding anniversary. They traveled to Pontevedra. A storm hit while they took a private boat out to sea. The boat was found. They were not. I think this is some small way to honor them, and I think that, wherever they are, they know of Xabi. They know what he means to me.

A boy stands at the front of the crowd, looking at the smallest of the coffins—his own. He must have been twelve, no more than that. His left arm is wrapped in bandages. Scars creep up his neck and onto the side of his face, a burnt mountain range. He looks over at me, keeps looking at me. I didn't want to stare. I wonder who asked him to do

this, who asked him to come here, if he decided himself, if he decided to let everyone see him so out in the open. He must think same, asked himself why I am here, too. Part of me wants to walk over and ask how it happened, why he is here, count the scars on his face.

When the priest asks us to climb into the coffins, I hear my mother's voice echo through me.

"You'll do this for me, no, Lucas?" she had said, fixing my hair and straightening my Sunday shirt.

I sweat through my shirt, feel the wet pooling at my back, and I do as I am told, step into the coffin, lean back and wait until Xabi and several the volunteers lift me onto their shoulders. At the front of the procession, a man carries a statue of Santa Marta. Worshippers and family follow us, some with flowers in their hands, some with candles, some with rosaries clasped between their fists.

Outside, the crowds sing. Octopus cooks in cauldrons full of paprika, rabbit, too, and musicians beat their drums and blow their horns. Big bellied men raise their glasses of thick beer and toast to life and health and the spirits that returned from the dead. Some drink and sprinkle aguardiente over their faces, anise stinging my nose. From behind the crowds, firecrackers shoot into the sky. Men and women, alone under their heavy black hoods, chant into the wind.

My mother used to tell me about the bruxas and the meigas, that they are everywhere, hiding in towns and villages and cities instead of out in the forests and caves. I don't remember what the difference was between them, but there was always caution, always a drop in her voice, like they were listening.

Back home she'd say, "They are here. People know them, and no one sees them."

The first time I came to Las Nieves, I was convinced I saw them while I was lying in my coffin. I was supposed to lie still, to pretend like I was sleeping, my mother had said, but I could not. The sun was so bright against my eyes, so strong it burned through my eyelids. This is all the same now, the light, the noise.

I remember she walked ahead of my father and the other man carrying my living corpse on their shoulders. People stood along the street leading to the church with candles and flowers and rosaries. The most devout raised their hands up to the sky, feeling for a sliver of a miracle. It's almost like they are here now, my parents.

In between groups of people, I saw men and women standing alone, unmoving, wrapped in black, and while everyone was sweating and singing and praying, they were not. It seemed like no one paid them any attention. Their lips move like they are whispering, like they are praying for something I shouldn't know. Around them, more people walk alongside the procession of coffins. They don't talk, didn't acknowledge anyone. A woman walks beside me. She is dressed in a brown patchwork skirt, a dirty white shirt, and a red shawl wraps around her, covering her tangled hair. No one pays any attention to her. She looks up at me, puts a finger to her lips and cries. When I blink, she's gone.

That woman didn't belong here. I know that half the people walking are not supposed to be here. This happened when I was younger. They looked like everyone else, all ages, all faces, but they did not look lost. They moved when I blinked, jumping ahead when there was no way they could have moved that fast. That was when I knew. They had already gone, and they came back for the saint's feast day. I know this because my parents are standing in the crowds, wet and dripping with sea water.

This isn't the first time I have seen them, but this is the first time I have been out of the village since turning 18, and they followed me. I came here for them. They must know that.

Under me, pall bearers join the singers, praising la virgin and Santa Marta. I was still sweating, trying to focus on the blur of the spirits and the men and women in their hoods. Their whispering grows louder. It rings in my ears. The music, the sun, the smoke in the air, and I am spinning, lying in a boat drifting out to sea. I grab onto the sides of the coffin and sit up. Then I see her, my grandmother, hair braided and pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck, skin rich like the soil of the hills.

She is standing on the side of the road with others, and while people sing and chant and throw flowers into the street, she remains quiet there, watching, an absent look on her face.

I want to cry but can't. I want to reach out, call to her and tell her to help me out of the coffin. I am not dead, but my mother's words float in the wind, *miracle* child. It feels like everyone is treating me like I've died, *miracle child*. Around me, the other cadavers are all lying still. One woman fans herself in her coffin.

Xabi hands me a jug of water. I spill half of it over myself trying to keep it steady against my mouth. My grandmother is gone, but I can smell her, strong tobacco and firewood in the midst of charred meat and roses. The music grows louder, the winds sigh, and the town rattles the dead awake. In the distance, the cemetery shakes. I hear it rumble.

I look for the boy with the scars on his neck, and I find him behind me. He is sitting up, too, pretending not to be dead or acting very much alive. I cannot tell. I wave, and he

waves back, keeps his bandaged hand tucked at his side. He doesn't look scared, and I am jealous of that, of how he sits there taking everything in, like he has seen and done this all before. Maybe he has. Maybe this is his second, third, fourth time as a living corpse. He turns to his right and stares. I follow.

In the crowd, another person wearing a hooded cloak, but unlike the others, their hood was pulled back just enough to see their face. An old woman smiled from underneath it, a smile innocent and hungry at once. She stood there, as still as a gravestone, eyes following us. I recognized her as being from the same village Xabi and I are from, but I can't place her or her name, as if the harder I struggle to remember, the more clouded it all becomes.

The pall bearers take us all the way around the town, up and down hills, and back to the church. Then they set us down as gently as they can, shaking from the heat and sweat. In the church, the priest says his mass while we all lay in our coffins.

When I first participated in this procession, my mother wanted me to cross my arms over my chest, like I was actually laid to rest. She asked me to, and I did even though I was uncomfortable. She seemed happy to be there, beaming and shining in the dim church.

When mass is over, Xabi helps me out of my coffin. Then we walk out to the vendors, where we eat grilled rabbit on skewers. All the people who laid in the coffins gather, and they talk about their almost deaths, their living miracles. One man from Pamplona was trampled by a bull, his wife afraid she'd never hear him laugh again. The man had no front teeth. Another man had cut his arm in a cigar factory, lost so much

blood he was in bed for days. A woman from Madrid almost didn't make it through childbirth. Her baby did not survive.

We listen everyone tell their stories. They ask me why I am here, why I am participating.

"His mother was my aunt," says Xabi. "She and her husband passed away this month four years ago. We're here to honor them."

I remember my drowning, and it's like I am back at the river, spilling water out of my mouth. I feel it rise up in my throat, and I need to separate myself. I walk away from weight of all the near death.

I walk to the statue of the saint left out in the sun for pilgrims to leave offerings, flowers of every size and color, roses, lilies, bunches of carnations. I look for the boy with the scars on his neck in the ocean of bodies and sweat, and I can't find him, can't feel him pulling me towards him. That boy, I don't know how he can stand to let everyone see him so openly, all his scars visible to the world, like he's a thing waiting for the crows to take.

I see his shadow before I hear him, stretching long over the flowers and the statue.

"Lucas," says Xabi behind me. "What's wrong?"

Hair disheveled, cheeks starting to flush from the wine, that crooked smile. How do I tell him having him so close terrifies me? That in any moment, someone will see we aren't cousins, that we are as obvious as scars against skin. I don't tell him this, but he knows. Of course, he knows.

"I'm tired," I say.

It's all I can do. I know I can tell him how my chest shakes inside, but I don't want him to worry. He does that enough.

"Let's go back to the inn," he says. "We'll get an early start back home in the morning."

The sky darkens around us. People laugh and drink on our walk to the inn at the edge of town. In our room at the end of the hall, we lie together in bed and listen to the sounds outsides the walls, dim flashes of fireworks sparking through the cracks in the curtains.

I don't want to think about Xabi leaving the village again. I know he needs the work. He left to return for his father, and before leaving the village with me, he sent letters to the employers at the shipyard, asking if they would have him again. By the time we arrive home, there must be a letter waiting for him. I know he'll have to go, but I know he'll return. He said so. He pulls me into him, and I breathe the smell of smoke in his hair.

"Remember how we met?" says Xabi.

"Of course, I do," I say. "Where is this coming from?"

"You just stood there, like you'd seen a ghost."

"And you haven't?"

"Not as many as you have," he says, rubs a finger over my mouth.

I nibble at the skin and that day come to me, like looking at a photograph. He'd returned from working in A Coruña, woodworking in the shipyards. He lived at one edge of the village, closer to the Eume river. I avoided open water. Just the sight was enough to make my heart beat in my ears. Because of the distance, I hadn't seen Xabi, only catching him at the festivals, and even then, never speaking, always far enough to hide away in a crowd. The village knew him as the boatkeeper's son, and when his father died,

Xabi returned to take care of the burial. Úrsula introduced us, and for over a year, we've given new names to every tree in the forest, counted every star we could see, always getting lost somewhere in that infinity. We've learned the expanse of our bodies.

What I don't tell him is when I first saw him when we were children, watching him play with the others while I sat under the trees. I remember seeing him in the forest one Saint John's Eve. I was fifteen. The village men had finished piling old, broken furniture for the bonfire just outside the village. It was a mess of buzzing and drinking and yelling waiting for the final touch to the burning. Everyone cheered when they saw it above the crowd, a group of canvas sacks stuffed with hay made to resemble a person. Sometimes the sack had fake horns on its head to represent the devil. Other times it had an old, raggedy dress and straw hair to represent a witch. In their skirts, women carried whatever bundles of herbs they didn't hang on their doors or left out in vases filled with water, fennel, rosemary, rue, elder flowers for more protection. They'd wash their faces with night dew in the morning.

The torch came, lit the pile of wood on fire, and the air filled with so much smoke I couldn't tell what was burning and what was not. People danced around the fire, chanting protections against the spirits. Fire rose high and embers floated, touched the sky and stayed there. Some men were lighting their orujo with the flames, drinking the liquor in one swing. I drank like the other boys my age until everything was heavy and hot, and my breath came in shorts gasps, so I moved away from the crowd and closer to the village. I saw two figures slip through houses. They weren't spirits like I first though. They were boys, and I followed them, kept my distance until I could follow them by listening to the sounds the trees made when they walked.

I turned and saw them, blue moonlight breaking through the slats in the branches, their hands fumbling across each other's bodies, finding their ways to the place in between their legs. My head felt light, but my body was heavy, and my stomach disappeared like morning dew. My face and ears burned. I slipped my hand into my pants, worked myself and watched the way Xabi kissed the other boy, wished it were me with my back against the tree and his hands pulling away my belt. I bucked against myself. Wisps of light danced across the corners of my eyes, and my hand came away hot and wet. I ran back to the village and found a vase full of flowers, poured the water over my face and scrubbed with my nails, trying to forget how good the sight felt.

In our bed at the inn, I turn to smoke, burning from the inside out, but Xabi's hands force me back to him, whole and new.

Chapter Two

Xabi and I arrive in town later that week. The sun is low on the horizon. Stars peak through strips of hazy clouds. That could be another world layered right over our own, hiding beyond what everyone else can see.

The trail opens. Ahead is the small cabin. The rowboats are docked along the lakeshore, oars leaning against a rack next to the house. I feel it, my left hand tight around the straps of my backpack, my fingertips sparking against my own skin.

It's a slow walk back to town. A hand in my pockets, I finger loose threads and bits of lint. I mind my own business, like the things in the forest. The sun is low now, and that hazy orange glow settles in. I catch Xabi looking at me, a twinkle at the corner of his eye. He yawns. He's tired, but he's walked all this way with me.

Around us, abandoned cottages lay scattered around the paths, some in a small clearing of tall trees, some sitting in the middle of grassy meadows, spots of no longer surrounded by what will continue to be, and I see myself there, standing at the door to my house where cobbles are cracked like dried bread, and wood has aged and wrinkled like the people that used to live there.

I have a vision of people leaving, first a few, then all of them, like how our teeth fall out as children, and I watch them. My hair will turn white, and my teeth will fall out all over again, and I will be overrun by roots and trees until I am as hard and wrinkled as bark. This is what will happen if I stay in this village until I'm old.

Dogs are wrangling the cows and sheep back to their pens. The farmers tidy up their day's work, bring in firewood for the night, whistle for any of their sons or daughters that haven't left to the city to clean up for supper. The children are still here until they leave. Then it'll be the old folks with their animals, and when those are gone, they won't make much money. They'll have a hard time hiring anyone to work the land, raise the cattle, and their children won't know they've died until the letters arrive. If they're lucky, their children make the train and coach back to the town to see them before a witch can steal their last breath at night. Maybe they'll see their grandchildren for the first time before that happens.

We arrive at Xabi's cottage. Inside, everything is as we left it, candle wax hardened on the table, the dinner plates set on a cloth to dry. I help Xabi start a fire in the chimney. Then we sit on his bed, where we hold each other in silence.

"Stay," he says.

I do. Of course, I do, and I stay until morning.

#

That afternoon, I knock on Úrsula's door.

"Come in, Lucas," she says, so I let myself in. She's in her kitchen, pulling at the strings in the room, calling spices by their forgotten names. There's the upside-down broom leaning next to the door, there's her jar of blessed dirt from the cemetery, her branches from a laurel tree, wolf's teeth over the chimney. "Hand me the big bowl in this cabinet here on the right," she says.

"What are you making?" I ask.

"I've spiced up some sausage to cook over the furnace, and I'm making a torta de Santiago. I know how much you like it."

I hand the bowl to her, and it's full of my smile.

"I knew it was you knocking at the door."

"How?"

"The wind told me."

I laugh. "That sounds like something an old person would say."

"Oh child, I'm so much older than you know," she says and goes back to cooking.

"Úrsula," I say.

She stops what she's doing, dusts her hands on her apron and turns to face me.

"I know that tone," she says. She hands me a pastry. "Come on, out with it."

"I've been thinking about leaving town and going to the city," I say.

"I know. And what's stopping you?"

"I'm not sure. I guess it's leaving the familiar, leaving the little I know here."

“Change is a scary thing. I know people who didn’t survive it.” I think she would have been a great mother if she ever had children.

“You should charge people for your advice,” I say.

“They think me a crazy old bat, anyway. Everyone except you and Xabier.”

I see her smile because she knows something.

I’ve never asked her age, but I know she’s older than all of us here, older than the town, older than Galicia.

It was all Úrsula’s doing. I met Xabi because she insisted I go with her to deliver sweets when he returned to take care of his father’s funeral. And I remember that night.

#

“Lucas.” The voice came from the river, the drowned returning. It couldn’t be because there was something in my name, the way that voice said it, like it was the first time I’d heard my name spoken out loud

Xabi rowed up close. He laid the oars in the boat and hopped into the shallows, pulled the prow behind him until he settled it into the shore. Sweat stuck his hair to his forehead, the scent of new earth, lavender, faint, and the forest grew one shade lighter.

“Where are you going?” he said.

“Home,” I said. “Then to Úsula’s house for dinner. What brings you out this way?”

“A ride down the river is a nice way to relax,” he said. “Would you care for a ride? We’re going the same direction anyway.”

Then I saw my parents in the boat. I saw them in the river. I saw the water pulling them under up to their eyes. Their hands came up for each other, and they were gone.

I wanted to, but I couldn't. I was afraid they'd reach over the rowboat and pull me under.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm not far up the road."

"Maybe I'll see you around the village, then," he said.

He pushed the boat into the water, jumped back in and began rowing away. He waved like we had known each other since we were children growing up in neighboring farms. I waved back. I tried to play with the other children, chased after them but got pushed into the dirt instead because that was where I belonged. That's what the other boys my age would tell me. They said my grandmother was dirty, so I was dirty, and they'd kick up dust. I'd come home with dirty clothes and scratches along my arms, memories best left alone.

I made it to Úrsula's house. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and asked me to start up a fire in the chimney, which I did. I left my coat inside and grabbed the ax next to the door. She hadn't asked, but I knew she would eventually. I started chopping wood, and that was all I thought about, the metal sinking into the wood, clean split. I looked up towards the path, a tiny part hoping I'd see a crooked smile walking my way, and part of me was so stupid for expecting, but I couldn't help it, and I dreamed it because I wanted it and I was saying, *please, please tell me I'm imagining it because this can't happen here, shouldn't happen here*. I chopped log after log, watched its halves snap and come apart and hoped it were all that easy.

Leaves crunched, a twig cracked, and there was someone standing next to me, his combed hair, his clean white shirt, his crooked smile.

"Hello," said Xabi.

“Hello,” I said.

“I was going to ask if you needed help, but I think you managed on your own.”

I cut a few logs too many. Úrsula wouldn’t have to worry about firewood for several weeks. I didn’t realize how much I actually cut, and I could not leave them lying on the ground, so I began collecting them to stack against her house.

“Let me help you,” said Xabi.

“But you bathed,” I said.

He laughed, and the breeze kicked up. “There’s nothing wrong with a little dirt under your fingernails,” he sayed.

I picked up the split pieces, cradled them in one arm. Xabi stacked more in my arms, and we piled them up along Úrsula’s house.

“Dammit,” said Xabi.

I turned to see him sucking on his finger.

He looked my way and said, “Splinter.”

“Don’t do that,” I said. “You’ll only make it worse.”

He picked at the wound. I grabbed his finger and pinched the wood. He hissed. I pulled it out and held it to his face.

“There,” I said. “Gone.”

“I would have been picking at it all afternoon,” he says.

“Then I’m glad I could help.”

I heard the birds stop singing. I heard the grass growing, felt the roots crawl under the dirt. The forest breathed me in and out.

“Lucas,” said Úrsula from the door. “It’s time for dinner.

I pick up the remaining pieces of firewood.

“Xabi,” she said, kissed him on the cheeks.

“Thank you for the sweets the other day,” he said. “I came to return the basket you left with me.”

She waved it away and said, “Come, sit down and stay for dinner.”

The house smelled of pepper, rosemary, cloves. Úrsula stirred her soup pot and ladled the stuff into bowls, served slices of bread onto the table.

“Eat. I didn’t make all this food for nothing,” she said.

Xabi attacked the food first, tearing a slice of bread and dunking it into the stew. He stopped mid-chew and apologized. Úrsula laughed, holds his head, and kisses him. She looked over to me and winked.

“It’s nice to have some extra help,” she said.

“It is,” I said.

“What did you do on your travels, Xabi?” she said, scooping a big spoonful into her mouth.

Xabi told us of his work in A Coruña, how he was working in the ship yards. The people he met. The sights and sounds. He’d never seen so many gulls in the sky, so many people crammed into a street. When he spoke, the flowers leaned toward him to listen. Like them, I hung on every word out of his mouth

“I’m not sure. I received a good offer from a factory. There’s a whole other world over there.”

My grip tightened around my spoon. My fingers whitened, hardened against the metal. Teeth clamped down on the words I wanted to keep in my mouth, the possibility of something, even a friendship, gone.

I ate the stew, smiled and nodded when I felt I should. Warmth spread across my face.

"Excuse me, Úrsula," I said. "I'm not feeling well. I think I'm going to go home."

"What's wrong? I knew I shouldn't have made you work out in the summer heat so much. I should have something here to make you feel better."

"No, don't worry about it, please. I'm sure I just need some rest." I stood up, offered my hand to Xabi, which was difficult because I thought of that moment as the final goodbye and hoped the city was everything he hoped it to be.

He shakes it. There's no crooked smile. His mouth is turned down, head tilted.

"I hope you feel better," he says.

I kissed Úrsula goodbye and opened the door. The rain started, and I realized I left my coat outside lying on the log. I left it there and walked home in the drizzle not expecting to ever see Xabi again.

#

"Here, take some food home with you. Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow." She hands me a small basket with food like the one she made for Xabi all those months ago, gives me two kisses on the cheek, and walks me to the door.

I eat some of the food at home and save the rest. It's just after 9 in the evening. The sun is almost gone. I grab my coat and walk out the door. I walk out of town and go in the opposite direction of the lake. There's a smaller one down the almost forgotten path.

I've marked the trees to find my way, but I've gone through here so many times, like a dog wandering a farm.

The grove of willow trees sits next to the small lake. Mist hangs in the air, a bride's veil, and I still don't know a holy space like this. Their branches dip and wind in the air, and some of their leaves touch the lake, fingers dipping into the bowl of holy water in a church.

Humid air, heavy, and I wonder how loudly I have to shout to hear someone talk back to me. I skip stones into the lake the way my father taught me.

Dried leaves crunch behind me. Something hisses. I drop the stone and pick it back up. I'll throw it if I have to.

I see who made that noise, an old woman on her hands and knees. I run over to her and take her arm.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

She looks up at me. "Yes, I think so," she says. "What are the odds you'd be nearby when I fell? The stars have aligned just right."

I'm careful with her. She's old, and I'm afraid her arm will dislocate, but she gets up and dusts herself off.

"What are you doing out here?" I ask.

"I was taking a walk around the lake. I live on the other side, next to the thicker grove of willow trees."

I follow her weathered finger. I don't see a house. There's too much mist, but I believe her, like I have no other choice.

"Please, you must let me repay you somehow," she says.

"You don't need to do that."

"What do you want most?"

"Excuse me?"

"I can tell you. I know just by looking at you."

"What do I want most?"

"You're carrying too much," she says. She's whispering, like calling a cat. "You won't come right away. I know it. I'll tell you one of these days. You know where to find me."

She wraps her coat around her chest and walks off.

Now that she's gone, I realize that one of her eyes had no pupil.

Chapter Three

I spend most of the day wandering through the village, my habit. There is Señor Coto and his wife walking down the road her arm linked through his. They would be around my parent's age, a little older I think. I'm not sure how different things would be if they were here, if I'd be questioning leaving, if I'd have already left after the mandatory few months of militia service, if someone would be linking their arm through mine in our own home.

The roads out of the town are quiet except for a few children playing, chasing after each other with tree branches. They laugh like they know nothing else, like that's all they're supposed to do, laugh and make trouble and smile so big because their default is love.

Dull light settles around me, the muted colors growing darker, like a screen over the sun. I keep walking. Spirits do it all the time in the forest, though they seem to know where they're going.

The Eume runs to my left. Smaller rivers and creeks stretch from it out into the forests and hills and the sea. I think of the old woman I met yesterday, and I wonder what she's doing.

I want a drink.

#

People keep to themselves in La Cañada, the inn at the outskirts of town. I sit at the corner of the bar and order a drink. The bartender asks if I want something to eat. I decline. Rosa, one of the barmaids, collects empty mugs from a table. She winks at me. If this weren't the only bar in town, I wouldn't come here, but this is the only place I can have a drink. I wish she's stop paying attention to me. Everyone except her minds their business, maybe a few nods of acknowledgement when someone walks in, but that's it.

I'm not sure how long I've been sitting here. It feels like I've been drinking for a few hours, though I'm not halfway done with my drink.

I hear the tavern door open. Light footsteps make their way to the bar and stop next to me. I smell soap.

"Oh, hello," says Xabi. "It's nice to see you here."

The bartender gives him a glance. Xabi catches it and says, "I'll have what he's having."

Drinks are put in front of us, with a refill for me. I wonder if drinking more will make me feel comfortable in this body. I finish my first drink and take the second one.

“Impressive,” says Xabi.

“Thanks.”

“My mother used to say that a bit of drink could make you feel better, well, for most people.”

“Tell her she’s right.”

He smiles and says, “I will when I’m dead.”

For a while, we’re silent, sipping from our mugs, listening.

Those affirmations are the fires that will burn me at the stake. Are people looking? Do they notice how the blood collects at my cheeks? Do they know that my body fights? Every day is a quiet rebellion. I don’t like to ask myself questions. I’ll start imagining scenarios, and here I go doing it. I should tell myself it’s all in my head, but that’s what makes it scary.

A man comes into the bar and walks over to a table, greets his friends. He pulls out a cigarette but none of his friends have something to light it with.

“Hey,” he says to the room. “Does anyone here have anything to light my damn smoke?”

Xabi calls him over. He pulls a matchbook of his pocket and with one hand, like fingers weaving thread, flips it over until amatch is standing up alone. He bends it over and snaps his fingers. It hisses and comes to life, fire.

The man leans over the flame, making sure his cigarette is well it.

“Thanks kid, and neat little trick you have there.”

Xabi shakes out the match and pulls it off the square.

I haven’t looked away from his hand and the matches.

“What’s the matter?” he asks.

“I didn’t know you could do that”

“This?” He sparks another to life.

“Show me,” I say.

I take the matchbook from his hand and flip it over. I see the place where the match struck, the scar his match left on it.

“How did you do it?”

He takes the matchbook and, with one hand, flips it open, selects the match he wants, bends it down, and closes the flap. His fingers turn it upside down, the match standing like a lone tree. He bends that down so the head is resting against the striking pad. He places his thumb over the match and snaps his fingers. A spark, smoke, fire. He blows out the match.

I take it from his hand again. I will get it right.

I use both hands, bend a match across.

“No, no,” says Xabi. He pushes the matchbook into my right hand and holds it there. “One hand.”

One hand. I’m working with half of what I have. Maybe that’s what this life I life is like, being whole but only using half of ourselves.

I do everything like he showed me. I snap my fingers. Nothing happens. I reposition the match, do it again and again until I wear the white off the match head.

It’s a whisper, but I say, “I’ll get this right.”

“I know you will,” says Xabi.

I smile and keep my eyes on the matchbook. It's nice to know someone believes in you, even if it's just a little bit.

More people come into the bar, shouting to order their drinks. Rosa walks by again and winks at me.

"I think I'm going to step outside," I say.

"Me too," says Xabi. He drinks what's left of his drink and leaves the money on the counter. The bartender's hands are quick, takes the money and waves his thanks. I think two less people to worry about will make his night easier.

It's cool outside. The rain has stopped, and mist floats over everything. The sun is gone. It must be later than I thought. The matchbox is still in my hand. I flip open the matchbook again and pick out a match. I snap my fingers over it, and fire lights up his smile.

"Good job," he says, and pats my back. "See? Easier than it looks."

I hand him the matchbook, but he shakes his head.

"Keep it," he says. "You never know when someone's going to need a light."

I stuff it in my pocket and pull my coat on, damp but not bad. It would dampen with the humidity anyway. I look up at the sky. Most of the clouds have cleared away, and the stars are out, all of them, houses in the dark with their porch lamps on, waiting for someone to come home.

"What do we do now?" I ask.

Xabi turns to me, hands in his pockets. "We?" That damn smile.

I have the sun in my mouth, burning down my throat. "Unless you've got other things to do."

The road is wet, mud puddles scattered along the way. Rabbits hop out of the path and into the dark. Other than the crickets, our boots against the soft ground is the only sound I hear. The dark stretches all over and the town is a collection of tiny lights at the end of the road. An owl hoots.

"Lucas," says Xabi. His voice is that moment before lightning strikes, the hairs at the back of my neck rising up like thorns. "Let's take a boat into the river."

"Now?" I say.

"Yes."

He's so sure. How? How can someone take every doubt, every question you've ever asked yourself and bury them, like bodies? It's late. It's dark. I see the town, and I hear Xabi's voice, but all I can think about is la Santa Compaña and their want of life because there is so much of it around me, the leaves, the animals, the wind, that voice, that "yes."

I say nothing. Instead, I nod toward the path, asking him to lead the way. I take a look around the forest, back towards the inn and tavern. Small lights hover through the trees. I smell candle wax. I start walking. Two green beads stare from the side of the road. I haven't seen a wolf in a while. Most have been hunted down, skinned, sold. Xabi sees it too. I grab his arm and pull him forward. The wolf stares back like it's still trying to smell us. It's smelling what it already knows. I knows what I want.

The town is asleep, the main street a mass of spilled ink. Above us, I can't tell where the trees meet the sky, and I want to see the stars. We walk through the dark, our own wolves, and I wonder how hungry we are. Muck and mud along the road. He walks next to me. They'd call that a friend. I want to say it.

Keep walking next to me.

I realize that I have never walked through the forest at this time of night, partly because of the spirits lurking in the forest and partly because I don't know what else I'll find wandering alone.

We make it to his cabin. Row boats are lined up along the shore. Xabi grabs a pair of oars and his rubber boots.

"Come on," he says. "You have to get in before I push it into the water."

Maybe. I should tell him that my parents would take me walking along the riverbank, and we'd sit in the shade, throw stale breadcrumbs into the river, and talk to the fish. I should tell him that the closest I've come to swimming since my parents died was standing ankle-deep in the water before I thought they'd take me with them to a place I couldn't follow. I learned how to swim when I was little, but lately, all I seem to be doing is staying afloat.

Fish are swimming through my blood. I remember what my dad said about being a man and being weak. I climb into the boat.

Xabi pushes off the shore and hops into the boat, and I grip whatever part of the seat I can, an anchor. I want dirt spread all over the boat because that might give me the illusion of land. I look over to him, and he's smiling under blue starlight.

"That's one thing I missed about living here," says Xabi, pointing his chin up.

The sky is torn, a gash crossing it like a wound, bruised over with light and dust and everything else I can't see. I am being crushed by land and sky, hands of dirt and stars feeding me the world. They're falling into the horizon, one, two, five.

I don't remember who told me that those streaks where the gods at war or that a war was coming or that war was going to end.

“Do you believe we’ve been here before?” said Xabi.

“What do you mean?”

“That we’ve lived before this, before now?”

I had never thought about the idea until now, until I hear it from his mouth, and if that’s true, then maybe that could be why I want to say so much. My mouth is a graveyard for words that died before they were born.

I say something. I say, “I don’t know.”

Xabi laughs. “Is that your answer for everything?”

“You’re the first person to ask that question.”

“When I was in A Coruña, I met a man from the east. Some of them believe that people die and are reborn again and again constantly looking for the person they were with until they find them.”

“That’s a lot like the old story from the Greeks,” I say. “About how humans were split in half as punishment for threatening the gods, so they wandered for years trying to find their other half.”

We’re floating along the river, letting the current take us. Xabi lays the oars down and picks up a lamp.

“Light this for me,” he says.

I have to let go of the seat. My hand trembles when I reach for the matchbook in my pocket. I try one match strike it so many times that I made it wilt. The second sparks, and I light the candle in the lamp.

“I prefer candles to oil lamps,” he says. “Have you ever had to put out an oil fire on a boat?” He sets the lamp on the ground in between us then pulls a flask from his inside his coat. He takes a sip and holds it out towards me.

I take it, anything to stop my hands from shaking so much, and drink.

“I hope you didn’t drink all of it,” he says and take the flask out of my hand. He laughs again.

I wish the alcohol would work faster. I sit in the middle of the bench because I’ll be the same distance away from both sides of the boat, as far away from the water as I can be.

“What are you so nervous about?” asks Xabi. He takes another sip from the flask, hands it back to me.

I finish what’s left of the alcohol and wipe my mouth.

“I’m just thinking,” I say.

“We’re all thinking something, no?” he says.

Crickets, an owl in the tree, and I can almost hear the mist rising from the forest, shushing the animals so we can hear the village’s heartbeats.

“Thank you for agreeing to come out on the boat,” he says. “I’m sure it’s a strange thing to ask for in the middle of the night.”

“You I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be,” I say.

“It’s just like the first time we came out on the boat together. Remember that?”

Of course, I do. I’d never seen his face so close to mine.

“I kept looking turn to the riverbanks, looking for lanterns, listening for footsteps in the mud, for late-night caravan and had to stop myself. There’s no one around.” It was just me and the river and Xabi and the stars.

The only other time I had been that close to someone was with the barmaid during a New Year’s Eve celebration. I kissed her because I thought I was supposed to. She leaned into my ear and said she had a present for me, that I had to unwrap it. She said I had to give her something in return, to give was to receive, and how could I be so cruel and not give her a gift. I don’t remember much after that, but I do remember she said not to tell anyone because she had barely lifted her skirt before it happened.

Now I see Xabi’s cheeks burning from their insides and kissed by the cold air around us. The boat has its own heartbeat. He is a half-lit moon, and I am desperate for light.

He leans over the lamp. I am a willow sprouting from a single branch. He is the water I dip my roots into. I think the wind would hate him because it could never kiss as soft as he does.

There is the crooked smile I am so used to.

Chapter Four

We treat days like they are years. The forest grows and greens through hands and teeth, and I have never seen so many colors at once. We name them the way the universe would have, with no one else around. We’re lying on the riverbank looking at the sky blush

The forest is full of giants holding up the sky, picking stars like fruits. Everything is still, lips on mine, teeth against teeth. I trace constellations on a body.

We trade stories of the village, of the times when we were kids with nothing to live for but the warmth of the sun and the feast days of saints, when the village would become its own party. Cakes and drinks and costumes and candles and men would jump over the bonfires. I tell him how parents would warn the kids not to go into the forest on the night of a saint's feast, how they warned them to stay away from churches and chapels dedicated to them, avoid crossroads and never accept a candle from a hooded figure.

Xabi talks often of his time in A Coruña, white buildings, men in black clothes, women in dresses and corsets and parasols, horse drawn carriages up and down the streets, white buildings and street vendors and churches that can hold entire villages inside them. There are children shouting and misbehaving. There is so much color in the world. I know he wants to go back. I know he needs the work, the money. What can I offer him that he can't find elsewhere?

"I want to see more than just this village," he says, like he can read my mind. "I saw a city, Lucas, so much life. I want to see more."

"Like what?"

"The giants in País Vasco, the winding streets in Barcelona, the dancers in Sevilla. I want to see everything."

He tells me of the letter. It offered him a job fixing small boats for the city and a shipyard. There is money in the city, more money than there is here in this half-forgotten village.

"I can send money back here," he says. "Until you can follow me to the city. What do you think?"

I keep words to myself. I say I am jealous of people I don't know because they knew you before I did. I say us, I say this, I say everything the wind took with it, and I say this is bigger than all of us.

I say nothing.

One day he teaches me how to skip rocks farther than I can, skip them so far, I send them to another planet. The next day I teach him how to talk to fish, how to listen to the forest the way my parents taught me, and later that day he shows me water.

We wait for the village to quiet and step into the river, barefoot and up to our ankles. He turns looks at me.

"Come on," he says.

He takes my wrist and wades deeper into the river.

I'm standing knee-deep in worry. I wiggle my toes underwater. Soft muck shifts between them, spongy. Trees crash in my ears with every small step. Waist deep now, and there ripples to my right. Two heads are submerged from the nose down. I see their eyes, weeds in their nests of hair.

Their eyes are familiar, the same brown I'd see growing up. They don't move. I wish there was something I could give them. I wish I knew what to do. I look back, hold their gaze like a noose around a neck, and I'm waiting for one of those to snap.

Still water remains. It's cold, and my body tenses, goosebumps on my back, thorns on my neck.

"I think I'm ready to get out now," I tell Xabi.

"I still haven't shown how to float on your back," he says.

Hands hold me up, and I am an offering. His touch leaves calluses on my body. Wind carries leaves into the river. Someone has cut open peaches and mixed them with clouds. He tells me how to do it, keep breathing, use your hands, let go.

"See? Easier than it looks."

We take rowboats into the river at night, and we explore the forest. I take him to the grove of willow trees. That's where I tell him about my parents while we toss stale crumbs to the fish.

"Do you remember them?"

"Yes," I say, though I don't tell him I see them often.

Sightings have been more common since I met Xabi. They never wandered out of water until I saw them in Las Nieves. Sometimes I see just their faces blue lips and eyes rimmed with blood. They don't smile. They don't speak. I wonder if they traveled upstream just to watch me or judge me.

"I don't remember my father," says Xabi.

We are sitting against the willow trees, picking at grass.

"He left when I was young," he says. "Everyone called my mother a witch after that. I think she started believing it. She drew into herself. She didn't leave the house a lot. I needed to find a way to help her make money, so I apprenticed to the boat keeper. Everyone called me his son even though we had no relation to each other, but I guess he was almost like a father when I had none. Then mom died. You know."

I nod, pick at more grass, look at him. Here we are among the wreckage. I pull apart my ribs and say, *this isn't a cage. It's a house. Please stay a while.*

"It'll only be for a little while," he says. "I'll write."

“I know you will,” I say.

The last days before he leaves last like leftover meat. We have to eat it all before it goes bad, and we are hungry, starving hands and ocean mouths, and we give each other everything. The way I look at him lying on the morning dew, that must be how the gods saw the beginning of the world.

#

Then one day he doesn’t show up. I wait. Mist disappears, the sun arcs along, and there is no sign of him. I go to Úrsula’s house. She’s in her kitchen again, calling herbs and bending sunbeams.

“Lucas,” she says. “How are you?” She kisses me on the cheek.

“Have you seen Xabi?”

“Not today, no.” She wipes her hands on an old rag. “Why?”

The earth smells different and last night’s rain didn’t clean the forest like it should. Lavender lingers in the air. The willow grove weeps. Colors dull around me.

“I thought maybe you had,” I say.

I follow the path to house by the river. Rowboats are lined up on the shore. There is no smoke coming from the chimney. I knock on the door and wait. There is no answer, so I knock again. I knock and knock until I lose rhythm. I call his name. I try the doorknob. It gives way. I can hear dust settling on furniture. It deafens me.

“Xabi?”

There’s a vase with flowers on the dinner table and kitchen with plates next to a sink and a wood stove with unused firewood, and my voice hovers, untouched. The scents I’m so used to are faint, ghosts.

There's a letter on the table addressed to me. I recognize Xabi's messy handwriting. He apologizes for not saying anything before he left, that he'll be back soon, that he'll write to me. He's taken the job in A Coruña and will return in two months.

I close the door behind me and walk away. My parents' eyes follow me from the water. I find the willow grove. Everything is still. The wind dies down. I reread the letter. I believe him because I have no reason not to.

Chapter Five

In the two months I wait for Xabi, I receive a letter every week. He keeps his promise. I take these to the willow grove at edge of the river and read them to myself over and over again. Xabi writes about the cuts and burns on his hands, and I imagine him writing through the pain. I smell sawdust rising from the pages. He writes of the friends he's made in the city, older men who take him to the taverns lining the docks. He has a room he shares with a man whose children have moved to Santiago de Compostela. He describes the view from his room on the third floor, which looks out to the sea, and he wakes up every morning to the smell of it. He says I'd love it there. That he can't wait for me to come to him, and from there, we'd travel the country, take the trains to the cities, and run into who knows what. The thought of it excites and terrifies me. My parents watch me from the river, heads bobbing like pieces of driftwood.

Then one day, the letters stop coming. Nothing. I go to the post office at the center of town, but the postman says there are no letters waiting for me.

"Could you please check again?" I say.

He huffs and looks through the ordered stacks one more time.

“I’m sorry, sir, but there is nothing addressed to you.”

I thank him and leave the building and walk out toward the farms at the outskirts. Cows and horses graze on grass. I catch wisps of spirits in the distance, floating through the cracks in the trees, flitting in and out of sight. Úrsula once told me that if I tried hard enough, I could hear them. I’ve never tried. I’m afraid my parents will appear, and that once they know I can hear them, they’ll spite me. Xabi wouldn’t have made them happy.

Tonight, it rains stones. They beat against the wooden roof of my house, and I smell something salty and misty all at once. The next morning, they lay scattered on the ground, smooth stones with holes born into them.

#

I wait days, which turn to weeks, which turn to months. I return to the post office, and every time, the post man says there is nothing waiting for me. The last letter he sent me says he’s arrived at Bilbao, that there’s a new shipyard he’s been asked to work in, a higher pay. He would send another letter when he could. He hasn’t. I grow restless. I wander.

I walk over to the other side of the river. The sun doesn’t move from the horizon, and ravens shout from the trees. I look up through the trees. The stars look different, not where I’m used to seeing them. Some I can’t ever remember seeing. Branches and leaves thicken around me. I see the river between the trees, and even though the shore is close, the other shore looks farther away than I remember.

Smoke rises from around the path. The wolf leads me to a small house near massive willow trees that dip into a creek. There’s something cooking inside. I can’t place it, but Úrsula makes something similar. A wolf disappears behind the house. Cracks run up and

down the house, like sheets of lightning. The windows are dusty, but candlelight flickers through.

I lift my hand to knock, but the door opens from the inside.

"Come in," says a voice from inside.

Jars of herbs sit above the fireplace. Smaller jars of tiny bones and yellow pebbles are at the other end. The house smells of mint and cloves, and it stings my nose. My eyes water.

There's an old woman in the kitchen plucking feathers off a headless chicken. She puts the feathers into a bowl and pushes it away.

I know who she is before she turns around, and then I see her eyes, one without a pupil.

"I told you I'd see you again," she says. "Help an old woman again and get me that big jar there on the table. Yes, the one next to the rat teeth. Gracias, mi vida."

She pours dried herbs and powder over the chicken and sprinkles oil over it then places it in a shallow bowl. She claps her hands and dust rises.

"That's so the dead know I'm still here," she says. "You are Lucas."

"How do you know that?" I ask.

She waves me over and takes my arm. "A pleasure. Agata. Now walk me to the table, please. We have a lot to talk about."

I set her down at the small round table. There's a pot of coffee and cups and spoons and sugar and hot milk. Agata pours the milk then coffee and spoons in sugar.

"I like mine sweet," she says then hands me a cup. She smiles, and I can't tell if it's because she has a visitor or if she's thinking something she wants to tell me.

There are more items around the house than I thought. A cat sleeps on a pillow at one corner of the big room. Vases of dried flowers dot the place. Goat horns are mounted on the wall. I sip my coffee. I can see my parents coming out of the creek and opening the door.

"I expected you to come sooner," says Agata.

She finishes her coffee and sets it on a tray next to the table. She looks straight at me, the way a wild animal does when you see it in the woods. One eye is normal, brown, a pupil in the center. Her other eye brown and milky and no pupil. I remember the stories.

"Who are you?" I say.

"I am the one who tricked the gods to teach me their secrets. I am the one who sees the woven strings around you. I am the wolf that howls the sun away. I am the meadow, and I am the billy goat. I am the one who knows."

Agata smiles at me, and I feel the hairs at the back of my neck stand up, like the moment before lightning falls. She clears away the coffee and dishes and removes a stack of cards from her skirt. She licks her thumbs and claps her hands again. Her fingers are quick, working the cards like a spider works its web. She pushes the cards towards me.

"Cut the deck."

I do.

Agata lights a pipe. She calls the mist from the outside. Smoke rises over us, heavy. The pipe balances between her tongue and her lips.

"Place your right hand over the deck."

She puts her hand over mine, and it feels rough, like petrified wood, edges that can cut me.

“Tell me your full name.”

“Lucas Bidarte Salcedo.”

“What month and day were you born?”

“The twenty-second of December.”

She takes the cards and spreads them in a line from her right to left.

“Choose one. Don’t look at it.”

I point at one somewhere in the middle.

“Good,” she says and places that card in the middle of the table. “That card is yours.”

She takes the deck and lays cards over mine, horizontal then vertical. She takes three cards from the top of the deck and lays them closest to me then takes another from the deck and leaves it face down to her right, away from her work. She does this four more times, lays cards in three over my face down card, three closest to her, three to her left, and three to her right.

A big puff from her pipe. She clicks her tongue.

“Oh child, you’ve got so much going on,” she says. She taps the cards like she’s making a pattern. “Tell me how long you’ve known him.”

Of course, I know who she’s talking about. My memories of him are sprouting like trees.

“About a year,” I say.

“You know, if things were different, he’d be a good match for you.” Agata takes another puff from her pipe. Smoke pours from her nose. We lock eyes. “Don’t look at me like that. Just because I think nothing of it doesn’t mean other people won’t.”

She waves me to come closer, licks her lips, stares at me with her good eye.

"I have seen men lie and gods die. I am older than these bones you've placed me in. I know the language of the wind, and it is pushing against you."

"How do you know that?"

She smiles, and I remember that story about the woman with the house made of candy, who wanted to eat the children that wandered in.

"Because I told the giants when they would die, and none of them listened. I told the monsters they'd be forgotten, and they have been. I can tell you this."

Agata points to each card as she reads it.

"He didn't tell you about the person waiting for him where he's gone off to, and he didn't tell you about most of his childhood." She cracks her jaw. "You want to find him. You want forevers."

"Yes," I say.

She laughs, rocks scraping against each other. "You won't."

"Then why did you bring me here?"

The room is cold. My fingertips numb.

"I didn't."

"You're lying," I say.

"Possibly. But isn't possibility what lies are made of?"

Smoke swirls around my head, and I inhale thick clouds. I cough up fog.

"Go to A Coruña," she says. "You'll be there sooner than you think."

I run out of the house. The leaves stir around me. In the sky, the sun hasn't moved from its lowest point on the horizon, and the stars are spinning above me, tracing giant

circles. Every step I take shakes the bodies underground. I go to the only person I can. I go to Úrsula. I see her at her porch, watering flowers.

She takes a look at me and drops her pail, rushes me inside her house. Úrsula sets water to boil and pulls different herbs from her own jars, like a creator making an animal from leftover parts. From a bowl of forest knickknacks, she pulls out a large chestnut and cracks it open.

"Eat this." She hands me the cracked shell. The water is boiling over the fireplace, herbs are muddled, and my head is spinning.

Úrsula mixes the herbs and water together and hands me the mug.

"Drink this," she says.

burn my tongue on the first sip, so I drink slow.

"Relax," she says. "Tell me what happened."

I tell her about Xabi. His name burns my tongue all over again. I tell her what I saw in the woods, the cards, the old woman, who acts like lightning.

"Eu non creo nas meigas, mais habelas, hainas," says Úrsula. "I'm sure you've heard that before."

I nod. *I don't believe in witches, but if there are any, there are.* I remember my mother telling that when I was young, maybe five. I know they've always been there, like I know there are things in the forest I haven't seen yet, like I know my parents watch me because of who I know I am.

"I need to find Xabi," I tell her.

"Where will you go?"

"Xabi told me where he wanted to go. He went there. He went to see everything."

I've wanted to leave for months. I met Xabi, and I thought he would stay. How does this happen? I met someone, and the world said, *yes, this is right*.

"Where will you go?"

"Bilbao," I say. "I'll go to A Coruña then take the train from there."

Úrsula floats around her house collecting items from drawers and jars and cupboards. She grabs small cloth bags and lays them on the kitchen table. Salt goes in a tiny one tied with string. She reaches for a dead stag beetle and rips its horns. It sits on her palm. She whispers something under her breathe, faint, like stars before the sun comes up, and brings her palms together. She places the horns in another bag. From a jar in in the kitchen, she take pieces of ivory wood, not wood.

"Claws and teeth of a wolf," she says, and dumps them in the same bag with the beetle horns. She holds up a black rock the size of my thumbnail. A leather string runs through it. "Jet from Compostela," she says. She pulls the string around my neck and tucks it into my shirt. "To keep the dead away. They're always grieving."

"Thank you," I say.

"Grow a pair of eyes behind your head," she says. "They're watching you."

Chapter Six

I pack the things I think I'll need. Extra clothes, Úrsula's charms. The jet pendant she gave me is cold against my chest. I take all the money I own, pesetas and reales and plenty of céntimos. I pack the most recent map I bought from a man passing through. I fill a canteen with water and stuff a bag with dried fruits and nuts, any food that will last

me a while. There's a drawer in the house I don't touch. I open it today and take the knife.

My father always told never to play with it. I remember the day I did. The handle felt like trying to hold a log with one hand. I swung it around, pretending I was a pirate. My father walked into the house and caught me playing with it. He took it from me, pulled me by the hair next to my ears, leaned me over his lap and spanked me. I remember my mother getting home after buying supplies at the main square. I looked at the floor and told her what happened. She didn't say anything, but I knew she was disappointed. She looked at me the way she does when I see her in the river. Maybe I'll find out why they grieve.

I take the knife out of the sheath and pick at the blade, sharp enough. I strap it to my waist and pull my coat over it.

Úrsula stands at my door to see me off. I hand her the keys to the shop. She gives me another small bag of food, chestnuts. I don't bother telling anyone I'm leaving. The villagers will see Úrsula and think I've left to the cities to find better work like most young people have done.

"This is it," I say.

She hugs me. I smell sage and honey in her blood. She pats my head and holds me close.

"Do what you need to do," she says.

I walk towards the end of town, stop, turn to look at it. If leaving implies a possible return, then I'm not sure what to say to the place I've lived in for my whole life.

Everything I know is there, in houses made of wood and stone and narrow, cobbled paths, and dirt roads where things we think are dead linger at the edges, like memories.

I start the walk on foot. The forest rises high around me, and the hills grow taller. The farther I walk into the wild, bigger everything becomes. Sunlight touches fog and takes it by the hand. I stop at the tallest climbing tree near the village.

All I think about is Xabi, where he went and why. Maybe it was something I said at one point. Maybe it was something I did.

He took me to the water, and I let him. I let him lead me to places I thought I'd never follow. The first day after the boat ride we spent walking through the forest. I'm doing now what I did then, calling out plants and animals as I see them, saying their names.

Oak there. A group of birch trees, some fallen over, a pile of bones. I see you, pine trees. You paint winters green. And a deer in the distance with her fawn, a warbler singing somewhere, a hawk scooping up a mouse.

We stopped at the same giant climbing tree I'm standing in front of now. A pair of squirrels ran up the trunk and into the branches.

Xabi stared up and said, "I'm going to do it." He climbed. Fingers gripped the bark, and he didn't struggle. It was like he asked the tree for help and it listened, held his hands and pushed his feet so he'd make it to the top. He called to me and waved me to climb up. I had never climbed a tree that high, but I had to. I didn't want to be left alone on the ground.

I couldn't remember where Xabi had held on to, where he placed his feet to guide him up, so I asked, like tossing a coin into a well. My foot slipped, and I scrapped my hands on the bark. I tried again, and I dug my nails into the bark, pushed and climbed as

hard as I could. The moment a branch was close enough, I grabbed the base and pulled to reach for another until I sat on a huge branch across from Xabi.

"Easier than it looks," I said in between breaths.

Xabi smiled and scooted closer. We looked down at the ground, feet dangled over nothing. He grabbed my shoulder and the waist of my pants, nudged me forward and said, "Careful."

"Shit," I said, and reached for his throat. "Don't do that."

He laughed, and the earth shook with him. He just was, like clouds, like things across the ocean.

A breeze came through, passed between us. I thought about what would happen if anyone saw us, if they'd think we were just a couple of village idiots laughing drunk high up in a tree or if they'd think we were something else by the way we sat so close to each other.

His smile up in the tree proved what I did the night on the boat. I committed his face to memory. We watched the forest dance.

The walk is quiet. My heartbeat roars in my ears, reminding me that I hear, that I am here. There are trees everywhere, moss covered logs lying in odd angles like giant matches. It's damp and humid. I take a handkerchief out of my pocket and wipe my forehead. I've been walking for two hours, so stop at a creek running over stones. I dip my hands and wash my face then refill my canteen.

Clouds roll in, thickening like bread dough. The sun disappears. The birds stop singing. Even the creek lowers to a whisper.

An old man walks towards me from the opposite end of the road. He's wearing a pair of old goat leather shoes, a black wide brimmed hat, and a dark traveling cloak with feathers stuck to the collar. His face is hidden under the hat, but I can see a long grey beard despite his hunch. Other than the tall walking stick, he's not carrying anything on him. He's finally close enough that I can smell him, dried sweat dampening all over again mixed with something sharp, almost fresh.

"Hello," he says and tips his hat.

"Hello."

"It's a nice day today." He looks up at the sky and smiles. "Perfect."

I follow, and the wind dies. The clouds stop moving, like they're waiting for orders. The air sits on my shoulders, heavy, the smell before rain.

"Do you think you could let an old man drink from your canteen?" he says.

I hesitate, but I hand it to him.

"Muy amable," he says, and holds the cap to his mouth. He drinks all the water and tosses it back to me.

"Do you want to drink the whole creek?" I ask. I dip my canteen back in the water.

He laughs and holds his belly. Thunder growls somewhere far. "You've got some nerve talking to me like that."

I should keep quiet next time. I pack up canteen and take another look at the sky. I need to find a spot somewhere to keep me dry.

"Relax," says the old man. "You might be quick, but you won't get the rain. Rather, it won't get you." He leans on his walking stick and sits down on a rock next to the creek. "You'll want to wait a little while before the clouds clear. They're just resting."

He holds the stick in both hands, like he's digging a post into the ground, and closes his eyes. He starts to hum, and I recognize it as one of the traditional songs Úrsula likes to sing while she works around her house. The old man's song is different, slower. It feels how it's supposed to sound, like a song so old that people just forget it. He's smiling. The air changes, and the clouds start moving again, waving to each other. Columns twist and coil, shrink and expand.

"What's your name, boy?" he asks in between melodies.

I don't want to answer him after he's called me boy, but I'm here, and I' not sure what "Lucas. Do you have a name?"

"Xuan," he says. "Mucho gusto." He hums again. "Where are you going all by yourself?"

"Santiago de Compostela," I say. We already know each other's names, so I think it's safe enough to keep talking. "I'll be taking the train to Bilbao."

"Going to Euskadi?"

"Do you speak the language?"

"Yes," he says, eyes closed, dreaming. "Why are you going all the way over there?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"Is this person important?"

"I think so," I say. "I think about and I wonder if I made all these feelings up."

Xuan nods his head. The clouds follow his movements. "Does this person have a name? Answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"Everything that has a name exists."

I look right at him. We lock eyes and thunder rumbles for the second time in the distance.

"I exist. You exist. Towns and forests and rivers and different animals and trees, they all exist. Even the dead exist. They had names, and we remember them."

His name rushes through my body. I try and breathe it in from the number of times I've said it into the air. Then my parents are there, Álvaro and Rocío. If it weren't for Xuan, I wouldn't be thinking of their names.

"What is your full name?" asks Xuan.

"Lucas Bidarte Salcedo."

"You've been kind, and because of that, I'm going to tell you something." He collects phlegm and spits. "Remember that, Lucas. Remember the names that are important to you."

He pulls himself up with his walking stick and walks over to me. I want to cover my nose, but I'm afraid I'll disrespect him.

He looks me up and down. "You're alright," he says. He tips his hat. "Thank you for humoring an old man." He starts shuffling away.

"Wait," I say.

He stops.

"What is your full name?"

His eyes catch some distant light, like a dog's eyes shine in the dark, and his smile is all the power of a lightning bolt. "Xuan Cabritu," he says. He walks away and takes the clouds with him.

I remember the stories from when I was a kid, el Nubeiro, the Cloud Master. He could have killed me if he wanted to. He would have done it for fun.

The wind comes back, like it's relieved to be here. I begin walking again. One name echoes in my ears, leaves my mouth in whispers not even wolves can hear. In seventeen days, I tasted something I never thought I'd have, and now I want it. That's the problem with wanting. What you have is never enough.

Chapter Seven

The sun marches with me. My father had stories about the sun. That's where he was born. Maybe my grandparents are there. He hardly mentioned them, and when he did I could never tell if they were alive or not. He was Basque and proud, and he would tell me stories about the sun because his grandparents told them to him. I polish my memories, links on a chain. He told me that sometimes his grandparents would make up some of the stories for fun. Sometimes those stories were true, like how the sun flies across the sky every day and scares the monsters away from the village and back into the darkness of the forests, but the sun gets tired, so she goes back to her mother and her sister the moon comes out to watch over the world.

I wonder if the sun knows. If she saw me, and if she saw Xabi, then she has to know. The stories say she's all loving and warm, so why wouldn't she be? I'm looking for Xabi. I keep the reasons to myself.

After six hours of walking and resting, I see signs pointing to the town. I see people for the first time in little groups and caravans. The road opens, like a greeting. Traveling merchants yell from their little booths selling fruits and vegetables and local crafts, like

little statues and religious icons. Another stand has clay statues of witches, some hooded, some with pointed hats, some with giant noses and warts. Seagulls cry over me, begging for food, for each other. Sometimes that's the same thing.

I ignore the people waving me to their booths and walk right into town. Cobbled streets everywhere, houses lined up next to shops and cafés, church bells talking to each other across the town, and I think I've landed somewhere far away.

The air smells different, and I know I have to see it before I find out where the train station is. I ask an older man where the sea is, and he points me in the direction. I thank him and quicken my steps. I hold on to my bag and start running.

Some people move out of the way. I'm dodging around couples and families and street vendors while they all yell for me to slow down, but I don't care. More clouds come in and cover the sun. The town goes grey, and I smell it before it starts. The moment I get to the bay rain falls, soft first, then more.

Ships cross each other on the canal. Sailors wave to each other and shout through the rain. Everyone on the streets is running to find shelter from the water. I take one final gulp of sea air and rain and turn to leave when I see them standing on the water holding hands.

My parents are as alive as the day they left, wearing the clothes they had on when they took a wagon out of the village. Mother is wearing her favorite white blouse and black skirt. Her hair is a mess of a knot on her head, ringlets matted on her face and forehead, traveling shawl pinned to her head and full of water. Father's grey pants are torn, and his vest is unbuttoned. His shirtsleeves are rolled up to his elbows. There are blood smears on his right arm.

All I know is that their boat was swept out to sea, and then they drowned in the wind and waves. The rain falls harder, and the wind picks up, and the waves splash against the banks. My parents are staring at me again. They take one step forward, floating on sea foam and air. I tap the jet stone hanging around my neck. A strong gust blows in from the sea, and a wave lashes against the banks in front of me. Water rushes up onto the streets. They're gone.

"Get away from there," says a voice behind me. There's a middle-aged woman and an older woman standing under a doorway. "You're going to get sick," she says.

I run under the doorway and shake off the water.

"Careful," says the old woman. "I'm here because I don't want to get wet."

"I'm sorry," I say. I take off my coat and try to squeeze as much water as I can from my clothes. My shoes and most of my pants are soaked. My coat took most of the beating.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you not to stand in the rain like that?" The old woman has a cane in one hand with her other arm linked through her daughter's. I've never wanted to kick a cane out of an old person's hand more than now.

"No," I said. "She died a long time ago." There, I let her have it.

She puts one hand over her heart and crossed herself twice. I feel bad telling her that. Mixed emotions never do good for anyone.

"I'm so sorry," she says.

"I just need to know where the train station is."

The middle-aged woman talks. She has a soft voice. She sounds like my mother. "Pass the construction site of the bullring. Keep walking, pass the two plazas until you

get to the town's entrance. Turn right when you see the railway and you'll get to the station."

"Thank you," I say. I shrug my wet coat back on.

By now, the rain has slowed to a drizzle. It's dark now even though it's summertime and early afternoon, and the street lamps aren't turned on. I'm one of the few people out walking.

They walk to their homes or into churches to get out of the w rain. I see the first plaza the woman mentioned and keep walking. The town is a mass of grey and white, blurring together. I see smoke in the distance and hear a whistle. I walk faster.

Something pushes me from my side. I hit the ground on my left side, and I try to get up, but someone's foot on my back forces me down, so I do the only thing I can do. I struggle to get up, kick my legs for support. Then I yell for help. I'm lifted up and punched in the stomach, and it hurts too much to say anything, hurts more than dropping sacks of flour on my feet. I drown in air.

There's a knife point at my throat. Two men have me pinned, the one locking my arms behind my back, and the other holding a knife to my throat. Rainwater has smeared dirt across his face, and he looks like he hasn't eaten in a few days.

My backpack lays on the ground, my money with it. The man with the knife picks up the coins and they start looking for more.

"Those are my things," I say. I wince, grit my teeth. My arms stretch farther than they're supposed to.

“The kid’s got some goods on him,” says the man with the knife. He keeps going through my backpack. “What the hell is this?” He opens the bags of powder Úrsula gave me. “This is shit,” he says. He takes all the money he can stuff into his pockets.

“Hey,” says a voice. The man holding my arms lets go, and they two take off running. “Stop right there.” A police officer chases after them, blowing his whistle.

I pick up my things and stuff them into my backpack. They didn’t take all my money, but they did take a lot.

The police officer trudges back to me. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I tell him. “But they took my money, and I need to get to Bilbao.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“What can you do to help me?”

“Nothing right now.

“So, you’re not even going to continue looking for them?”

“They’re probably gone by now, hiding out somewhere. This kind of thing happens all the time.”

“But if it happens all the time, then there would be measures in place to find them, no?”

“Look, kid. I’m not going to argue with you. Your money’s gone. At least they didn’t slit your throat for it.” He walks back the way he came, and I’m left standing in water and dirt.

So now I’m wondering what the hell possessed me to travel all the way here, to leave my village and find someone. My feet hurt, and my side is sore, and the food I ate earlier today wants to come up.

Chapter Eight

I make it to the train station in a soggy mess. A few people are sitting, waiting for something, maybe to board, or maybe they're waiting for their family to arrive from someplace else. A steam engine sits behind the platform, smoke rising like a distant bonfire. I walk over to the ticket booth at the end of the station. A man flips through a book with numbers and names written down in columns.

"Excuse me," I say. "When does the next train leave to Santiago de Compostela?"

"There's one leaving two hours from now at 6pm," he says. "You'd make it there just after seven."

I see the board next to the window with ticket prices. I reach into my backpack and count out my money. I have enough for a ticket to Compostela. I stop moving. I feel my chest shake, somewhere close to my heart, like it's trying to break the bones in my body and fly up into the sky.

"Is there a problem?" asks the man.

"No." I lie.

I buy the ticket anyway, and I'm directed to the waiting area until they call for boarding. I'm not sure what I was thinking coming all this way. I have a few more reales and céntimos, and one peseta left. I think about Xabi again, dark hair and sunburnt cheeks.

Our time was ours and no one's. The day after climbing trees, we went down to the river again and skipped stones. I thought my father was champion until I saw Xabi do it. Those stones went so far, I lost track of them.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

“It’s all about the angle,” he said. “Let me see you do it.”

I picked out a flat stone and held it the way my father taught me, in between my thumb and index finger, stood sideways and let the stone fly from my hand, index finger the last thing to touch it. The stone skipped down the river, one, two, three times.

“Very good, said Xabi. “But I see where you can do it better.” He slipped a stone in my hand, and positioned my arm at a new angle, adjusted my wrist. “Do it again, and make sure you keep your arm at this angle.” He stood back to watch.

It flew out of my hand, twice as far, and I’d only ever gotten that many skips once before. I smiled at the water and smiled at him, and that’s what I liked so much about him. When he smiled back he wasn’t expecting anything in return.

We moved along the shore, found new stones to skip, and I got used to the new toss.

“What do you think is out there?” asked Xabi.

“How do you mean?”

“Outside of this village, maybe even across the continent or across the ocean.” Xabi skipped another stone. I counted seven jumps.

“Maybe there are places like this village, quiet, away from everything.”

“Maybe there are actually citied bigger than Madrid,” he said.

There had to be. If there were, I’d go.

“Maybe there are monsters bigger than the giants, and spirits scarier than the santa compaña,” I said.

He ran behind me. “They’ll creep up on you in your sleep and steal your dreams.”

“Or they’ll put dreams in your head that will never come true.”

Xabi shoved me, and I shoved back. It got rough, and we were kids again, playing at the edge of the sky before it ends in a drop back into real life where all the things that didn't exist then breathe the air straight out of our bodies.

We rolled in the dirt and ended up on our backs, lying next to each other. Stars were forming in front of us, and the sky was alive.

Xabi asked me, "Would you ever go?"

"To the cities? I'm not sure." I had thought about it, and wanted to, and every time I told myself I would, I'd think against it.

"Would you go with me?"

I'd go with him. I'd go to the places I'd still be too scared to follow him to.

I said, "Yes."

People get up from their seats and huddle around the platform. The first person to smile is a rock dropped in a pond, and that smile ripples until all the ripples are bouncing off of each other and everyone is a ripple.

A train arrives, whistling and blowing steam and smoke saying, "I am here, and I brought the people you love." It stops with a final puff, a loud whistle. The doors swing open. People pour out of the passenger cars, mothers holding hands with their children, men and women walking arm in arm, the handful of people stepping off with just a traveling suitcase.

I hear people laughing and see a few tears, and the world stops for them. They start to clear away, leaving only people in their seats waiting to board the train. I start to pick out some of the people, and man and a woman with their two children, an older

gentleman with a shiny black hat, and a blond woman dressed in grey with a face like the moon. She looks right at me.

My skin freezes.

"All aboard the 6pm train to Santiago de Compostela," says a station worker.

Everyone stands in line, tickets in hands, like church donations. The move into different cars, some to the front, others in the middle cars. I present the man my ticket and he points me to one of the cars in the back.

Up the steps, through the passageway then I stop to sit at one of the back seats, backpack on my lap, and I'm five years-old again, hugging blanket because it smells like the only thing I've ever known, so here I am, about to go to another part of the country with not enough money and you're not here.

Chickens can lay eggs faster than what it feels like to wait for the train to start moving, and I finally hear the station workers shouting to close the passenger doors. The train chugs forward. I look out the window and see the town, the roads leading out until cobbles turn into dirt and dust and grass. The train runs around hills and over rivers until we get to Vigo to drop off some passengers and pick up new ones. We start moving again, leaving a town looking just like Pontevedra, and travel along the bay until the world outside us becomes golden hills and sunset.

The conductor comes in through the door at the front of the car and stamps everyone's train ticket. I show him mine, and he looks at it, stamps it and hands back, routine. He walks back to the front of the car and holds the door open for someone, a lady.

"Señora," he says, and motions her through.

“Gracias,” she says, teeth so white they look painted. I recognize her, blond hair and face like the moon. She walks over to me and doesn’t ask when she sits down on the seat across from me.

I can finally see her face clearly. The sunlight sets her hair on fire, and her face is thin and smooth. If she weren’t sitting front of me right now, I’d think she leads the procession of spirits knocking death on village doors.

We stare at each other. She turns into a perfect statue.

“Buenas tarde,” she says.

I put my hand out, and she offers her slim cold one. “A pleasure,” I say. “What’s your name?” But I know who she when the words leave my mouth. I don’t recognize her because she’s younger now, the wrinkles smoothed, teeth intact. I think she’d be about my mother’s age if she were still alive.

“Agata,” she says. She smiles at me.

I know that look. I feel it so often through the brush and the mist, and it’s sitting in front of me now, followed me all the way from home.

Chapter Nine

Agata has her hands folded on her lap, like she is at a grandmother’s house, ready for afternoon coffee. She doesn’t take her eyes off me, grey and bright and narrow, and of course, the one pupil-less eye.

I am sweating, palms cold, and I wish I knew what to do with my hands. Instead, I push the hair out of my face, try to fix it and pat it into place. My mouth is dry, and I gulp what little saliva I have left.

“You’re a very nervous young man,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I don’t know what else to say. I wasn’t expecting to see her here, to ever see her again after storming out of her house.

“That’s why I’m here,” she says. She blinks for the first time. “I’ve been watching you for a long time now, and I knew you needed someone to watch over you on your journey.”

I don’t like her smile. It reminds me of that time with the barmaid, but this feels cruel, like we’re playing a game of charades and my hands are tied behind my back. Next to us, the forests and roads blur, and I feel a drop of cold sweat trickle down my back.

“So, what do you want then?” I ask.

“I just want to have a little chat, that’s all. We don’t get to talk very often.”

“We spoke once.”

“Twice,” she says. “It wasn’t that long ago you came looking for me.”

She’s right, of course.

“Why are you on this train?”

“I’m looking for my friend. You know that. If this is all you need to say, then you can go now,” I say in between slow breaths.

Agata clicks her tongue, like how a mother would judge a child. “But we haven’t talked about what worries you.”

I open my mouth, but she hushes me, and my mouth goes dry again and my tongue, rough.

"You think you won't find him," she says. "You're worried he's moved on, and you feel it right there in the center of your chest. You laid your bones bare, and now the wolves will chew on them. I am hungry."

"Leave me alone," I say. I look around at the other people on the train. Everyone seems to mind their own business. No one looks at me or Agata, and I hear my own heartbeat, feel my blood running in my neck.

"What would your parents think? And their only son too?" she says. She fixes her skirt and blouse. "Think about that for a while," and she says this like she expects I'd do it. "We will see each other again. Maybe we'll have coffee." She smiles again.

I hate it, how she knows everything, how she smiles and empties my chest, how she makes me question everything happening, every thought, Xabi, my parents, and I expect to see them come into the passenger car, sit themselves across from me, their clothes dripping and smelling of sea and rot, and stare at me through red-rimmed eyes.

I blink, and Agata is gone. I don't miss her. I think, *not all ghosts are dead. Some of them live inside you*. I think some of them lived inside me, too.

Agata's words keep folding and unfolding in my ears, and my hands shake like the train on its tracks. Sweat drips down my neck. I take a kerchief from my pocket and wipe my forehead, neck, collarbones. All I want is to make it to Bilbao and find Xabi. He talked about the giants in the mountains and the cold, dark sea in the north. We were going to see it, all of it. Now I wonder if I am chasing ghosts, if Agata is right, if I'll never find him. There's no home to go back to when yours is taken away.

I lace my fingers together, something about them fitting like puzzle pieces, but my hands know each other, always have, and I am looking for the touch of skin that made my

hands feel like strangers meeting for the first time, made them spark with embers that could tear a forest apart. I am so used to it, the sensation, each day a chance to renew and make new, and I never thought that I would want anything as much as I did.

Of course, I remember. Hands were the world, hands in my hair, my head on his lap, us under the trees, and I taught him how to hear the voices of the spirits. His hands threaded my hair. Kingdom come.

I didn't tell Xabi then, on those lazy days when the world felt as clean as those moments between us. I don't think he ever saw them. I did. I saw my parents peeking through the river, blood rimmed eyes and skin pressed to blue.

The door at the end of the train car stays shut, but every time the train rattles on the tracks, and the door shakes on its lock, I jump at thinking that my parents will step through there, following me, always following me, knowing the parts of me I would never share.

I don't move for hours. I rest my chin on my hands, move my hands to my lap, cross my arms over my chest, and I cannot sit still. Then the train slows down. I look out the window and see mountains rising behind towns and church steeples. The sun is setting behind me, painting the trees gold and burning, and I am cold. Around me, people gather their things, a coat, a bag, a child, a partner, lover, husband, wife. How many of them ran away from someone? How many of them were running away with someone?

The train chugs and stops. Smoke and steam pour around the windows and doors, grey storm clouds smelling like fire. The doors open, and the station workers help the passengers down the steps. Maybe Xabi walked through this place already. The station is more like a platform. Wood and metal lay on the floor, scattered in neat and messy

stacks. We stop in a station mid-construction, but I have never seen something like this. Back in the village, the houses are all falling apart, window shutters hanging on their hinges, wood peeling like dried skin, doors with holes letting the cold in. We were exposed in our own homes.

I wonder what he thinks about this, that he has seen it all before, if everything iss as new to him as it is to me. People around me hurry out the platform, arm in arms, holding bags and suitcases and each other's hands. They move around me while I stand in the middle of it all, looking at the stone and wooden walls half built around me, blood buried into rocks, pulsing and breathing.

The streets are clean but dusty, white walls smeared and blown with grey from the wind. Papers are plastered to the walls and on them, a white flag with a jagged red "X." The slogan around the flag read, "God, Country, and King."

"Those Carlists," says a voice behind me. An older man in a grey coat is standing, smoking a pipe and reading the announcement over my shoulder, thick, dark eyebrows and hair greying at his temples. A woman about the same age loops her arms through his and pats the pipe soot off his chest. She has little wrinkles around her eyes, and laugh lines around her mouth, but her hands look hard, tough and worn from too much work.

"They've turned into a peaceful group, but I don't believe it. I'd rather believe a witch telling me I'd be rich than believe this garbage." He spits on the ground.

"Blas, don't do that. That is improper. Save it for the home," says the woman. She turns to me and say, "Please excuse his manners. I have to punish him like a bad dog."

"You're not thinking of joining that shit, are you?" he says.

“Blas,” says the woman, whispered between her teeth. She jerks his arm and straightens her back.

“No,” I say. I tighten my grip on my things. “I don’t think so. I just arrived in Bilbao.”

“Ah, another young person to work the mines,” says Blas. “That’s what’s been bringing you all here. This place is changing, always changing now. I never thought it would.”

“No, sir. I left home. I’m here looking for someone.”

“That sounds romantic, doesn’t it, Blas? That reminds me of how we got married.”

Blas turns to the woman, and she is smiling. He holds his pipe in between his lips and pats the woman’s hands. The sun is still setting, but their smiles bring back the sun, and I ache inside.

He puts his hand out. “I didn’t introduce myself,” he says. “My name is Blas Rovira.”

I shake his hand. He smells of spice and smoke.

“This is my wife, Valentina Rovira.”

She puts a strong, delicate hand in mine and curtsies.

“Lucas Bidarte Salcedo.”

“Where are you staying?” ask Blas.

I hadn’t thought about it. I hadn’t planned anything except getting on the train, and most of my money is gone.

“I don’t know, sir,” I say.

“You’ll stay with us for the evening,” says Blas.

Valentina looks at him. She tightens her lips and her grip, and I feel like I am an unwelcomed thing, a sick dog picked up off the street only to be thrown out again. She whispers to him, her eyes digging into his.

"I don't want to cause any trouble," I say. "I can just find an inn somewhere in town."

"No, you won't," says Blas.

"Blas," says his wife.

"Do you remember how we were at his age?" says Blas. "We were in a town we did not know with people that did not care."

Valentina sighs. "You're right. I remember, and you're right."

"Please, come with us," says Blas.

I walk next to them with Blas in between me and Valentina. The sun sets to my left, and Blas and Valentina march on my right. They nod to the people that pass them by, old couples and groups of young ladies with their chaperones and the men that follow them hoping for a chance to talk to them.

The air smells different, and I have to see it before I leave with Blas and Valentina. I walk faster, passed my new friends, if I could call them that. Then I start running, and I hear them call out after me. Some people move out of the way. I dodge around couples and families and street vendors while they all yell for me to slow down, but I don't care. Clouds come in and cover the sun. The town goes grey, and I smell it before it starts. The moment I got to the bay rain fell, soft first, then more.

Ships cross each other on the canal leading out to the bay. Sailors wave to each other and shout through the rain. Everyone on the streets runs to find shelter from the water. I

take one final gulp of sea air and rain and turn to leave when I see them standing on the water holding hands.

My parents are as alive as the day they left, wearing the clothes they had on when they took a wagon out of the village. Mother is wearing her favorite white blouse and black skirt, hair a mess of a knot on her head, ringlets matted on her face and forehead, traveling shawl pinned to her head and full of water. Father's grey pants are torn, and his vest unbuttoned. His shirtsleeves are rolled up to his elbows. There are blood smears on his right arm.

All I know is that their boat was swept out to sea, and then they drowned in the wind and waves. The rain falls harder, and the wind picks up, and the waves splash against the banks. My parents stare at me. They take one step forward, float on sea foam and air. I tap the jet stone hanging around my neck. A strong gust blows in from the sea, and a wave lashes against the banks in front of me. Water rushes up onto the cobbled streets.

They are gone.

"Lucas," say Blas, calling from a building archway. "You're going to get sick."

I walk to where they wait, pat the water off my coat, and shake my soaked feet.

"Moco joven," he says. "Why did you do that?"

"I'm sorry," I say. I apologize again to people I barely know. I make up an excuse. "I've never seen the sea."

They look at each other, like I could have said anything else that would have made more sense than the words that had left my mouth. I could have told them my dead parents were floating on the bay, and maybe they would have believed me.

“You’re going to catch a cold,” says Valentina, clicks her tongue and straightens her coat.

Blas looks down the street, waves over a covered carriage. He opens the door for Valentina and me then hands the driver the coins and tells him where to go.

A whip cracks, and the two horses clop down the cobblestone streets. I look out the window, at the sun breaking its way through rain clouds.

“A sun shower,” say Valentina. “You what that means, don’t you?”

I shake my head.

She lowers her voice, like she is afraid someone outside the carriage will hear her. “It means the devil’s daughter is getting married again.”

“Says who?” asks Blas.

“My grandmother would tell me that when I was a girl,” she says.

“I was always told something different,” says Blas.

“Here comes his Catalan.”

“Les bruixes es pentinen,” says Blas.

I shiver. I hea Agata laugh. I heard her name on the wind. I know.

“The witches are brushing their hair,” says Blas. He laughs and scoots closer to Valentina. “That’s what my grandmother told me when I was a boy.”

“Grandmothers always had the most interesting stories, no?”

In that moment, I don’t exist. Blas and Valentina talk like they are a young couple going on their first outing into town, learning the private parts of their lives, the smiles and the glimmers that only show themselves behind a locked door.

Outside, the rain is stopping. Little drops fall against the glass. The sun is still out, and the sky is a collection of dust.

We ride out of Bilbao and through a busy road. Church steeples rise behind trees, and chimney smoke mixes with low-hanging clouds. There is a long, winding river to my right, and I cannot tell how far it stretches, but I assume it goes straight out to the bay and then out to the sea.

I glance at Blas and Valentina, sitting close together, arm in arm, smiling and giggling, and I feel guilty to be there, that they know nothing about me, that they are ready and willing to take me into their home when I have not told them I was forced out of my own. Home. I say home like if I had one. I think home is something I can go back to, but I'm not there, and I can't go back, and remember the voices from the forest following me as I left saying things like, "yes," and "you're alone now," and "come with us."

Blas and Valentina stop their games. They stare out the wide window, and Valentina crosses herself, holds herself against her husband.

I follow their eyes at whatever made them stop. A large black carriage makes its was across from us. I have only seen a hearse once before, back in the village. The family had somehow gathered enough money to hire the carriage but not the driver. Family normally carried the coffin on their shoulders. It looks almost the same, but this one is more ornate. There is a coffin inside it. People walk behind the carriage, a priest holding a bible across his chest, men in black coats, women with black lace veils covering their faces, children in matching black trousers and dresses, made up like dolls. Many of them are crying.

This procession for the dead is alive, but I remember the stories from the village, floating lights and incense and the cold wind that comes on the nights of a saint's feast. I am in the forest again, drowned in sounds and scents, and mist licks the back of my neck, a lover I did not want.

"Are you alright?" asks Blas.

I am back in the carriage, rain on the roof and window.

"Yes," I say. "I'm sorry. I just feel sad when I see funerals." Another lie, another excuse.

"They're a terrible thing to be a part of. Bless you," says Valentina. She folds her hands together over her lap.

I look out again at the procession. Family and friends file behind the carriage, hands at their sides or clasped cross their bellies or folded on against their chests. They stare ahead, to the cemetery in the distance. At the end of the procession is a lone woman dressed just like all the others, back dress, lace veil and gloves, a parasol in one hand with a rosary wrapped around her wrist. She looks at me from behind her veil, and I see her, blond hair and face like the moon. She puts a finger to her lips, like she is shushing a baby.

I watch them go. I watch her go knowing I'll see her again.

Chapter Ten

I think, *I can't stay here.* I think, *I need to leave*. I think, *I don't know where Xabi is*.

Agata saw me, and I saw her, and I don't know where the hell to escape to, so I do my best to seem calm, hands on my lap and a small smile on my face while Blas and Valentina talk to themselves about what they'll prepare for dinner.

The carriage bumps onto cobbled streets. I hear people speak a language almost familiar, and I remember the times when my father would get angry and speak his mother tongue, Euskara. I am in their land, all mountains and forests and stories about the sun and her children. I am in the place I thought I would never see.

Small houses stand close together, red shingled and wooden roofs, white walls, and brown wooden window shutters. Street vendors are closing their stands for the evenings, and shopkeepers sweep front porches. Some houses and shops have large yellow flowers hanging on their doors or next to a window, brown and green leaves arranged around it, like a dried out sun.

We stop at a house similar to all the other ones, tucked into a narrow street in the town. "Welcome to Arrigorriaga," says Blas.

He opens the door and helps Valentina and me onto the street then tips the driver and waves his thanks.

The rain has stopped, but I still smell it in the air, and it was different, not as damp and humid like the forests back home. It is sharper, tinged with something I do not recognize, but I know it the same way I know Xabi's hands. It is the sea, cold, distant, blowing a song from the north, and I wish I could understand the words.

Blas and Valentina's house has a flower hanging on its door, just like other homes. Valentina straighten the decoration, fluffs the leaves.

"What is that?" I ask.

“An eguzkilore,” says Valentina. “The thistle flower protects the house from the spirits of the night.”

Of course, there would be spirits here. They’re everywhere. I listen, but I can’t hear them. I am not in Galicia. I am on unfamiliar ground, and things are different. I feel unwelcome everywhere.

I follow Blas into the house, large and rectangular and open, and a piece of metal sits at the center of the kitchen. Valentina grabs two logs from a pile sitting against a wall, opens a door on the machine, and places them in the chamber.

“You must be hungry,” she says.

I nod. I was planning on eating the food left in my backpack.

Blas takes my things and said, “Follow me. I’ll show you where you’ll be staying for the evening.”

He leads me up the stairs, and I have to balance myself as I follow. Houses in the village are close to the ground. We walk down the hall and into an empty bedroom.

“Thank you very much,” I say. “But please, I don’t want to be a bother to you or Valentina. I’m sure I can find an inn down the street.”

Blas holds up his hand, and I catch myself flinching, squinting. It reminds me of my father. Blas’s hand doesn’t go over his head, doesn’t wind back, fingers tight and straight, like kitchen knives. He shakes his head, takes his pipe and tobacco case out of one pocket, a match box from the other, lights a tiny fire, and swallows the air.

“It would make Valentina and me very happy if you stayed, at least for one night,” he says, smoke melting into his moustache.

I know now. I hear it in his voice, and I know. I know it the same way I know the palms of Xabi's hands, his arms, their veins, the map of his back where I traced the mountain range of his spine.

"Valentina only cooks for the two of us, never had a chance to cook more than that," he says, puffs on his pipe. "They were so tiny, both of them. I held them in my arms once."

It all pushes itself into the room, heavier than smoke, and Blas holds himself like an open crypt, and I am looking at the bodies. By now, the sun is gone, and the tiny glimmer of twilight disappears with it, so was Blas, becoming less like the man I met in town.

I think it's best not to say anything, just nod and agree that yes, I will stay the night, and yes, I will eat supper with them.

"I'm sure Valentina is running some water for your bath," he says.

She comes in to the room, like she heard him from across town, to take me to the bathtub and says, "No matter how long we've been together, I will never get used to the smell of that pipe."

Blas grabs my shoulder on my way out of the room. "Please," he says. "Don't tell her I told you. It would just make her remember."

"Of course," I say.

Right then, without knowing that man more than a few hours, I realize I am already keeping someone else's secret. I am still keeping my own, holding it against my chest the way I imagine Blas and Valentina would have done years before.

Valentina leaves me in the bathroom downstairs, a metal tub and pails of hot water. I set my change of clothes aside, undressed, step inside, feel the steam creep up my legs

until I sit down. I take a deep breath and sink. I count the seconds, and in between the seconds I think about my parents and how, for the tiniest flicker of a moment, I imitate them, holding my breath as long as I can until I feel my insides piercing, twisting. Twisted.

I think about Xabi, how he saved me on the day he taught me how to swim, pulling my arm and then my body over his shoulder, pumping the water out of my body, holding my face in his hands.

I feel my body tense, sharp, needles and knives and clothes pins, and gasp for air. I stay in the tub, staring at the ceiling like it's a holy thing. Steam fills my nose while I lay in a watery grave. Everything is still, like the nights in the forest, by the river, the nights in my bed, a tangle of sheets and arms and breathing, almost in tune. Words hum in my head, repeating themselves like an asking, a prayer, a litany. They are a collection of words Xabi told me in the village on days that stretched themselves like a blanket over our lives, wrapping us in warmth. I'm not sure what I would say to him when I see him again, if I see him again, but I say them to myself like he was in the room, watching me from the corner with my back turned to him.

I say, "You haunt me because I remember the words that left your mouth. I've saved them in mine."

Someone knocks on the door. "Lucas," said Valentina. "Dinner is almost ready."

"I'll be there soon," I say.

I dry myself off and dress in clean clothes, white shirt, grey trousers, fresh socks. I clean my shoes and comb my hair, make my way around the hall and through a doorway next to the kitchen where Blas and Valentina have set up the table.

Candles line the table and wooden cabinets along the walls. Three set of plates and utensils and glasses sit at the end. Blas uncorks a bottle and pours golden liquid into three glasses.

"Sagardoa," he says. "The cider of Basque country."

I sit next to him, and he and Valentina start handing me plates of food.

"Here's the bacalao," she says, and serves me a giant spoonful of fish. "And this is piperrada and some bread on the side. Blas, give me the plate of angula. There's a plate of cheese, apples, and peppers somewhere."

She serves herself and lets Blas pile food on his plate and then they sit down and bow their heads.

"We say a silent prayer before eating," says Blas.

I close my eyes and bow my head just like them, so maybe they will think I remember how to pray. Maybe they will think I am praying right now. I don't think my parents would be to happy to know about my shaken faith, how difficult it is for me to believe that some all-loving, all-knowing thing would send me to hell because I don't know of any other way to feel. Maybe there's a saint for lost causes or a saint for the hopeful or a saint for the person who might be caught in the middle of it all.

"I hope you like the food," says Valentina.

"I still haven't had anything better," says Blas, and he reaches over and squeezes her hand.

It's such an open and such a private gesture, one hand in another. I could never do it in front of people, I think. I'd keep it inside, just like this, away from the windows and

doors. So I focus on the food, peppers and onions and salted fish prepared in ways I've never tried, splash cider in my mouth, and it's tart but sweet.

"This is very good," I say.

"We're glad you like it," says Valentina.

I'm hungry. I did not want to admit it to them, but I did in silence. I eat everything on my plate, the red peppers and onions and fish, mop up salty oil with bread, wash it all down with cider and water.

Valentina clears the dinner plates away and sets new, smaller plates, each with a fork. Then she brings a platter and says, "I hope you don't mind, but Blas had a slice of cake this morning." She brings the large knife down, cuts a large piece for me, cuts pieces for her and Blas.

"You said you were from Galicia, correct?" asks Blas.

"Yes, sir," I say.

"You remind me a lot of a young man that we ran into a few weeks ago. He stayed with us about a month ago."

"I hope that's a compliment," I say through a smile, push another forkful of cake into my mouth.

"You're right," says Valentina. "What a coincidence that he was also from Galicia, and about your age too."

I stopped chewing, gulped my food down with too much force, make my throat sore, but I have to ask. "What was his name?"

"Xabier," says Blas. "He was so respectful, kept declining out invitation to stay with us."

"Could you describe him, please?" I must have sounded desperate, but I didn't care.

"Well, he was a bit shorter than you, hair very similar to yours, not as dark, and light brown eyes."

"Such pretty eyes," says Valentina. "I bet he makes the pretty ladies swoon."

My hands are shaking so bad, so I set my fork and knife down as calmly as I can, and I'm afraid they'll rattle against the plate, send food flying all over the table. I wipe my mouth.

"I'm almost positive that's my friend," I say.

"Does he owe you money?" says Blas, and he laughs and swings back a gulp of cider.

"No," I say. "It's on some personal business."

"With those pretty eyes of his, I bet he must have taken your lady. That sinvergüenza," says Valentina, clicking her tongue at a man's bad behavior.

"But he was alone," says Blas.

"You're right, he was. I bet Bilbao was just a stop for him. He must be some sort of Don Juan, corrupting innocent ladies like that."

They didn't know. They wouldn't. Xabi hides it just as well as I do because even though we can't go to jail, we don't know how people will treat us if they found out. I was kicked out of my village, no, not my village anymore. Kids pushed me to the ground because of one grandmother's dark skin and dark hair. They spit, called me "dirty," said I was not like them. I hadn't thought about my grandmother in years. I don't have anything that once belonged to her. All I have are memories, and those belong to me, only me. I

don't want to share them. I am afraid to. Her songs play in my mind now, slow, where the moon cried and the trees bowed and the rest of the world bathed in blood.

"Lucas," says Blas.

"Are you all right, dear?" asks Valentina.

"Yes, sorry," I say.

"You seem lost," she says.

"I was just thinking about going into town tomorrow, exploring on my own."

They both smile, like my answer was what they were hoping I'd say. I don't tell them about the letter in my bag. I don't tell them about anything. I hide right in front of them, the way best kept secrets are hidden.

"Please let us know if we can help you," said Blas.

"I will," I say. "Thank you."

Valentina picks up the plates and forks, and Blas follows her into the kitchen with the rest of the dinner plates and leftover dessert. I watch them from the doorway, passing plates to each other to wash in the basin, flicking water from their fingertips like raindrops, and they smile. They smile like it is their first instinct, like they know that even if the sun doesn't rise tomorrow, their smiles would be enough light for the two of them.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be witnessing something so private and tender because it is not meant for me. It is not something I'm supposed to have, not something that has been promised to me when I was finally able to understand like, "sun," and "people," and "the world." I walk toward the back door.

"What are you doing?" says Valentina.

She's behind me now, and I feel her breath on my neck, wild, a windstorm.

"I'd like to step outside for a little while," I say.

She makes sure the door is locked. "We don't do that here. You didn't tell him," she says, turning to Blas.

"I have not."

"We have one rule in this house," she says. "You do not go out at night." She moved herself in between me and the door.

I back away, my hands at my sides. A knife at my belt would make me feel somewhat safer, but I turn to see Blas with a knife in his hand and looking passed me at the door behind his wife.

"The night is for the dead," she says and looks out the window. "The moon is waxing. It is a good night to die." Then she turns to me and says, "You can't leave tonight."

There's nothing I'd rather do more, but the wind is different, and the earth doesn't smell the same. There's something metallic when I breathe, and I don't know what it is. The house darkens, bits of ash and dust at the corners of the rooms, and the night is alive. It sings in a language that is not my own, and I think this is what it's like to be away from the only people I've ever loved. I understand nothing except the blood in my own body, and even that feels foreign and dirty.

I took their moment from them, the sunlight shining in the dark. I robbed them, and if they knew who or what I really am they would say, "typical," and "disgusting."

Blas goes back to washing the dishes in the basin, and Valentina stares at me, walks away from the door and picks up a cloth and scrubs other plates.

Instead of asking to help, I go back to the bedroom upstairs. I open my bag and flip Xabi's last letter in my hands, trace the edges of wrinkled paper. I can almost hear his voice, and it's the voice of the forest, the river, and the night dripping starlight. I will find him, wherever he is. I will follow him, and I like to think he'd follow me too.

I count the money I have left, a handful of coins, not enough to buy me a train ticket, I think, but maybe just enough to get me somewhere. Maybe I could find a caravan and join with them on a mass journey on foot. Maybe I could sneak away on a carriage headed for nowhere. Maybe I could stow away on a train, but there's no way I could do that. I'll get caught, taken away and never see anything else except stones walls and rats.

Rain starts to patter against the windows, soft, just the way I remember it in the village, and back there, the way it clicked against the leaves, and I heard it everywhere, the way the sound sank into my skin, and it was music.

The bed holds me, and I wait too many minutes. I count the moonbeams in between the rainclouds and name them, all the things I was called when I left the village, scum, filth, sinner, cursed. Patience. That's what my grandmother taught me.

She was around Valentina's age when she died, young for a grandmother, but some Romani were forced to marry young. She was no exception. The rain and the darkness and the music it creates takes me back to my childhood, back to the time my grandmother held my hand and taught me her song.

"You know I was not born here," she said on that afternoon that was just like any other cloudy afternoon, and the sunset blasted against the clouds and washed the sky in ochre.

“I was born in the south, where the dust kicks you from behind, where the oranges beg to be picked and the wind carries a different song every hour.”

We walked through the forest, the two of us, away from the eyes of the village. They looked at her. They always looked at her, and I didn’t know it until I was older. Her dark hair was tied back in a tight bun at the nape of her neck.

“You’re lucky,” she said. “You’ll learn to speak more than one language here. You’ll learn to hear more than the others will.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She was slow, patient. “Listen. Do you hear it?”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“But the dead hear you,” she said. “I’ve lived all over this country, and in the end, the dead all sound the same. They want to be remembered. They had names, all of them.”

“Abuela, I don’t understand you.”

“In time, you will,” she said and pushed the hair away from my forehead. “You’ll know. I lived in Basque country for a while, and they had a saying. Izena duen gutzia omen da.”

“What does that mean?”

“Everything that has a name exists.”

“My name is Lucas,” I said.

She smiled and said, “And you exist. I have a name, and I exist, and the places where we lived and the people we knew that are no longer here, they all have names.”

We walked farther into the forest, away from the main roads and lonely cabins to a small clearing by the river. That was her favorite spot, different than the one my parents

would take me to. She started singing, a sound that came up from the earth and caught her throat and squeezed. It was deep, rough, her lips humming and her face in pain.

It was a wailing, like crying for someone she lost, and she was trying to find them, calling for them. She brought her palms together, made the forest still, made it listen. She sang from someplace that wasn't the forest, and she was taking me with her. She stomped her right foot, clapped her hands at the same time and shook the dirt, called up the bodies.

It hurt me. I felt in my arms and my legs and my chest. My bones rattled, and if I listened hard enough, I could remember what she remembered, but I couldn't. My grandmother stopped.

"This is how I remember all the names that are no longer with me," she said and reached for my hand. "Come, let's go back to."

"But I don't want to," I said.

"Sometimes you have to go back to the places you don't want to go back to, but then you'll leave again to the places you want to go to."

She explained things as if they were and always would be.

"And what did I teach you about that? What do you need?"

"Patience," I said.

She kissed my head and said, "Very good," and lead me down the path back to the village.

So I count the number of breaths I take in a minute and count the threads on the bedsheets and count each letter on the page, each pen stroke, and each space in between the words I imagine him breathing into paper.

Chapter Eleven

Blas and Valentina take me into Bilbao. There are more people out today than there were yesterday, crossing cobbled streets buying bread, drinking coffee, selling their goods. We walk north into town. Seagulls wheel through the sky, laughing and crying, and ladies hang clothes to dry on their balconies. In the distance, I see flags waving off of giant wooden beams, white sails waving, birds circling.

"It's a good day today," says Blas. "It's market day."

Everyone hears him say it. Sardine vendors walk next to us, smiling and waving silver salted fish, a few ladies offer baskets of pastries and cakes, say fresh baked this morning, say nothing better in the region.

Blas and Valentina wave their decline, smile like the old, polite, married couple they are.

I am flooded with sounds and smells and light, and we haven't reached the end of town. To my right, I see a church tower in the distance, and to my left stands a church, the steeple golden in the morning sun. A bridge runs next to it and over the river.

"That's the Basilica de Begoña over there," says Blas. "And this church of San Antón. Those damn Carlists almost destroyed it."

I remember pieces, flakes of memory in my head like the first snow of the season, melting away as soon as it touches the ground, my father telling my mother what travelers told him about money and the military to the east in Basque country, but I don't remember much. I was a child, and what I didn't know I avoided like my father's open palm.

“They tore this place apart all because each side wanted a different monarch on the throne,” says Blas. He spits on the ground.

“Blas,” says Valentina, tugging his arm. “That is not proper in public.”

“I do remember my parents talking about a different war,” I say. “I don’t think it was much of a war. I don’t think it ever came that far west.”

“You must have been alive around the second Carlist war,” he says. “It’s a good thing you lived as far west as you did.”

I nod, stare at the ground just in front of my feet, continue to walk around the church and along the river.

“Why aren’t your parents with you?” he asks. “I assume they gave you their blessing before you left your village.”

I pretend to smile and look out to the river, and I’m surprised I don’t see them at all. Maybe the dead get tired too.

“No,” I say, finally. “They died a few years ago.”

Valentina crosses herself. “I am so sorry.” She takes my hand and rubs my knuckles, the way I’d imagine a mother making a cut heal, magic, a pat and a rhyme and everything is better. She still holds my hand as Blas puts an arm around her shoulder.

“I’d actually like to see the town,” I say. I reach into my coat pocket and show them the address Xabi wrote in his letter, the last one he sent. He always wrote the address at the bottom of the page, just in case I ever forgot it. I could never forget it.

“This is up by the shipyards,” says Blas, handing the letter back to me. “We’ll take you there.”

“You’re very kind,” I say. “But I’d like to go there myself.”

I catch Valentina glance at him, like she doesn't trust what I say more that she wants to look out for me. I already upset her once yesterday, almost opening the door into the night.

"Of course," says Blas. "Follow the river, and you'll make it to the docks. Why don't we meet in front of the church in a few hours?"

"Thank you, Blas."

I look over my shoulder, wave at them, and head through the marrow streets. Walls rise around me, red, white, green, yellow, wooden shutters splayed open in browns and whites, more laundry hung up on rope crisscrossing over me, strung from one balcony across the street to the other. Neighbors call to each other, wave and smile. Sunbeams grow out of their eyes.

These buildings look loved and alive, nothing like the rickety farms of Galicia, and the scent of the sea is different, older, something in the way it wraps itself in my mouth, sharp and cold, not humid and full like the breezes back home. Some of the building's doors have an eguzkilore just like Blas and Valentina's house.

I walk along the river, pass the old buildings to my right and the river to my left, green and blue. Bushy trees dot the plaza across the river, and men on ladders clean the streetlamps along the bridges. I near the docks and see them, a mix of old white sails and large metal ships, smoke pouring out of a center funnel.

Sailors and fishermen haul nets and rope, fish and anchor. People yell at each other back and forth, and gulls hover over me, waiting to steal food, survival. The smell is unlike anything I've known, nothing like A Coruña, rotten fish and dirty water and burning coal.

I wrap around the streets, looking for the address, ignoring the sardine sellers and vendors shaking their goods at everyone. I see a middle aged woman sitting on a bench with her daughter. She fixes the girl's shawl around her shoulders and straightens her clothes. I wonder if should ask her, show her the address and have her point me to where I need to go. I always thought most mothers had a helpful instinct.

"Excuse me," I say. My hands are shaking, so I hold the paper with both hands.

She looks up at me like I was some sick dog off the street.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you can help me find this address."

She takes a quick look at it, enough to see the writing but not enough to think about what it says.

"I'm sorry, young man," she says. She stands up, takes her daughter's hand. "I don't know where that is." She walks away, not looking back.

I don't know why she did that, made a decision before I could explain myself, avoided me completely for whatever reason. Whether it was my hair, my eyes, my clothes, I don't know. It could have been her way, not speaking to strangers. Maybe it's me. I look at the letter in my hand, open to the world, revealing a private part of me, like I am giving it away. I move to the skin holding letter, my skin, and I notice how dark it looks in the sunlight. My grandmother called it sun-kissed, called it beautiful, called it yours, mine.

Xabi doesn't think anything of it, never bothered with it even when I told him who I was and were I came from.

"Chico."

I look around for the voice and see a man in a shadowed alley. His face is clouded in smoke, and he puffs his cigar like needs it to breathe.

"Yes, you," he says. "You look like you need help, no?"

He waves me over, pushing smoke into his face in the process. The shadows make him look taller, but he reaches just up to my chin. Cigar spice fills the alley, and I'm closed in.

"I can help you out," he says, another puff.

I could do exactly what the woman did to me, acknowledge and turn the other way, and that would be safe. That would get me nowhere. 4

"I just need to get to this address," I say, showing him the letter.

He blows smoke away from us and bends over the paper. "You're very close. Take this street down two blocks and turn left on the avenue. It's the second house to the right."

"Thank you very much." I fold the letter and tuck it into my coat. I turn to leave, but he stops me.

"That's not how it works," he says. "I did you a favor, so you owe me a favor."

He puffs his cigar again, and I can barely recognize him in the smoke and shadows. "I want you to listen," he says. "A long time ago, maybe when I was about your age, I went out into the forests because the village I lived in was running out of food. There were stories about men who could grow their own food, so I found them." Another cloud of smoke, thick and grey and laughing. "I knew they wouldn't tell me, so I complimented them on their gardens, made them feel very good about themselves, and they were so filled with pride. They started talking between each other, sharing each one's own way of

planting and sowing and harvesting. I took all of it with me. I told the village who told other villages who told towns and cities."

His story sounds like something I would have heard from my grandmother or from Úrsula, a piece of a world behind me, and whether I left it behind or it left me, I don't know.

"This is why I'm telling you this," he says. "People are forgetting my story. I just want someone who will remember it, who will tell someone else who will tell someone else."

His cigar is almost done, and he puffs on the tiny burnt nob that's left of it.

"Can you do that?" he asks.

"I can," I say.

He drops what's left of his cigar, stomps out the embers, and puts his hand out.

"Martintxiki," he says. "But most people called me Txiki."

"Lucas," I say, and shake his hand.

"That's a good name," he says and repeats my name. The smoke clears from his face, and he's older than he sounds, crow's feet next to his eyes, and a smirk that won't go away.

I loosen my grip, but he doesn't let go of my hand. The music coming from down the street is loud, tambourines and drums and pipes, and all of that is drowning in my heartbeat caught in my throat. Something is not right.

"Come on," says Txiki.

"No, thank you," I say. I pull my hand away.

"Are you sure? No one will find out."

“If you take another step, I keep your name. No one will know it.”

He stops, pulls another cigar out of his breast pocket, bites the end and lights a match. The smoke is thicker, a fresh cigar, a new curtain to hide behind.

“You wouldn’t,” he says.

“I’ve kept secrets my whole life. Another one won’t bother me.”

This time he blows smoke in my face and pulls his pants up, adjusting his belt.

“The world wasn’t made for people like us,” he says. “You are all you’ll have.” He smirks again and nods and smoke curls around his shoulders, like a scarf. He walks farther into the alley, melting into the corners until I can’t see him anymore.

I walk into the daylight, into the music and the din and the smell of fish drying in the sun. I breathe. There are words in my hands and noise in my chest, so I walk the direction Txiki told me to, passed the docks and vendors and into the street with rows of stone and wood houses, and I feel a flutter rise up from my belly, quick like a flashflood from a river, and it rises up to my chest, mixing with the noise already in there, clawing its way out of my bones, and I find the house with the matching numbers on Xabi’s letter, a house with a wooden door like all the others and brown shutters like all the others and I hesitate, like a little tree holding its own against a windstorm, because I’m here now, and I didn’t expect all this, to be standing in front of a house such a distance from everything I’ve ever known, and I’m shaking, shaking like a small tree caught in a windstorm, and the only thing keeping me rooted is the thought of pressing my knuckle to the door and knocking.

Two breaths and I knock, wait. The lock twists and the door creaks, and a man stands on the other side in his shirtsleeves. He must be the owner of the room Xabi was renting.

"Good afternoon," I say. "I'm looking for Xabier Palomo, the young man renting the spare room here."

"Yes, what about him?"

"I was wondering if he is in."

"He was until a few days ago," says the man, picking at the dirt under his nail.

"How do you mean?"

"The kid left."

He's alive. I close my eyes, take a shaky breath to calm the explosions in my fingertips. I can put that thought to rest. He is on this earth, not under it. He is walking. He is breathing. Then something in me sinks, faster than a rock thrown in a river.

"Do you know when he'll be back."

"No, I don't," he says. "He's probably not coming back."

I can tell he doesn't want to do this anymore, stand at the door answering questions when I can a woman in her undergarments trying her best to hide away from the door.

He starts to close the door, and I stop him, dig into my pocket and take two pesetas, offer them to the man.

"Please, did he say where he was going?"

"He said something about new work in Barcelona. The shipyards are big there, bigger than these, more trade and more work where you don't have to mine for coal all day."

“Thank you very much.”

The door closes in front of me, and I hear a woman giggle. They’re hidden away behind stone and wood and glass, a world in a house.

I am left standing in the street. The town is alive around me, tiny moments happening behind me, next to me, one, two, five streets away, and I am alone in the afternoon shadows squeezed between cobblestones and laughter. The sea wants to take me. I don’t allow it.

I walk back to the old town, east, and the sun crosses over me, floating the other way, away. Hands in my pockets, people walk passed me, and I kick gravel down the street because it gives me something else to focus on. There are so many people around me, and I wonder what in the devil’s name I’m doing here. Everywhere I turn, people are walking around each other, some smiles but more silence, like they are so focused on getting to wherever they need to, and I think it’s foolish of me to be here. I don’t belong in a city, but I don’t belong in the country anymore. I am a shipwreck. I’m not sure where to go.

I picture Xabi here in Bilbao, standing at the docks as the light hides at the end of the world, the gulls laughing in the sky pulling ribbons of clouds with them. He is smiling, and I can’t tell which light is brighter, him or the sun. He says hello, asks what took me so long, says he has so much to show me, puts an arm around my shoulders, something so innocent and friendly, and it is the only way we can be ourselves without no one suspecting.

He is not here. He is somewhere else, and I’d like to find him. He is the only place I have left to go.

Walking through the streets and alleys, I notice shadows moving to my right, not so much shadows but things shuffling in corners, hiding from eyes and sunlight.

Two men surround another shorter man. I cannot see what they look like, but between the gaps of shoulders and arms, I can see some of the short man's features, thin and dark. He looks familiar, just like my grandmother. The two other men look like much older versions of the boys that teased me, spit and shoved and kicked me when I was younger, made me feel like I was an animal. My grandmother's knife weighs at my side. Memories are heavy things, like lumber.

One man punches the shorter one in the stomach, and he holds himself. His knees hit the stony street.

"You dirty little shit," says the man who punched the other. "I want that money you stole."

"I didn't take your money," says the man on the ground. He takes deep breaths in between his words.

"The world doesn't need another thief and a liar. I don't think the world would miss you if you if you were gone."

I have my knife in my hands, and I know that what I am going to do is the most foolish thing I've done. I've already gotten on a train to a city I've never known, but that man on the ground is like me, or I am like him, and I cannot leave him there, and I think of what Xabi would do in this moment. I creep closer to the two men, stay as close to the wall as I can.

They have their hands on their hips, trying to show that they are something better and stronger than the man on the ground.

I decide on which man to threaten, the one that punched the other, and I loop my left arm through his, hoist and grip him by the scruff of his neck, right handed knife at his throat, just like my grandmother taught me.

"I dare you to say another word," I whisper, loud enough for the other to hear.

His friend bolts out of the alley.

"You wouldn't," he says.

I dig the tip of the knife into the soft skin of his throat and draw blood, and I hear him hiss in pain.

"I want you to run from here, run like the devil sent me to claim you."

I shove him away from me, and he runs into the sunlight. My hands are shaking so hard that I drop my knife. I hold myself against the wall and heave, empty myself of my morning's breakfast. My head feels full of something, like it's floating and I'm trying to keep it steady.

"Thank you," says the man.

He walks towards me, but I put my hand up, heave again and cough up phlegm and more bits and bad taste. I spit whatever I can and wipe my mouth with the back of my palm.

I see something dangling next to my face. I turn, a handkerchief, tattered at the corners.

"Here," he says. "Use it."

"Don't worry about me," I say. I take slow breaths and stand.

The man picks up my knife, wipes the dirt and dust off of it and inspects it, weighs it in his hand, flips it between his fingers like he was born holding one in his hand. He folds it closed and gives it to me.

"It's a well-made knife," he says. "Whoever gave it to you must have known that."

"It was my grandmother's," I say.

"She was from the south."

"How do you know that?"

He smiles, dark, matted curls falling over his face. "It's a southern thing," he says. "And don't let them catch you waving it around. It's illegal here."

I take the knife and hide it in my coat, pat myself to make sure it's not visible through me clothes.

He laughs, winces, puts a hand over his stomach and says, "It hurts."

"Do you need help?" I ask.

"No, this is nothing." He looks behind him at a pile of broken wood. He kneels on the ground and picks through it and clicks his tongue. "This, however, is a problem."

The guitar is broken beyond any kind of fixing. Strings curl like lightning, and the wooden body lies in a pile of polished splinters.

"How did this happen?" I ask.

"Those two thought I owed them money. I wasn't the guy, but they didn't care. I was just another lowlife to them, so they broke the only thing I had with me."

He stands up, takes a deep breath, dusts his knees and his shirt. "We should get out of here before they come back."

I follow him out of the alley and into Casco Viejo. We walk through winding roads and narrow streets then through an arch and step into a large square. I look around me, men and women drinking afternoon coffee, children eating cakes and sweets, vendors tucked into their booths and tables.

"You're not from here," he says and laughs again. "We'll wait here for a little while." He extends a hand. "Andrés."

I take it in mine and shake. "Lucas." I give him my name.

He smiles, and I wonder how he can smile the way he does with everything that's just happened, but I don't ask. I don't feel I can. It's such an easy smile, like he shows his teeth not because he's warning the world but being threatened so much and living despite it. I do not know him, and I won't be here much longer.

"What brings you to Bilbao?" he says.

"I'm looking for a friend, but he's moved to Barcelona."

"A friend from home?"

"How do you know?"

"I can smell it on you," he says. "I understand what it's like to miss your friends from home."

"Do you miss your home?"

"I do sometimes, but then other times I learn how to make other places home, and then I don't miss it as much."

"How do you do that?"

Andrés crosses his arms over his chest and bites his lower lip. Then he says, “I make an anchor of something, something that I can tie memories to, a place, a person. I learn to make a new friend.”

I want to ask him how he can be so trusting of the world, how he seems to be so unafraid about all the things that can happen to him and not me because I do not look like him, do not have the same dark hair and skin he does, am not looked upon as immediate as I can tell he is, and he doesn’t care. He smiles.

“You know, I don’t know you, but I think you’d make a good friend,” he says.

His words are so sudden that they take me out of myself. I laugh but not at him. I laugh because there is so much honesty behind him, and it makes me happy.

“I appreciate that, Andrés. I really do.”

“It’s a shame, then. You’re off to Barcelona, no?”

“Soon, I hope.”

He nods, stares out to the crowd. We watch a violinist play to a group of children. An old man and woman start to waltz. People toss coins into a hat next to the violinist. I can’t help but smile looking at the couple. They twirl and step in perfect rhythm. Everything the man does, the woman mirrors. She lets him lead her through the dance. A crowd gathers around them, and they start to clap. The old man nods to the violinist, and he plays faster, and the man and woman laugh, and I feel rose petals will fall from the sky.

The music stops. The crowd cheers and yells for a kiss. The old couple is blushing, but the man laughs and takes his wife’s hands in his and kisses them. She turns and kisses

his cheek. They're such simple things, like the first rainfall of the spring, and I want it like dried earth wants a river to flood.

Andrés applauds next to me, pulls me back to myself, and I clap with him, hide everything with a smile because that's the easiest way to do it.

"There's so much of that in Barcelona," he says.

"Dancing?"

"And love." He shakes his head. "But there's love everywhere."

"I like to believe that," I say. "You've been to Barcelona?"

"Once, a few years ago. It's a beautiful city." He takes another look around. Most people avoid him. Andrés doesn't seem to care. "This is where I leave you."

"I don't like those words," I say. "It's like you're saying this is the end, and aren't we supposed to become friends?"

"See, I knew I was right about you," he says, and his smile sets the plaza on fire. "How about this. If you're ever in Sevilla, find a place called Café de Silveiro. I'm there most nights playing when my brothers aren't."

"I'll remember that," I say.

He shakes my hand and says, "I'll see you soon?"

I wonder why he asks instead of states it, like he doubts I'll ever make it there. I don't know if I ever will make it there, but I'd like to. Maybe Xabi and I will travel to the south one day.

"Yes," I say. "I'll definitely see you in Sevilla."

He smiles and walks away. Standing by myself in the plaza with crowds humming, the last time I felt this alone, I was when I walked out of the village.

Chapter Twelve

I make my way back to the church, find an empty bench and wait for Blas and Valentina. I can't stay in this town much longer. Barcelona calls me like some memory I trained myself to remember, a dream I thought I dreamed. My stomach aches, my mouth is dry and my throat sore, and I try to steady my breathing. There's a shaking in my chest. There's a sparrow flying inside me, trying to find a way to escape its cage.

I hide my money in my coat and count the little I have left, not enough for a train ticket to Barcelona, I don't think. I lace my fingers together to stop them twitching.

Coming to Bilbao, I did not expect to feel this way. I did not think that I wouldn't find him. I was expecting so much. I was expecting Xabi here, by the sea and the woods, and he's not here. He is somewhere else, someplace I can't get to.

Something touches my shoulder, and I voice catches in my throat.

"Lucas, I didn't mean to frighten you," says Blas. He's smoking his pipe again. "Have you been waiting here long?"

I can't find right words, buried somewhere in between my teeth. I shake my head and stand to meet him.

"It's getting late," says Valentina. She clasps her hands to her chest, and I remember what happened the night before.

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The three of us eat our dinner, and they ask me about my day. I am thinking about too much, Andrés's smile and Txiki's words, and Xabi is not here. I tell them anyway, leave the details behind. I keep names to myself.

Blas and Valentina stare at each other across the table, and the sparrow returns. I excuse myself, tell them I am very tired and would like to rest early. I lead myself to the bedroom upstairs and lie down.

I stretch and stir and rub sleep out of my eyes. The house is dark, but I hear a voice downstairs, faint, the way people whisper prayers in a church.

Downstairs, faint light glows from the kitchen. I peek from behind the doorway and see Valentina kneeling down in front of a small cabinet, its doors open and cupping light from the burning candles. I hear her mumble something in that ancient tongue I barely remember.

"It wasn't a good death for them," says Blas.

He is behind me, hands behind his back and speaking so low I have to lean into his breath to catch it because the wind will take it. There are dark circles under his eyes. I think he's been awake all night.

"She does this once a month at the hour they died. She prepared the bodies for the funeral."

"Blas, I'm sorry," I say. "I'll go back upstairs."

"No," he says. "Stay."

Valentina is dressed in black, and in the candlelight, I can see the wrinkles on her face, the same wrinkles I remember my grandmother had.

Standing in this dim hallway behind a woman at an altar, I remember my grandmother, the way she wrapped stories in her dress, the way she shot songs into the sky, the way she kicked up dirt and dust and blessed the earth.

"Izena duen gutzia omen da," says Blas.

My grandmother speaks through him, the same words she said that one day in the forest.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"Everything that has a name exists," he says.

I think, *my mother, my father, my grandmother*. I think, *Úrsula, Agata, Andrés*. I think, *Xabi*.

"We named them before they died," he says. "Luis and Ana."

"Those are beautiful names."

I think we keep them alive, the dead. We remember them. I remember my parents and my grandmother. Valentina remembers her children.

"This is why we took in that young man. This is why we took you in. Valentina and I, we wanted to know what it would have been like to care for children."

His words unsettle me more than they should. I look at him and see a broken man. I look at Valentina and see a woman who remembers too much, who carries too much and cannot find a place to put it all down.

I return to the bedroom upstairs. I pull the curtains aside, let whatever light is out there help me find my things. I pack my bag and make sure my knife is in my pocket. I turn my steps into mist and fog, float down the stairs and towards the door. I turn the nob. It squeaks.

"What are you doing?" says Valentina, tears shining on her cheeks.

"I can't stay here," I say.

"You can't go out there at night," she says.

I shut the door behind me and follow the road out of town, away from Arrigorriaga and Bilbao. I might be able to find another house down the road, hide in the forest until the sun comes up and ask a farmer for directions. I remember I have no money for a train ticket, but maybe I can sneak on board.

There is no sense of time. The world is dark, and the moon is hidden, and the trees rub against each other, making music I know but sung in a different language. These are not my trees, this is not my wind, and they tell me this is not my sky I am walking under.

Everything would be I wish he was here, next to me, an arm over my shoulder while we walk down this dusty road. That moment, I'd call it mine. I'd feel his warmth next to me on this cold night, brush the hills of his knuckles and the forest of his hair. I'd smell the sea on his neck, and he'd smell the earth on mine.

He is not here, and I am breathing storms because of it. Rainfall sits in the air, pulling at threads like a bed sheet coming undone. My feet keep moving but I keep wondering if this was a mistake, coming here with nowhere to go. I did not think I wouldn't find him. I expected things to happen the way I wanted them to, and they did not, and now I am walking a dirt road during some hour of the night, and he's not here.

Even though this is not my forest, and these are not my winds, I can see the shadows move. I see the shapes through the trees, hear them step across the ground, over soft, wet leaves and mud.

I remember Úrsula, her words and her smile and her light, the way her kitchen always smelled of sugar, honey, and fruits. I remember the dead. The pendant she gave me, I still have it, hanging around my neck, black stone cold against my skin.

Rain starts to fall, and the earth rises up to meet it, makes mist from their kiss. It is raining because I miss him. I repeat those words, forcing myself to believe them, as plain as they sound folded under my breath.

These were our nights, rainy and dark, when the world turned into something different, washed and bathed and made fresh for the morning, and there were countless nights under the same roof. No, not countless. I can remember each one, each lighting of a candle, each breath, each star we'd try to name in the sky. Then the candles would burn to their bases, wax dripping over the tables with promises to clean it later but went untouched for days.

He's alive, as alive as I am with the rain sinking into my clothes. I see a tower between the trees, a church. I try the door, pull it open and shudder at not feeling cold anymore. I drop a coin into the offering box, the least I can do for walking in at night, but this is sanctuary.

My father would say that in the few moments he'd share pieces of his life with me. He was raised Catholic, always attended Sunday mass.

"If you are ever lost on the roads," he said. "Find a church."

I hate to think his words have stayed with me, burned their way into the corners I cannot reach inside me, but here I am, a place he loved but cannot see me in. I sit at the end of a pew and stare at the altar, wooden, a white cloth draped over it. Wood creaks in the wind, and raindrops tap against the roof.

The candles have all been put out, even the candle at the end of the altar. I hesitate to light one. I rub my arms for extra warmth, blow into my hands and slide them against each other. There's no priest in here, no one alive except me.

I tell myself I have nowhere to go. The village does not want me, my family does not exist, and I'm left floating through the earth. Maybe I am a spirit. Maybe I'm dead and am experiencing things in the afterlife that I never experienced when I was alive. The world really can be that cruel, I think.

I hear something heavy outside, footsteps at the threshold, water falling over something that's not ground, something solid and moving. The church door opens, and wind and water sweep through the building. Statues of saints look down on me, mouths open. Broken candelabras lie on the ground. The tabernacle is missing. The doors slam closed. I smell her before I see her.

"Why did you have to run away from those old folk," says Agata.

"Wouldn't you if they were trying to keep you?"

"A fair point," she says.

She's sitting at my right, ashy blonde hair tied back at the nape of her neck. Her shawl is bunched high at her shoulders.

"You know, Lucas, you can get to Barcelona more easily than you think."

"I don't understand," I say.

She holds out her hand, as if I should take it. I don't. She smiles.

"Come," she says. "Let's go for a walk. The rain is stopping, and I know you want to see him again."

Outside, the fog is light and full of ghosts. I know because they're mine. The sun rises, clearing away the things I cannot see, and the trees rise higher than any I've ever seen. There is so much green surrounding us in a sea of mist and dust and the breath of

the earth. For a moment, I'm reminded of my forest, my oak trees and river, the hidden falls and mossy rocks, the forgotten monastery and midnight swims. I think of Xabi.

Agata leads me through the forest. The wind parts for her, and the trees bend away from her, from us.

"They're all connected," she says. "The trees, of course. The forest talks to the wind, which talks to the stars, and so on."

We reach a small grove of trees that lean toward each other, bent and twisted and covered in ivy.

"We're here," she says.

The wind stops, and sound leaves the space around us. The only thing I hear is my blood roaring in my ears, and it howls.

"Think of where you want to be and walk through the trees. That's all you have to do. They'll do the rest."

"Why are you doing this?" I rub my eyes red.

"Doing what?" she says.

"Taking me to him."

"I'm not taking you to anyone," she says. "I am showing you to a place. You decide what to do when you get there."

"There's something you want," I say.

"I just want to know how much you're willing to risk for this."

So, I leave her behind and step through the trees, into the brush and the mist. One memory shines now, during one of those night swims. We said our names underwater, screamed in a world hidden under the other, where it was dark, and we were kings. We

broke the surface and splashed at each other. Moonlight caught the water, pulled it over us, and we were sailing through our own sky. I found his hands underwater, cold and strong. I pressed my forehead against his and kissed the stars forming on his shoulders. He kissed me then, the only fire in a world full of cold, his cheek against mine.

I say his name to myself and remember his voice. I love him like bats love dark places. Then I hear footsteps against cobblestones, the hum of voices, and I breathe the smell of the sea.