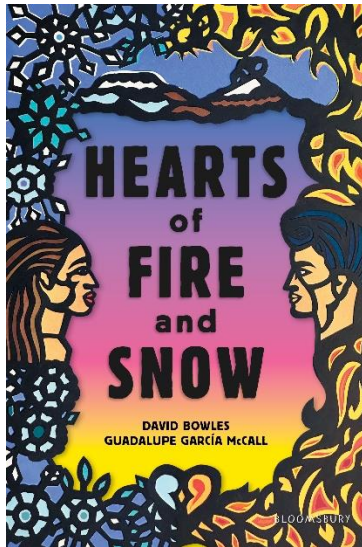


"A fiery romance with a reminder that true love is worth the wait." —*Booklist*

## HEARTS OF FIRE AND SNOW

By David Bowles and Guadalupe García McCall



Award-winning authors David Bowles and Guadalupe García McCall reimagine a beloved Aztec tale of star-crossed lovers who have one last chance to reunite.

Blanca Montes wants to make a difference in the world, to do more than her wealthy godfather and spoiled boyfriend think her capable. So when Greg Chan shows up as a new student at her Nevada school, she is more than intrigued by his confident charm.

But Greg and Blanca are drawn to each other by something stronger—their fates entwined centuries ago. In his first life, Greg was Captain Popoca, and Blanca is the reincarnation of Princess Iztac, who took her own life after believing her beloved Popoca was sent to his death in battle. Greg has spent many lives searching for his lost love, and now the fates have given them one more chance. Will their hearts finally beat as one?

This rich contemporary fantasy boldly expands the canon of “star-crossed lovers” giving modern readers an epic story for the ages.

**David Bowles** is an award-winning Mexican American author and translator from Texas. His books include *Secret of the Moon Conch*, *The Smoking Mirror*, *Feathered Serpent*, *Dark Heart of Sky*, and *They Call Me Güero*. He has been published in the *New York Times*, *School Library Journal*, *Strange Horizons*, *English Journal*, *Rattle*, *Translation Review*, and the *Journal of Children's Literature*. In 2017, he was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters, and in 2020, he co-founded #DignidadLiteraria, a social justice movement advocating for greater Latinx representation in publishing.

**Guadalupe García McCall** is the award-winning author of *Secret of the Moon Conch*, *Under the Mesquite*, *Summer of the Mariposas*, *Shame the Stars*, *All the Stars Denied*, and *Echoes of Grace*. She has received a Pura Belpré Author Award, a Westchester Young Adult Fiction Award, and the Tomás Rivera Mexican-American Children’s Book Award, and was a finalist for the William C. Morris Award and the Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy. She advocates for literacy and diverse books. She lives with her husband in Texas.

Praise for *Secret of the Moon Conch*:

★“An excellent romantic fantasy woven with timeless themes. The authors juxtapose historical aspects of Aztec civilization with today’s current events, calling attention to strains that migrants experience in modern-day detention centers. Young adults will thoroughly enjoy this riveting, long-distance love story.” —*Booklist*, starred review

“A gentle love story and action-packed sequences elevate this sobering read.” —*Publishers Weekly*

**HEARTS**  
**of**  
**FIRE**  
**and**  
**SNOW**

Also by David Bowles and Guadalupe García McCall

*Secret of the Moon Conch*

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**DAVID BOWLES**  
**GUADALUPE GARCÍA McCALL**

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*To Jesse, for standing watch over  
those I love the most. —Tu suegro, David*

*To my Mami and Papi in heaven, los tengo  
siempre en mi corazón! —Lupita*



**HEARTS**  
**of**  
**FIRE**  
**and**  
**SNOW**





## PROLOGUE

*When the Great Gods of Chaos at last choose to pluck the princess from paradise and send her back, we—the Goddesses of Fate—sense the devious plan and set in motion our own.*

*Long ago, we had snarled the souls of her family and enemy together. Now we hook that skein to her destiny, and they go spiraling into the world, whatever memories they retain fading.*

*Chaos craves their punishment, hungers to see them suffer, longs to see them act out the bloody tragedy once more, wants to gloat as they repeat the mistakes of the past. Not us. Our hungers are unique. We shall devour their faults, their pain, their shame.*

*We await the signs that will help us find them. Two generations ago, the volcano of our beloved warrior—who has kept his magma and steam calm for nearly a century—erupted in the midst of his regenerative sleep. In the aftermath, we discovered that one of the two dead and icy volcanoes was now tethered to a human soul.*

*Somewhere in the United States. Reno, Nevada.*

*Enough of our children's children inhabit the city for us to keep a tenuous watch over this web of broken hearts we helped to create. The ones we believe we recognize, at least.*

*Twelve years later, we sense her at last—another human soul,*

suddenly linked to a snowy silhouette. A girl of seventeen winters, icy pride rippling through her being.

Nearby. In the city they call Mexico.

Ecstatic, the oldest of us goes to the volcano to awaken the deathless from his long sleep a little early. There, in that vast chamber near rivers of molten rock, Eldest Sister speaks.

“Majestic child, long-suffering warrior, the debt has been paid. Your deathless vigil of a thousand years is coming to an end. The maiden has at last returned. Rise now and bring her to us so that you both may meet your destiny.”

The ancient warrior leaps to his feet, hot heart roiling. The volcano responds, magma surging from below as the ancient rock shudders all around. With a voice unused for fifty-two years, he croaks a single word.

“Where?”

Before we can answer, his eyes go wide, and he clutches at his head.

An awful scream tears from his lips, and he collapses to the bare rock.

“No! Too much! I remember it all, every second, and it burns! IT BURNS!”

His cries echo through the caverns, and the volcano shudders violently in response. Gouts of magma surge from the depths, bursting through the caldera.

Elder Sister has no choice. She touches his forehead, pushing him back into hibernation. Then, sobbing, she begins to make his memories fade, calming the eruptions to intermittent hiccups of smoke and ash.

Then she takes the younger two with her to that distant land, to prepare the way should he ever awaken on his own.

And I stay behind to watch over him.

As I have done for centuries.

Waiting to set things right.

## CHAPTER

# 1

When I open my eyes, I don't know who I am.

Even the room I'm in seems unfamiliar. I sit up in a huge bed, pulling aside sheets so soft they feel like warm clouds. The space is the size of a small apartment, which makes me wonder if I'm in some studio loft in a big city. But how can I know about apartments and cities if I can't remember my own name?

I walk around, hoping that some object will trigger memories. Instead, I just feel confused. There's a black rectangle on one wall that may be a television set, though it also feels different from any I've ever seen. Another screen sits on a desk, and all that comes to mind is the computer in Mr. Spock's quarters on that science fiction program. What was it called? *Star Trek*. Annoying that the title comes so easily.

There's a sofa and a few other chairs. Full bookshelves. A dresser with photographs displayed. I inspect them while checking the mirror hanging on the wall behind them. Both reflection and snapshots show a teenager, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, with dark skin, black hair and eyes, handsome features. Indigenous, my selective mind suggests. Perhaps Nahua, from the highlands near Mexico City.

Then I look more closely at the photos. Something's off. It's hard to explain how I know, but the boy in those images is *not* the same one staring back at me from the mirror. The resemblance is *very* close, as if a talented surgeon or scientist took someone with a similar build and background and tweaked his features to look like . . . mine.

Muffled conversation comes from beyond the closed door. I'm only wearing boxers, so I open the drawers and find a T-shirt to pull over my well-muscle torso. There are no pants in the dresser, but a huge walk-in closet nearby gives me lots of options. I pick some jeans at random and a pair of soft leather loafers.

Once I'm dressed, I take a moment to look out the window that fills most of one wall. Though something feels odd about the skyline, I recognize the metropolis as Mexico City. On the horizon rise the slopes of the two volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl. The sight of their snow-capped peaks brings an ache to my chest, so I close the blinds and turn away, gasping.

Wanting answers, I open the door and step into a second-story hall with a railing that leads to staircases at either end. The voices are clearer. They are speaking in both Spanish and Nahuatl, two languages that I apparently understand, as I can follow the mysterious conversation easily.

"But it's been four months!" a man is protesting. A quaver in his voice suggests old age. "With all due respect, Blessed One, we believed you Four would have resolved the problem by now."

"There's no use pushing him to awaken," replies the voice of a woman, maybe younger. "He would just shut down and fall into a coma again. The other three are monitoring the situation in Nevada closely. The candidates aren't going anywhere. There's time for him to emerge from this state when his mind's ready."

Another woman, older, interjects. “When we were still children, His Majesty explained the cycle of regeneration. Nothing like this has ever happened before. You say it’s the work of Chaos, but why now, when his plea to heaven has finally been granted?”

“Granted begrudgingly, believe me. Think of this setback as a final trial. To find her, he has to find himself.”

I lean over the railing. An elderly couple, elegantly dressed, is sitting on a sofa while a middle-aged woman in a maid’s uniform stands in front of them. All three appear to be Indigenous Nahua, like my reflection.

The maid looks up and smiles.

My heart fills with peace and contentment. I know her. She loves me, and that love is precious, somehow. Meaningful.

I get the feeling she’s stood by my side through very hard times.

“Goyo!” she exclaims with delight, tears of relief sparkling in her eyes. “You’re awake at last. Stay there—I’ll help you down.”

More quickly than a woman of her age normally moves, she runs up the stairs, but I wave her away. “I feel fine. Perfectly steady and strong.”

“Okay, then,” she says, giving me a thumbs-up. “Follow me, boy. There’s much to discuss.”

I descend the stairs behind her. The older couple is now standing, eyes wide. The man must be in his seventies, wearing a tailored suit, while the woman may be fifty-something. Perhaps a little older, her dark hair pulled back by a diamond-studded net of silver.

I realize I know their names.

“Roberto Chan Texis,” I say as I reach the last stair. “Dolores Ihpotok de Chan.”

Mr. Chan hurries to my side, taking my hand in his. The nails

are carefully manicured, the skin soft though heavily wrinkled with age. “Do you remember, then?”

With a sigh, I shake my head. “Not really. I can’t recall my name. I don’t know who I am. It’s like someone emptied my head of all the memories of my life. There’s knowledge in there still, but disconnected from *me*, if that makes sense.”

The three adults look at one another, disappointed and saddened at this news. Dolores smooths the rich fabric of her dress in a nervous gesture.

The maid wipes a tear from her cheek. Her short hair—black shot through with gray—bobs as she nods. “It’s okay. We knew this might happen. Plan B, my children.”

Taking a deep breath, she looks into my eyes.

“Your name is Gregorio Chan. These are your parents.”

I glance at the couple. My heart tells me that her statement is both true and false.

“I was adopted, wasn’t I?”

Dolores . . . my mother . . . covers her mouth with a shaking hand.

“It’s more complicated than adoption,” the maid responds, “but . . . yes. Your father is the CEO of Grupo Tolchan, one of the biggest conglomerates on the globe. You’re its heir. But you’ve been out of the public eye for a long time. At a boarding school in Switzerland. Till four months ago.”

She picks up a newspaper from the coffee table and hands it to me.

The tabloid is in German, *20 Minuten*. The date is May 22, 2023.

I have no problem reading the headline, which means I know at least three languages.

CORPORATE HEIR IN COMA AFTER SKIING ACCIDENT.

Below it is an image of me. Except it isn't me. It's the boy from the photographs in my room.

For the moment, I don't mention the weird discrepancy.

"You've been in a coma for four months . . . son." It's clear that Roberto is not used to calling me that. And I know instinctively that my coma has nothing to do with skiing.

"You three aren't being completely honest with me," I say.

The maid gives a wobbly, almost sarcastic nod.

"You're not wrong, Goyo," she confirms, using the common Spanish nickname for guys named Gregorio. "But you're going to have to trust us. We can't tell you everything."

I think about what I overheard moments ago. "Because I might 'shut down again,' right?"

Dolores, my mother, gives a little groan. "You have to remember on your own, no matter how long it takes."

I look at the maid. A name pops into my head. "Teicuihtzin?"

It means "beloved younger sister" in Nahuatl. A strange name for a middle-aged woman.

Her smile grows wistful. "Yes, my child. But you must call me Teresa. Teresa Segundo. That will be my name in our new home."

"New home?" I ask, confused. "I don't even recognize this one."

My father squeezes my hand. "We're . . . sending you to study abroad again. But this time to the United States. Reno, Nevada."

I raise an eyebrow as I turn my head to stare at him.

"You're transferring me from Le Rosey School in Switzerland to a private academy in *Reno*?"

Teresa laughs. "Oh, it's worse than that, Goyo. Not a private academy. A public high school. In a decent neighborhood, sure. Attended by snobs galore. But an honest-to-goodness, apple pie and football institution in the land of the free and the home of the brave, etcetera."



She has switched to English, which I also understand with ease.

“Why?” I ask in the same language.

“Because there’s someone there you have to find,” she explains, suddenly serious. “No one else but you can do it. We know she’s there, but we don’t know who she is.”

I can’t help but give a weak laugh of despair. “You realize that makes literally no sense, right?”

Teresa’s face softens. “Yes. But know this, my dearest boy: you have loved her for a very long time, have searched for her everywhere. You need her, and she needs you. What we’re about to do is unprecedented and perilous. You may wish your memories were still erased before we’re through. But on the other side of the trials, you’ll be whole, all of you, the girl you love and all the rest.”

I understand nothing. But deep in my heart, I feel she is telling the truth, and my pulse quickens.

“Well,” I say with a shrug, “I’d better pack.”

Teresa giggles, a sound so surprising in the mouth of a woman of her age that I can’t help but roll my eyes and grin.

“Oh, our things have been waiting in the cargo hold of your father’s private jet for months. Say your goodbyes. We leave within the hour.”

## CHAPTER 2

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and lock it away in my lungs, letting it feed my body, my mind, my heart. Nothing feels more natural than standing on a precipice on a crisp, cold day. Mount Rose has the best slopes, especially on snowy mornings like today. The Reno + Sparks Chamber of Commerce couldn't have picked a better place to hold their first annual Winter Wonderland Fundraiser.

"Damn it!" my boyfriend, Jackson Caldera, the handsomest most valuable player at Galena High School, curses under his breath. Instinctively, I turn back to check on him. He's bent over, dark blond hair swirling around his proud forehead, as he fiddles with his left ski boot.

"Still not latching on right?" I ask, because I want to make sure he's safe before we go any farther.

"Agh." Jackson tugs on the strap.

"We can go back," I tell him. "Get you another pair. My padrino's not going to use his. I'm pretty sure we're just giving them a ride again, so you might as well take them."

"It's my stupid sock. I can feel it slipping around. Don't worry

about it. I'm sure it'll sort itself out," he says. Then he straightens up and gets going, squeezing my shoulder as he walks past me.

"I'm sure you'll forget all about it once we're going downhill," I say, teasing him, because I've been around Jackson long enough to know just how much he hates going down these slopes. Football, not skiing, is his thing.

As for me, this is my "mole." Skiing, swerving, sliding down sunlit white-capped mountaintops—that's my poetry, my music, my inspiration. Unfortunately, it's a passion no one else in my life seems to share, not my friends Tina or Sofía; not Jackson; and especially not my padrino, Rafael Montes, who's been my sole guardian since I was five.

"Here we go," Jackson says, stepping up to the green marker on the beginner's slope.

"Ah, no," I say, signaling for him to move on.

"Fine," he says and keeps going, reluctantly stepping up to the blue marker for the intermediate slope. "But only this once."

"Jackson? Blanca?" Jackson's parents, Ted Caldera, owner and CEO of Caldera Resorts, and Anja Olsson, a statuesque Swedish woman whose old-world money funded the family business, walk quickly to us.

"Mom. Dad. What are you doing all the way up here?" Jackson's stilted tone of voice tells me everything I need to know.

"Well, we can't take the bunny slope if we want to make a good showing, can we?" Jackson's father says, referring to the fact that all winnings, aka matched donations, will be displayed on the leader board as the event progresses, making all our efforts public knowledge.

"We're putting our best feet forward to make sure the Reno Children's Shelter gets enough funding to last all year," Anja Olsson says, in that breathy, sweet voice of hers. There's something ethereal about

her beyond the blond hair, green eyes, and perfect porcelain skin. She's kind and so very open-minded—especially with me when I go on about things I'm passionate about. She just gets me. I like her so much; I want to be her someday.

“Ah, yes, the children. Of course.” Jackson practically rolls his eyes as he turns away, directing his gaze to the lodge. He's never been as enthusiastic as his parents about these events.

“Well, you two be careful,” Mr. Caldera says, touching his ex-wife's elbow, prompting her to get going now that they've got their skis on.

Anja Olsson smiles at him before she turns to look at us again.

“But not too careful. Life's too short. Be joyful and grateful for these youthful life events. Enjoy each other. Have fun. Celebrate your love,” she says. Then she winks and waves her mittened fingertips at us. Smiling radiantly, she secures her goggles on her face and takes off, leading the way down the slope with Mr. Caldera following close behind.

“I love your mom,” I say, looking longingly up to the double black marker at the summit a few feet up ahead, because that's where I really want to go.

“Everybody does,” Jackson says, smiling smugly. “She's the best.”

“Look at them, like synchronized swimmers,” I say, as we watch them swish and swoosh elegantly down the slope. “It's hard to believe they're not married anymore. I guess some couples get along better as friends.”

“Works for me,” Jackson admits. “I have two houses I can crash, one here, one abroad. Best of both worlds. Amenities everywhere I go.”

I shake my head, because only Jackson would find ways of making the best of his parents' divorce. I think I was more shaken up

than he was by their breakup. Anja was the closest thing I had to a mother before she left Reno five years ago.

“Shall we?” I ask, giving him my most winsome smile, the one that makes him melt because he knows how happy I’ll be if he just takes a leap of faith with me.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jackson says.

“But that’s how you get the most bang for your buck,” I say, disappointed, because I don’t want to do this for me. I’m thinking of the Rural Nevada Ecological Society, the young women’s coalition from Carrizo I’m representing today.

“Depending on my maneuvers, I could double, maybe even triple, my score. The higher my number, the higher the proceeds, and those young women could really use the money.”

“Maneuvers? You mean stunts, don’t you? Nope. Too dangerous,” Jackson says, following me up the incline despite his protestations.

“Come on. Not even for your team?” I ask because he’s chosen to donate his “winnings” to our school’s football team. Not necessarily without a conflict of interest, but still allowable by the city board council in charge of the fundraiser.

“Blanca, please,” he begs when he figures I’m not going to back down. “How many of these políticos do you honestly think are going to risk their hides to raise money today?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I say. “This isn’t about them.”

“Zero,” Jackson says, huffing and scoffing the whole way up. “Nil. Not one. I’m not risking my neck for a few measly bucks. I’d rather write a check.”

I know he’s right, but I can’t help but feel disappointed that he won’t join me—on the slopes or in my passion for the causes I believe in.

“Now you’re starting to sound like my padrino,” I say, poking at

the snow on the ground by the double black marker with my right pole, trying to disguise my frustration.

“Don Rafael has it right,” Jackson says. “He’s not wasting his energy out here. You said it yourself. He doesn’t have to get into a pair of skis to make this worth his time. While the rest of us chumps are freezing our butts out here, he’s fireside, making big business deals from a cozy chair in the corporate lounge.”

“How do you know where he is?” I ask, a little annoyed that Jackson thinks this is not worth my time.

“Because he told me where to find him when I was done playing nice,” Jackson says, pushing his blondish hair aside. Then, because I must look betrayed, he puts his hand on his chest and defends himself. “His words, not mine.”

I’m upset, but I can’t—I won’t—let my indignation ruin this for me. I have a job to do. So, instead of getting mad, I challenge him. “What? You scared of a little slip and slide?”

“That’s not little,” he says, looking down the steep incline. “That’s downright dangerous, but it’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” I ask, sliding the toe of my boot into my ski and pressing down to lock it in.

Jackson huffs, irritated. “Come on, Blanca. You know I can’t risk breaking an arm or a leg, or worse, losing an eye like that guy did last year. My future is tied to my looks, and . . .”

“Wait. What?” I ask, horrified, because this is not something I’m used to hearing from him. He might be a bit self-absorbed at times, but he’s never been vain. At least, I never picked up on it before. “What do you mean your future is tied to your appearance?”

“I’m just saying, I need to be careful.” Jackson looks a bit sheepish as he slips his feet into his skis. “I mean, I don’t want to lose out on a career in the NFL, and everything that comes with it. You ever

see an ugly dude become a sports broadcaster, much less one with only one eye?”

“Well, no, but I haven’t been focused on them either,” I say, allowing my disappointment to show in my tone of voice, letting it linger in the unspoken words between us.

Honestly, I wish he wasn’t so . . . shallow. I mean, the NFL, sponsorship, celebrity status, I get all that, but a good-looking, physically intact sports broadcaster? Really? I wish he wanted to be more, do more with his life, like helping others who are not as privileged as we are. But he has zero interest in making a difference. That frustrates me, because even though I’m still working on what it means to be me, I know I want to be of service. I wish Jackson and I were on the same wavelength.

Below us, I can see the tiny forms of Jackson’s parents skiing down the snowy slope, following each other like two slick seals in action, perfectly in tune with each other in joyful bliss.

“Look at them,” I say. “They’re so . . .”

“Nuts,” Jackson says, laughing as he leans over to plant a wet kiss on my cheek.

Pretending to push my hair out of my face, I wipe the remnants of that kiss away. It feels cold and damp on my skin.

“I was going to say in tune,” I tell him, perturbed by his mittened hand lingering on the small of my back. I want to be nice, to laugh at his little joke, because I know that’s how he deals with stress. But I can’t.

The truth is, I don’t find him funny anymore. Most of the time, I’m annoyed by his immaturity, especially his disinterest in issues of social justice. It all points to an aversion to growing up, and I just don’t know if I want to stick around, waiting for him to grow up.

I know that’s what our parents expect from us. That we’ll end up

together. Our families joined emotionally and financially. It makes sense to them since our businesses seem to work so well in tandem. But I'm not sure that's going to happen. Not if Jackson doesn't shape up. Soon. Before I lose my patience and dump him altogether.

Jackson nuzzles my cheek. "Hey, why don't we ditch the skis and go find a nice, quiet spot with a fireplace where we can snuggle up together?"

"Stop it. That's not what I came here to do," I tell him, pushing him away from me.

"Sheesh," he says, stepping back and fussing with his hair again. "Talk about snow and ice and everything not so nice. What's with you these days?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You've been cold and distant for months now, and not just to me. That's why everyone started calling you the Ice Princess at school. Ever since you came back from Mexico City, you're different. Moody and introverted. Not fun, like you used to be."

Jackson looks wounded. Despite all my reservations about him, his words move me. I don't want to hurt him. He's the only boy I've ever cared for. The only boy I ever wanted to be with. That's the problem, though. He's still acting like a boy, but I'm growing.

Inside, I can feel myself evolving.

Peering down at the difficult piste below, I remember vividly the day it all started—when things changed for me. I was in Mexico City with my padrino at the end of May. But, as usual, he was too busy to spend time with me, so I hired a guide and went hiking at Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl National Park, walking around the park with Tina, who'd never been out of the country her entire life. I took her along because, honestly, her parents could never afford to send her on a trip like that.



The guides, Eli and Norma, a husband-and-wife team with their own tour bus, picked us up at the hotel and gave us the experience of a lifetime.

Tina had a blast, but while she was oohing and aaahing and taking pictures of absolutely every single thing, I stood at the foot of that beautiful, snowy mountain range, Iztaccihuatl, and had a moment. As Norma and Eli recounted the story of Iztac and Popoca, I felt a deep connection to the mountain they call the Sleeping Woman.

“For those of you who don’t know the story,” Norma said, pointing at the mountain range across the way. “Popoca was a captain in the emperor’s army, in love with his daughter, Lady Iztac. She loved him too. So, when word came that he had died in battle, she was devastated.”

“I would be too,” Tina said, hoisting her backpack higher up on her shoulder.

“To make things worse,” Eli said, “the emperor gave her hand in marriage to Tzinacan, who coveted the kingdom and saw her only as a prize. What she didn’t know was that Tzinacan had secretly conspired to have Popoca sent to his death.”

Norma pressed on. “So, aggrieved, Lady Iztac chose to hang herself.”

“That’s . . . horrible,” I said, shuddering, because I was suddenly ice cold.

“Then Popoca, who was very much alive, arrived to find her lying dead. He picked her up and walked with her into the highlands, where he begged—no, demanded—that the gods bring her back.”

“But instead, they turned them both into volcanoes, one dormant, one active . . .,” I whispered, putting it together, the story with the images I’d seen printed on calendars, circulars, and many other items over my lifetime.

It occurred to me then that the fate of those star-crossed lovers was reminiscent of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, yet much more poignant, much more tragic. At the thought of Iztac losing Popoca to the hands of war because of a jealous lover, my heart constricted in my chest and I began to wonder . . . *What good is love if it can't be protected, cherished, allowed to blossom? Why are we here if not to love each other? Why were we created, given breath and life, if not to help each other grow, prosper, and live rich and meaningful lives?*

Two days later, Popocatepetl started rumbling and actually erupted while we were still nearby, spewing smoke, volcanic ash, and fiery rocks for weeks. That was when it happened, when I began to feel the need for understanding, the need for personal growth, the desire to find what my teachers and every book I've ever read referred to as a calling or life's purpose. But Jackson doesn't think any of it is important—not my research papers on environmental issues and water preservation, not my work with the women's coalition, and certainly not this fundraising ski run.

"Blanca, babe, what's going on? Are you mad now?" Jackson asks, and his voice is back to being sweet. "Come on, babe. Talk to me. Can we at least hug it out?"

"I told you, I'm not here for that," I say.

"Then why are you here?" he asks. "With me?"

Tired of the conversation, I pull my goggles over my face, making sure they're tight around my temples and secure against the bridge of my nose before I bend my knees.

"Honestly?" I ask, right before I push off. "I'm here to show these girls how to be fearless!"

## CHAPTER

# 3

During the flight to Reno, I try to learn more about myself. Teresa refuses to answer most questions, handing me a black rectangle and remarking cryptically, “Google is your friend.” The device is a small but powerful computer, equipped with a search engine that can call up anything from in-depth articles to ridiculous speculation by random people who seem to invent half of what they claim to impress their allies and anger their opponents.

The easiest thing to learn about is Grupo Tolchan, my father’s business. A century after its founding, it’s the sixth-largest conglomerate *in the world*, with a *one-trillion-dollar* market capitalization. Even though I don’t recognize the rival companies, I intuit that these figures indicate the total value of all Tolchan’s shares.

Okay, so I’m crazy rich.

But what am I *like*, as a person?

I find a few pieces that discuss me, but vaguely, as if the journalist was afraid or had been paid to be superficial. A few minutes of my activities, total, have been filmed over the years. I watch these “video clips” and can tell that they feature my doppelganger, the eerie double-not-twin in those photos in the house I never lived in.

“Great,” I say out loud. “Nothing new. Gregorio Chan is a smart

but pampered rich kid who has spent the last nine years living and studying at a Swiss institute nicknamed the ‘school of kings.’ He has been seen in Paris in recent years with two different girls: a model and the daughter of a prime minister. He loves fast, fancy cars and skiing, among other dangerous pastimes. But none of that tells me *who I actually am*, Teresa.”

Still wearing her maid’s uniform, the middle-aged woman looks away from the desert landscape below and regards me with a wistful grin.

“Just be who you are. Trust your gut. Gregorio Chan is whoever you know yourself to be, not what others have observed. Put the tablet down and *look*, Goyo. We’re approaching Reno.”

As the private jet banks starboard, I peer out the window. The city is cradled at the foot of the Sierra Nevada, the very edge of the arid Great Basin.

“Just like the Mezquital Valley,” Teresa mutters, “and the sprawling urb we once loved. Dry. Dangerous. But beautiful beyond compare.”

Her words slice through my mind, and I recoil from the view, grabbing at my temples. “Stop!” I beg, glad as the pain fades that she’s chosen to tell me nothing. I can only hope that remembering on my own won’t be as agonizing.

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When we land, a gray-haired man in chauffeur livery is waiting at the bottom of the ladder beside a black vehicle, a Rolls-Royce Phantom. I’m filled with relief and happiness, though I’m not sure if it’s because of the car or the driver, who looks to be about the same age as my father.

“Andrés Stilson Mier,” I call out as I descend, the name jumping to my tongue before I can think.

I know him. I . . . *care* about him.

“Greetings, Master Gregorio.” He opens the door, giving a curt bow to my companion. “Doña Teresa. Panolhtihtzinoh.”

The Nahuatl greeting is archaic, I realize, and very formal.

“Howdy right back at you, Stilson,” she says, her voice as playful as ever. “You look old.”

He waits to reply until we’ve climbed into the back seat and he is sitting behind the wheel. Pulling on leather gloves, he turns his steel gray eyes—the same color as his thinning hair—upon us in the rear-view mirror.

“Quematzin, Nonantziné,” he drawls. *Yes, ma’am, beloved Mother.* A strange way to address a maid. “I was set to retire this year. My replacement was waiting, a great-nephew who just turned eighteen. Now, you and Master Gregorio have dragged me north to this gods-forsaken country.”

Teresa raises an eyebrow. “Your teenaged great-nephew is of no use to us. Your experience, knowledge, and skills *are*. We appreciate your staying on a few more months. Goyo’s memory will come back soon, and he will find the girl who was lost. Then *all of you* will leave your lonely, laborious pasts behind.”

Nodding, he starts the car. “Yes, ma’am. So have I been taught since childhood.”

The drive to St. James Village lasts nearly thirty minutes, so I fiddle with my smartphone, which is similar to Teresa’s tablet. Once I grasp the basics, the rest is simple. Though I don’t know *who* I am, I think I’m the sort of kid who picks up new knowledge fast. At no point during the day have I hesitated. My mind just pushes me forward, confident that I can handle whatever comes.

As we approach the gatehouse, the guard recognizes the Phantom and waves us in, eyes lowered. The road winds through a sparse

pine forest, past several large homes, before splitting into a drive that leads to a large estate.

“As your father instructed,” Stilson says, “I brokered the purchase of four acres on the shore of Joy Lake. Quite a display of wealth, meant to establish you immediately as the . . . top dog, shall we say?”

Beyond the ornate shrubbery and stone walls sprawls an almost palatial mansion, glittering glass and stark concrete accented by rough timber and red brick.

Before Stilson can open our doors, Teresa jumps out of the Phantom, pointing at the hedge lining the mansion walls.

“Stilson can give you the grand tour in a moment, but first, take a look at these rosebushes!”

I let her pull me along the right wing of the mansion. She points out the varieties of fragrant flowers and explains what she has done to make them blossom bigger and brighter.

“The key was blending the compost the gardener uses with a manure-based fertilizer. Then I dribbled a little refined human sin into that mix and voila! Roses that could win me awards.”

I feel a twitch in my mind at the phrase *refined human sin*, but no pain. I’m about to ask her to explain when a car approaches along the drive. We turn to watch a black sedan park behind the Phantom.

“Oh!” Teresa exclaims. “I need to go inside before things get complicated.”

“Pardon me?” I ask, but she’s already scampered off.

Two women get out of the sedan, both wearing badges around their necks with their photos, names, and titles displayed.

The older of the two is a redheaded woman, in her early forties, judging by the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and lips. I flick my gaze to the other’s face and do a startled double take.

What?

She could be Teresa's younger clone. Same broad nose and black eyes set wide in clay-brown skin. Same black hair, only long, in a ponytail, and without any streaks of gray. She appears to be fifteen years younger than Teresa, but otherwise identical.

The older woman speaks.

"Perdón, ¿habla inglés? I'm looking for the owners of this home."

Ah. She thinks I'm one of the servants because of my dark complexion, despite my expensive clothes. I'd laugh at her knee-jerk bigotry if it weren't so annoying.

Out of her line of sight, her junior rolls her eyes.

*White people*, she mouths at me.

"I'm their son," I reply. "Gregorio Chan. How can I help you, ma'am?"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She lifts her ID. "I'm District Attorney Christina Flowers. This is Daniela Tercero, one of my lead investigators. Are your parents home?"

"Actually, no. They're back in Mexico. I just turned eighteen, so I'll be living here alone for a while. Tomorrow I plan on enrolling at the local high school. My father thinks it's important for me to finish my studies in your country."

Flowers pulls out a smartphone, using its stylus to jot down some notes.

"Is there anything wrong?" I ask.

"Not exactly," she says, lowering her phone. "It's just that your parents paid the full market price for this enormous house from Montes Realty. Fifteen million dollars."

I nod. "My father is one of the wealthiest men in Mexico. He can afford it, trust me. I'm sure everything was completely legal."

There's laughter in her green eyes as she waves away my

indignation. “I’m less concerned about the buyer than the seller. Montes Realty. Could you pass my information on to your parents? I’d be very interested in chatting with your father about his interactions with Rafael Montes.”

She extends her business card to me. Behind her, Daniela Tercero mouths, *Criminal activity*, for my benefit.

“You bet, Ms. Flowers,” I say as I take the card. “Have a nice day.” I stand by the roses a while longer, watching them drive off.

“Stilson?” I say.

“Yes, Master Gregorio?”

“How are there two of them? Teresa *Segundo*. Daniela *Tercero*. Are they . . . like . . . clones or something?”

Stilson has taken off his bowler, and his gnarled fingers twitch at the brim as he turns it round in his hands. “Ah. I’m worried, sir. I’ve been instructed not to explain . . . certain elements of your life to you, for fear of negative consequences.”

I look back at the mansion. Teresa has left the front door wide open.

A thought comes bubbling to the surface of my mind.

“There’s more of them, aren’t there? Of her?”

He swallows heavily and seems to consider his options. “Yes, sir. Four. You will encounter all of them soon. They have invested a lot to reunite you and the girl who was lost. It is no surprise they want to be closely involved.”

It’s the third time one of these old people has spoken of the girl that they want me to find.

I may not remember her, but something stirs inside with her every mention.



Stilson gives me the tour. The mansion is spacious, but I'm not overwhelmed, as if I'm used to even bigger residences. There are eight bedrooms, nine baths, a ballroom with a bar, an Olympic pool and fully equipped gym, a small movie theater. If I ever need to entertain guests or distract visitors, all bases seem covered.

My stomach growls, so we sit down with Teresa to eat an extravagant meal made with fresh ingredients native to Mexico and seasoned with spices that something tells me are rarely found in modern kitchens.

As Teresa serves us, I look at Stilson.

"Tomorrow's my first day at school. Will you be driving me?"

"I thought you might take one of the cars I've acquired, sir. I have saved our trip to the garage for after dinner. I think you'll be pleased."

Nodding, I dig in, grunting appreciatively at the delicious food.

"So tell me, Goyo," Teresa says, watching me eat my fill, "how is your memory?"

I take a sip of water and respond. "When I try to remember, there's just a haze. You and my parents have sent me here to find this *girl who was lost*, but I don't see how."

Teresa puts her hand on mine. "You don't need your memories. Just trust your heart."

"But don't you have a photo of her? Can't you describe her to me?"

"I'm sorry," she tells me. "As impossible as it sounds, we don't know who she is. Just that she's here. Attending the high school."

I take a few more bites. But my mind keeps coming back to the mysterious girl. A rising feeling in the pit of my gut—*anxiety or yearning*—tells me I need to know more. I remember the rosebushes and Daniela Tercero.

"Look, Teresa, it's clear that you and . . . the others . . . have been in town for a while, watching. Don't you have *any* ideas?"

“Sure,” she replies. “We’ve narrowed it down to two possibilities. So stick close. She will be revealed eventually. You’ll have . . . more allies like me helping you there at the school. It shouldn’t take too long to make a positive identification.”

It’s all so vague and mysterious. I groan and push my plate away in frustration.

“Who is this girl, anyway? And who lost her?”

Stilson turns away, lifting a napkin to his face. Teresa just stares at me for a while, silent, a look of sadness and sympathy replacing her usual coy, sarcastic grin.

Then I understand, and sadness surges from some dark crevice of my heart, pricking at my eyes.

“It was me,” I croak, overwhelmed. Tears I can’t explain run down my face. “I’m the one who lost her, aren’t I?”