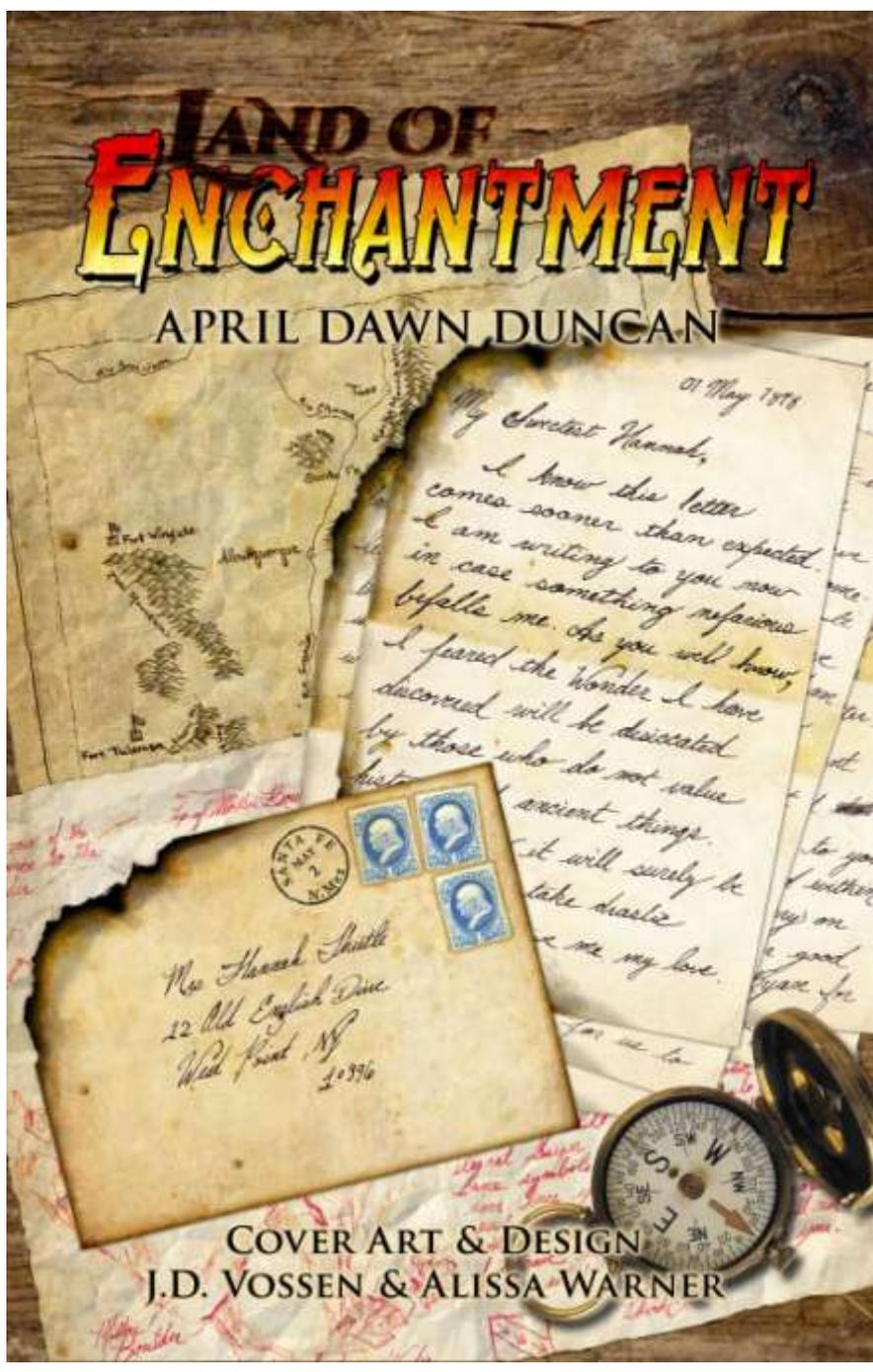


LAND OF ENCHANTMENT

APRIL DAWN DUNCAN



COVER ART & DESIGN
J.D. VOSSEN & ALISSA WARNER

LAND OF ENCHANTMENT

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Land of Enchantment

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Author's Dedications

For my mom, Louise, and my brother, Storm, my best friends and most ardent supporters. Without you: this would still only be a dream. With you: I know dreams can come true.

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To my son & daughter: How do I love thee, let me count the ways and whys! Storm: For taking over the jobs his aging father has not been able to do. For all the love he has shown his mother in many situations. For his concern over her health throughout the years. For the beautiful gifts he's made with his own hands that have always brought joy to his mother's heart. April: For all the times she made an effort to come home and be with her family. For the loving times she chose to be with her mother instead of her friends. For the times she spent dealing with her mother's health issues over the years. For the constant encouragement she shared with her mother and much more. She has been her mother's close friend all of her life.

-Louise H. Duncan

To a rock steady Gallant Knight (the way Knights should be), to a Little Dragon, to a Faerie: a proof that Dreams come true, and a promise of Adventures to come.
-Little Fox*

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Beautiful music!
-April Dawn Duncan

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By

April Dawn Duncan

Chapter 1:

Rocks and Sand

It was a well known fact that beach bunnies were not meant to be desert rats. Sure, both had a lot of experience with sand, but beach bunnies could head inland and be back in their lush, green habitat, while desert rats could never escape from their desolate, brown prison. Micay and her brother, Keme, expressed these sentiments by pressing their foreheads against their respective windows. Their parents had roused them as they entered the city limits. Micay wished they hadn't. She would have been happy to sleep through the next five years so she could wake up as an adult and live wherever she liked. Poor Keme still had seven years to go.

Micay stared forlornly out at the high desert grassland, which stretched out as far as the horizon. She took several pictures only to realize they were all the same then uploaded them to her photoblog and named them *Ennui*. It was a clever name, she thought. Thank goodness for online dictionaries, though, or she would have never figured out how to spell it.

The only thing that broke up the monotony was the tallest mountain she'd ever seen looming in the distance. She fumbled with her phone, trying to get the right angle, and snapped a picture. She had promised the few friends she still had back home and her brother's friends who were fans of hers that she would make a photoblog to keep them updated. They were going to be put to sleep if she didn't post something interesting soon. *Biggest rock in New Mexico*. She hoped that would make them laugh at least.

Suddenly the muscles tightened in her throat as she stared at the screen and thumbed her way to the text message she had received from her best friend the morning before, the morning she had left. *Have a great rest of your life*. Reading it triggered a painful memory, and Micay found herself momentarily lost in it.

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"What's wrong, Micay?" asked her less-than-popular classmate. He leaned over her with concern, his tiny frame forcing him to his tiptoes to do so.

She wasn't in the mood to deal with him, the boy who had crushed on her since his arrival the previous year. All she had done was help him find his class, and ever since, he acted like they were friends. "Just leave me alone," she said in a whisper.

He put his cold, clammy hand on her shoulder, ignoring her request. "I'm sorry you have to go. Your friends shouldn't be treating you this way. It's not your fault."

She shrugged his hand off though it felt nice to be touched by someone who cared, even if it was some nerdy kid trying to win her affections. "It doesn't matter. Please go away..."

He slid his hand from her shoulder. "I understand. I just wanted you to know that I'm here for you. I'm following your photoblog, so if you need me, you can find me there."

Micay groaned to herself. Her only photoblog fans now would be a few of her early-childhood friends and some nerds and geeks, most of which were only there because they were friends of her brother, the ubernerdgeek. Could things really get worse? She heard the boy sigh and start to shuffle away. A needle of guilt stabbed into her heart, prompting her to call after him, but she couldn't remember his name. Instead she simply muttered, "Thank you," before he got out of earshot.

His only response was a hesitation in his shuffling.

She looked out from between her arms where she cradled her head and saw him disappear inside the library doors. She supposed she should be thankful that anyone wanted to be her friend anymore.

A bump in the road jostled Micay back to the present where she did not want to be, and she folded her arms tightly around herself. It was all so unfair! Losing her closest friends, starting a new life and moving to a desert!

She and her brother had already tried to talk sense into their parents, but it was a hopeless cause. Their parents had been desert rats most of their adult lives and had an inexplicable fondness for it. They had sanely settled down by the sea for a while, but now were back to their old, nonsensical ways. When they finally decided on moving somewhere permanently for the first time, they had chosen the deserts of New Mexico! Visions of flat adobe houses with rocks instead of grass and cacti instead of trees haunted her mind. She sighed heavily, feeling as though her world was caving in around her.

Her dad, Phillippe, turned in his seat to spear them with his ice blue eyes. His light golden tan and countless freckles came from working

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countless hours in the sun and made his eyes all the more startling. In that moment, the hard-weathered lines of his face softened. "Wait till you see the Sandia Mountains up close, you two. They're really something!" His feigned enthusiasm was as transparent as glass.

Micay and her brother both grumbled in unison. Keme sank back into silence, but Micay simply could not contain herself. She swiped at her dark, razor-cut bangs and huffed, "We can already see them. They look like more rocks and sand!" She rolled her cat-like eyes, one of her favorite features, and added sarcastically, "What we've always wanted!" Her family members were experts when it came to rocks and sand. Her parents had minored in geology, and her brother wanted to be a geologist someday among various other things like volcanologist, astronaut, and physicist.

Her dad winced and shook his head. His shaggy sun-bleached hair and perpetual five o'clock shadow made him look like he'd just come home from the field. His voice came out strained when he said, "The Sandias are not just rocks and sand. I'll prove it." He looked to his wife. "Honey, take I-40 through Albuquerque then follow the signs towards Cedar Crest. Highway 66 should merge into NM 14, and then we'll take NM 536 West till we see signs for Sandia Peak. I have a treat for us all."

Micay's mom, Araceli, gave her husband a lazy salute, hazel eyes glittering from within her dark tanned face. Her full lips turned up at their corners. "Aye, aye, Cap'n." Her mahogany ringlet hair bounced in time with the bumps in the road.

"Why don't we just go live on the moon? I'm sure there'd be more trees there," piped up Keme, emboldened by his sister's outburst. Micay was usually the instigator in such matters, and where she led, her brother often followed. Of course it was only right that he should since he was younger than her by a little over two years. She smiled inwardly, proud that she inspired his backup, and watched as he stared at his reflection in the window. He tried in vain to smooth down his unruly shock of straw colored hair while his eyes, like two cobalt flames, burned back at him. Sparse freckles did little to add more color to his pale skin, which was not yet tanned because their parents smothered them in sun block at every turn.

Her dad insisted, "You'll see lots of trees once we get up to the crest, I promise."

"Right," Micay seethed, her anger at her parents churning in her stomach. She was on a roll, so why not keep it going?

Keme whined, "Why is it that all of your favorite archaeological digs are in the middle of deserts?"

Their dad put his head in his hands and heaved a sigh in defeat.

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Their mom chuckled, no longer able to hold back her teasing nature. "It saves us all that time we'd have to spend on deforestation. It's troublesome to reach the dig sites when trees are in the way, after all."

"Mom!" complained Micay, her hands clenched into fists, "It's not funny! I'm going to dry up and blow away!"

This only made her mom go into a fit of giggles. When she finally caught her breath, she said, "Don't worry, I'll make sure to catch you in a plastic baggie."

"Mom!" Micay almost shouted in frustration.

"Oh come on, Micay, you have oily skin like me. You'll be fine. Now as for your dad and brother, we might need plastic baggies for them." Her mom giggled some more.

Her brother snorted at that and grinned mockingly at Micay.

"Oh ha ha!" Micay sneered back, put on her headphones and pretended to crank up the volume on her mp3 player. She didn't want to admit it, but her mom was right. She had inherited her mom's skin, which meant she never had to use lotion and always tanned deeply even when she wore sun block.

Keme recoiled from his sister's sneer and then scowled out the window.

"Yes," said their dad while rubbing his temples, "there are lots of great archaeological digs in deserts that we love, but there are equally fantastic ones in jungles and other various terrains that we just haven't been chosen for. Your mom and I have to go where the work is; it's as simple as that."

His wife patted his shoulder then said to her children, "This job offer is a once in a lifetime opportunity we can't pass up, you know that. It's the first long-term position we've been offered! It means stability, which means some peace of mind for us as a family."

Micay pretended not to hear, and her brother didn't react either. Their parents both fell silent, too. Though they had dragged their children many times into a desert for an extended dig, it was the first time they would make one their home.

After a few minutes of quiet, her brother couldn't take it any longer, and he tried to be witty. "Hey Mom, I think I saw a scorpion!"

Their mom glanced over her shoulder at him, all traces of laughter gone. "Yeah, we'll have to be careful with those around."

Keme nearly shot out of his seat. "You're not serious, are you? I mean, dealing with them when we're camping is one thing, but are they gonna crawl on my bed at night?"

Micay barely kept from snorting with laughter.

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“Yes, it’s true that they’re sometimes found in the city, but that’s rare. They’re more scared of you than you are of them,” said their dad, frowning at their mom who stifled another giggle.

“Sure, Dad,” said Keme, slumping down into his seat, “just keep telling yourself that. Hey Mom, can we stop at the nearest sports store?”

Their mom glanced at him dubiously, one eyebrow arched. “Why?”

“I want to buy some of those rubber fly fishing boots. You know, the ones that go all the way up to your waist?” Keme quipped, looking quite satisfied with himself. However, when this only succeeded in making both of their parents laugh, he went back to scowling.

Micay watched the exchange from behind her bangs.

“At least our children are witty, even if they are misanthropic,” conceded their mom while their dad grinned in agreement.

Keme looked up at them, his brow furrowed and mouth drawn up. “What does that mean?”

Their mom gasped. “Our son doesn’t know the meaning of a word!”

Micay snickered silently, pretending to be immersed in her music. Though she loved her brother, sometimes he needed to be reminded that he in fact did not know everything.

“I’m not perfect, you know, besides, I’m not even 11 yet,” muttered Keme, crossing his thin arms and pouting out the window.

“Thank goodness! Otherwise you’d be insufferable!” exclaimed their mom, still unable to hide her amusement. “And you’ll be 11 just in time for school to start.”

Her mom’s words made Micay start dwelling on the fact that she would be 13 in two months herself. She would be starting high school not only in a new city but a new state. It just wasn’t fair! She didn’t want a birthday party, even if becoming a teenager was supposed to be a special occasion, because she wouldn’t have friends who could come to it.

Their dad reached back and ruffled Keme’s hair, which didn’t need the extra help. “Your mom is basically calling you two party poopers.”

Keme glared at his parents, his eyes a darker version of his dad’s. “How can we be party poopers when there’s no party?”

Micay pulled one headphone out of her ear and answered tartly, “That’s because it’s a funeral.”

Chapter 2:

The Watermelon Mountain

Micay and her brother admitted to each other with a silent look that the mountain scenery wasn't bad. Of course, they weren't going to let on to their parents that they thought as much. Tall pine trees lined each side of the road as though hosting an important procession. It was more green in those few minutes than she had seen in the past day of driving. She soaked it in and took multiple pictures. These she uploaded and called, *Echoes of the past*. Thankfully her phone had autocorrect and switched the letters around to where they belonged as she finished swiping at the touch screen keyboard.

Though she was terrible at writing, she loved to share her adventures. This forced her to seek other ways to express herself. She had tried sketching, and although she was talented at it, it took so long that she couldn't capture the moment quickly enough. Yeah, she was impatient. It was her adventurer spirit's fault. Her impatience had made her turn to photography instead, which captured a moment instantly in every detail. For her twelfth birthday, her parents had upgraded her basic phone to a smart phone with an eight mega-pixel camera on it. It was truly the best birthday present yet. She was hoping they'd get her a semi-pro camera for her next birthday both because it was supposed to be special and because they owed her big time for moving.

As they drove around the last curve and up Sandia Peak's final incline, they were greeted by massive radio antennae stretching into the sky and finally a paved parking lot. Micay surprised herself when she jumped out of the Land Rover almost before it had stopped moving, sprinted over to the nearest tree, a pine sapling, and hugged it. It enveloped her in its scent, and she inhaled deeply. She didn't care if she got sap all over her strategically ripped t-shirt or her olive-drab cargo pants, it would be worth it. Clinging to the tree, she watched as Keme climbed slowly out of the Land Rover, clutching a book in one hand.

He laughed at her and teased, "Tree hugger!"

Micay gave him a dirty look. "Book worm!"

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“You’re just jealous because I can read and write well, and you can’t!” her brother’s pale face had flushed crimson with anger. He hated being called things like book worm or geek even though that’s exactly what he was.

He rarely said mean things to Micay, but this was one of those times when she had pushed his buttons, and he unleashed his indignant fury. His words stabbed her like a sword, but she did her best to act like they hadn’t even fazed her. “Reading and writing are boring, that’s all. I’d rather be doing something exciting than just sitting on my behind and imagining what other exciting things people are doing,” she said dryly. The truth was, it had always been a huge struggle to read or write until her parents had put her through special training to try and overcome it. Even now it gave her a headache if she had to read or write for long. If only the letters and words would hold still!

“No, you’re just too lazy to try!” Keme countered with a scowl.

“Keme Evan Torres-Bastien! What have we told you about teasing your sister about that? You apologize this instant!” demanded their mom as she exited the Land Rover.

“Sorry, Mom!” Keme shouted then turned his attention back to Micay. “Sorry...Elf!”

Micay shrugged nonchalantly. “What’s wrong with elves?” she goaded him.

“They’re haughty and vain,” her brother sniped.

“No, they’re beautiful and intelligent!” she countered.

“They’re stuck up and full of themselves!” Keme retorted. Then he added, “You should have pointed ears!”

Micay groaned. “Oh why don’t you try living in reality for once?” Secretly she thought sci-fi and fantasy games were kind of cool, though she’d never played one herself because none of her friends did. Most of them were from the more popular crowd and would have thought she was weird if she had. She didn’t need to anyway as she regularly imagined searching through jungles for lost temples or climbing mountains to find hidden ancient cities. Of course she never let her brother know that. Besides, he spent all of his time pretending about things that were impossible, while she knew that someday what she pretended could become a reality. Her parents had almost lived it, after all, and Micay intended to follow in their footsteps and beyond.

Keme smirked, and almost as if he had read Micay’s mind, said, “Hey, I’m not the one who goes chasing after imaginary treasure!”

Somehow her brother always knew just what to say to get under her skin when he wanted to. It was like he was psychic or something. She shrugged it off. “Just because I haven’t found any yet doesn’t mean it’s

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imaginary. You'll see, one day you'll be begging to come along on my next expedition!" She let go of the tree and spun on her heel to walk away from him before he could reply. When she got far enough away, she took a picture of her tree friend, uploaded it and called it *Tree hugger*. Then the towering antennae drew her eyes up towards the sky. She snapped a picture and took a quick look to see if she had captured their full dimension. If there hadn't been wispy white clouds in the background, she would have never noticed the dark form of a hang glider riding the updrafts. She looked up quickly to see if she could spot the brave soul with her own eyes, but the hang glider must have entered the clouds or passed into open blue sky.

Hang gliding was something she'd always wanted to do, but her parents told her she'd have to wait till she was eighteen. She thought that was totally lame. Despite that, she had to smile at how unexpectedly special the photo had now become. She uploaded it and put the title, *True freedom*, beneath it.

Micay finally dragged her eyes back down to earth to see where her parents were. When she realized that they were already across the parking lot and headed up the stairs to the city overlook, she sprinted after them. With a shout of dismay, her brother pulled his nose out of his book and scrambled after her. The long staircase had them both huffing and puffing by the top. Being at close to 11,000 feet above sea level was getting to them. As usual, Micay won the race. When they finally caught up, they found their parents looking out at the valley floor below.

During the road trip, her brother's rattling off of facts—about New Mexico in general and Albuquerque specifically—had been annoying, but now Micay found the information coming back to her as she examined the grand vista before her. The spread of the two sibling cities, Albuquerque the elder, and Rio Rancho the younger, impressed her with its generous breadth. Though both combined held less than a million people, they stretched across the entire valley floor like the roots of a mighty tree. It meant that most people who owned a house probably owned a generous portion of land to go with it.

Even more spectacular was the framework of nature that surrounded them. Jagged young mountains acted as their backdrop while sandstone cliffs—rumored to be decorated with petroglyphs—and five volcanoes marked their edge. The Rio Grande, which from their view point looked like just a dark line of cottonwood trees, literally divided them. She leveled her phone with one hand and took a picture to remind her that from the right view, Albuquerque could actually be beautiful. Too bad it wouldn't stay that way once they came down from the mountain peak. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath; the wilderness air carried

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the spicy scent of high-desert plants. She opened her eyes to absorb more of the vista while she could.

Her dad wrapped an arm around her mom's shoulders. "Isn't it stunning?"

Her mom nodded silently, engrossed in the view.

"Yeah, if you like rocks and sand. Can't we live on the other side of the mountain? At least it has trees," Micay complained, even though she was still secretly admiring the sight below her. She turned away from him to upload the picture, *Perspective*.

A pained look crossed her dad's face, and he started to protest, but her mom grabbed his hand and distracted him by posing a question to the group.

"What do you think those are out there?" Micay's mom pointed to the three larger volcanoes on the horizon.

"We passed by them on the way in, but you two were asleep," muttered her dad.

"Man!" complained Keme, looking up sharply from his book. "I can't believe I missed seeing them!" Then he immediately went back to reading and flipping through his book.

Micay tapped her chin with a finger. "Hmm, let me see." She rolled her eyes. She was good at that. "They're rocks?" She knew she was pushing it, but she had made up her mind that she would hate it here because it wasn't home, and her parents didn't care one little bit how they felt about moving yet again.

Before their mom could muster a rebuke, Keme glanced up from his book again.

"Wrong as usual. Those are five cinder cone volcanoes that erupted a little over 100,000 years ago. Native New Mexicans refer to them as the *Tres Hermanas*." He smiled smugly at Micay then went back to his book.

Her mom nodded to him with a warning glance, not entirely surprised by his response. "Thank you for the clarification."

Micay made an exasperated sound in her throat. "You are such a show off! And if you know so much, why would they call them the Three Sisters when there are five of them?" She immediately regretted asking because he had always been obsessed with volcanoes.

Keme didn't even look up from his book. "No, I just pay attention in class, and I read the textbooks. Now to answer your question, because those three," he pointed out to the horizon, "are the largest of the five."

Her mom had to hold Micay back from smacking her brother. She would have paid more attention in class if the way things were taught were more engaging, but it always came down to reading. Movies and photos made much more sense to her.

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“Enough you two! Why don’t you go and have a look in the gift shop?” pleaded her mom.

Keme peeked over his book as though making sure he had heard correctly then calmly put his book in his olive-drab rucksack, which he took with him everywhere. It was a gift from his French-Canadian grandparents who knew the kinds of traveling Micay and her family did. They had given Micay an identical one in black. She had added her own personal touch to it with patches and pins, of course.

The moment Keme secured the second latch, he took off running without warning.

Micay shouted after him, “Hey! No fair!” She glared in her parents’ direction then stalked off after him. Before she got far, she overheard her dad ask, “Why the gift shop?” and her mom respond, “You’ll see.”

Micay eyed an older girl who was looking at postcards. She wore a t-shirt with a college logo on it. Micay’s hands fidgeted with various trinket treasures in the basket in front of her as she watched the college student with admiration. Someday she would be in college, and she would be studying to be an archaeologist. That is if she could figure out a way through all the reading. With a longsuffering sigh, she moved on to a display of different types of minerals. She imagined what emeralds and rubies inside a treasure chest would look like instead of fool’s gold and turquoise sitting in wooden buckets. She took note of her brother’s location and snorted. Books always caught his attention before anything else. Of course, he could say the same of her and shiny things. He looked like he had found heaven as he scanned the shelves. She had to admit that for a gift shop, the Sandia Crest House was pretty cool.

She browsed through the jewelry and watched as it took him several minutes to decide between the two comprehensive maps he’d found. He already had a book on New Mexico tucked under his arm. She shook her head. He was hopeless. Her fingers found some obsidian earrings. They were as shiny and dark as her hair and would be a perfect match for her punk style. They’d even go with her funny looking toe shoes, which were black, of course. She always wore combat boots for casual things like hanging out or going to school, but for anything active, toe shoes were the best.

The bell over the door jingled, and she looked up to see her parents walking in. Her dad strolled over to Keme who was standing at the register, while her mom moved over to where she was.

“Time to go,” her mom said gently. “I’ll get those for you if you like,” she offered as if she were waving a white flag.

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Micay ignored her mom's peace offering and looked down at the polished stones in front of her. They were the ideal opportunity to get in another jab even if it meant she wouldn't get the earrings. "Fine. I was running out of rocks to look at."

Her mom just sighed and started heading for the exit.

Micay felt a twinge of guilt, shrugged it off, and shuffled behind her. She paused at the checkout counter, not wanting to be alone with her mom outside.

Her dad was smiling at his son and asked, "Whatcha gettin'?"

Keme looked up at their dad like he was an idiot. Micay figured it was because Keme always got the same things on road trips, but as usual their dad hadn't caught on yet. "A book and a map, as always," he replied.

"On what?" their dad asked, ignoring the sarcasm.

"New Mexico, of course." Keme's voice tightened with irritation.

Their dad looked sheepish and covered it up with enthusiasm. "That's great!"

Keme shook his head and sighed. "If I'm going to have to live here, I might as well see if there's anything redeeming about this place. Besides, if we let you and Mom plan the summer trip, we'll be looking at rocks on the ground and more rocks in the sky."

Micay had to swallow a snicker. It was almost as fun as watching a sitcom.

"Oh come on! You love astronomy!" Their dad didn't have to pretend to be insulted, though he did try to hide it. "And the Exploratorium was fabulous!"

Keme thanked the cashier, took his bag, and replied calmly, "True on both counts. But it's nice to look at things other than rocks, too. And of all the awesome things to do in California after that, you took us to see things like the Experimental Dome House and the Guinness World of Records Museum!" He waited to let the weight of what he was saying sink in then continued, "Why couldn't it have been the Winchester Mystery House and the Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum?"

Their dad screwed up his face. "Because, those places are...weird."

Keme gritted his teeth. "No, Dad. Those places are cool."

Micay couldn't have explained it better herself, so she remained silent.

"Look," their dad put his hands up in surrender, "we can talk about this later. There's something your mom wants you to see, and I still have a surprise for us," he said then turned and walked outside.

Keme gave Micay a resigned look, bit his lip, and followed after their dad. Micay shrugged at him helplessly then fell in behind them.

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Micay and her family leaned against the railing and looked out at the setting sun as they waited to board the world's longest tram. She had to agree it was a sweet surprise. It had only been a short hike from the gift shop, and in that time, she became excited to float hundreds of feet above the mountain into the sunset. The deep reds and oranges glittered like gems against the rippled clouds and were slowly fading into softer pinks. She couldn't stop herself from staring at it. Finally, without looking away, she fumbled with her phone and started taking pictures.

"Now tell me that isn't the most breathtaking sunset you've ever seen," her dad said in a hushed voice.

"It really is. It looks like the sky is on fire," agreed his wife quietly.

Keme looked back and forth from his book to the sunset, one hand absent-mindedly trying to smooth down his unruly hair.

Micay was trying not to cry. As stunning as it was, she'd take a golden Californian sunset anytime. They made her feel like she was home.

Her dad appeared lost in thought, the sunset mirrored in his pale blue eyes. "They say if you're down there looking up at the mountain during a sunset that it reflects a deep pink. That's where the Sandias get their name."

"That is common belief, however there's another equally valid explanation for that," said Keme rather smugly. Micay's brother loved correcting his parents when he could. "Some believe that the name was given to the indigenous people of the valley down below by Spaniards who mistook the harvested abundant crops of squash for watermelons."

Their dad shook his shaggy head and turned away without another word.

Keme watched him, swallowing hard, then looked sheepishly down at his book.

"Watermelon is a stupid name for a mountain," muttered Micay, fighting tears and wondering why they hadn't named it something better. As she pondered that, she uploaded her photos.

"Oh? What would you have named it then?" asked her mom sharply, most likely angry that her children were being difficult.

"I don't know. El Fuego since it looks like it's on fire or something?" Micay shot back as she labeled the photos, *Desert sunset*.

"I just read that the reason sunsets are extremely colorful in deserts is because there is a higher occurrence of cirrus clouds," Keme offered shyly.

Micay's mom glared at her until she had to look away. Micay blinked back a few tears and said softly. "If we lived up here, I could appreciate the only beauty the desert has to offer twice a day. And I could hug those trees every morning."

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Her mom took in deep breath then put one arm around Micay and replied, "I wish we could live up here, my dearheart, but they don't even allow camping." Her mom squeezed Micay once and added, "I promise that's not the only beauty you'll find here."

Micay heaved a deep sigh, shrugged her mom's arm off, and turned as though she were interested in her brother's book. In reality, she was just trying to hide the tears that kept threatening to pour down her face.

Keme gave her a sidelong look then went back to reading.

An announcement sounded over the speakers informing them to be ready to board shortly. They could see the tram car making its way up the cable towards them.

Her dad looked over the edge at the cliffs below, his jaw muscles working furiously.

Micay knew she and her brother were upsetting him, but their parents had upset their entire life. Those were the thoughts with which she justified her behavior and consoled herself.

Her mom stepped beside her husband, lifted his chin, and kissed him soundly on the lips. "Don't worry. They'll come around. We'll find some neat places to take them to for our summer trip."

Why did parents always say things they wanted their kids to hear while pretending like they weren't around when they were and could totally hear everything they were saying? Micay never understood the purpose, and it just ticked her off when they did it.

Her dad started laughing to his wife's surprise. "I think they're planning the family summer trip this time."

Her mom put a hand on one hip. "Come again?"

He nodded, rubbing at his 5 o'clock shadow. "Yeah, apparently they think the places we pick are boring."

Micay rolled her eyes then noticed her mom was almost a mirror of herself. It annoyed her when she caught herself looking like her mom, because her mom could cop some serious attitude when she wanted.

Her mom answered, "Well, we'll see what they pick first. We are their parents after all. We do retain the right to veto."

He laughed more heartily then. "We'll look up some places just in case as back-up."

She kissed him again, making a face when his whiskers tickled her. "Sounds like a plan."

The two of them walked hand in hand toward the tram doors and stepped inside off to one corner.

Micay wiped at a few stray tears, hunched her shoulders and followed her parents inside. She shouldered past them and got as far away from them as she could then pressed her forehead to the window. The scenery

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below her looked surreal, like she was in a dream. She wished her friends could be with her to share the awesomeness of the moment, but they weren't because she wasn't home. Every thought of home brought fresh tears. The friends she had counted as close had taken her most of middle school to make, and now they weren't even talking to her. The friends she had left promised to write and call, but it just wouldn't be the same. Over the past two days of travel, she had received several texts but just didn't have the heart to answer them. She hoped they would understand and give her some time. For now, the photoblog would have to do.

Only weeks before she had just put the finishing touches on her room, now she had to start all over again. No more lazy weekends on the beach or camping in the Redwood Forest or slumber parties with her friends where they would tell ghost stories and scare each other silly. Her stomach clenched as she stifled a sob. Keme shuffled up next to her and put his arm around her waist. She gave him a weak smile and put an arm around his shoulders. Though her brother irritated her on a regular basis, when it came down to it, he had her back. They were in this together, and they only had each other for comfort.

Soon all miseries were temporarily forgotten when the tram began to move, and for a quarter of an hour Micay felt what it might be like to be an eagle. The pictures she took could never convey the experience, but they would have to do. She proudly called them *Eagleview*.

Chapter 3:

Old Lady Thistle

It was a small mercy for Micay to find out that her family was going to live on a street lined with opulent trees and an abundance of vegetation. Even a water-hungry willow tree inhabited one yard; she could just make out its silhouette. As they drove, she saw by streetlight and porch light that the houses were a mix of styles instead of being adobe after adobe. When her parents pointed out their new home down near the cul-de-sac, she let out a sigh of relief. Their new house looked like a fusion between pueblo style and a bungalow with its white stucco walls and medium pitched roof and dark eaves. Their front yard boasted a well-tended lawn with a few large shade trees around the edges. Micay snapped a photo and looked at her brother for explanation. “How is this possible in a desert?”

Keme shrugged, his hair sticking up in weird directions as always. “I don’t always know everything.”

“You’re right. You just always act like you do.” Micay stuck her tongue out at him while her fingers worked at her phone. This one she would call, *Not home*. She’d take a better one in the daylight, but she wanted to remember this moment in all its bitterness and frustration.

“Enough, you two!” said their dad with exasperation edging his voice. His face reminded Micay of a strawberry, which made his freckles all the more evident.

“Yeah, we’re getting fed up with the *woe is me* routine. Now knock it off,” warned their mom, her eyes narrowed at them.

“It’s not like we didn’t take your feelings into consideration, you know. We chose to live in the North Valley near the Rio Grande and irrigation ditches so you could be surrounded by trees and grass,” explained her dad with an air of triumph, his face beginning to return to its normal color.

Her mom’s eyes relaxed as she added, “Think of it as your oasis in the desert.”

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Micay remained silent, letting the concept sink in and deciding not to push her parents past their limits. Her brother wisely followed in kind.

As they turned around in the cul-de-sac where their house awaited them, they were greeted with a strange sight. An old lady chatted with one of the movers under the street light, while the other mover carried in Micay's junior scuba gear. The old lady had brought out some refreshments for the movers, the remnants of which lay discarded on the curb.

"Who is that old lady and what's she doing?" asked Keme curiously.

Their mom frowned at his choice of words. "Obviously she's our neighbor and apparently a nice one at that."

Keme gave his mom a dubious look, lips pursed and one eyebrow raised askew. He was famous for them.

"We should count ourselves lucky to have at least one nice neighbor," insisted their dad.

Micay felt overwhelmed with the sudden realization that she probably didn't even have other children who lived nearby on her new street. Anger and betrayal flared to life inside her. Misjudging her parents' reduced level of annoyance, she took another jab at them. "Great! We have to move away from all of our friends to this horrible place, and we can't even have kids our age next door! No, we get stuck with an old lady!"

Her mom did not appreciate Micay's sentiment one bit and responded sternly, "Micay Elin Torres-Bastien, you will not talk about elderly people like that. They have lived far longer than you and deserve respect, if only for that reason."

Her dad wasn't appreciative either and warned, "Don't forget that someday you'll be old and wishing that people wouldn't see you as just that. You'd be surprised the wealth of information and stories elderly people hold inside them."

Micay fell silent under her parents' scathing gaze and felt a little guilty about the matter, but only a little as the anger and betrayal took up most of the space. She looked down at her phone and fidgeted with it to distract herself, checking to make sure the labels on her photos didn't have red squiggly lines beneath them warning her they were misspelled. Thankfully her usually verbose brother kept quiet and didn't make things worse. She only looked up when she heard her family getting out of the vehicle.

The old lady's bright green eyes lit up when she saw Micay and her family approaching. Micay exchanged glances with her brother and tried not to stare at their odd new neighbor. Her long straight hair still held

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most of its natural dark auburn color despite encroaching grey at her temples. Her olive toned face, though lined with age, was still smooth and firm. She wore a short-sleeved white cotton shirt and a billowing white cotton skirt to match with worn cork sandals on her feet. Silver and turquoise jewelry adorned her fingers, wrists and neck. She patted the mover on the back then spryly walked over to them with her hand extended.

Micay's mom smiled at the old lady, made a motion that she'd be right back, and passed by her to have a word with the mover.

Her dad stepped forward and shook the old lady's hand. "Hi! We're your new neighbors! I'm Phillippe Torres-Bastien, and these are my children Micay and Keme, and that's my wife Araceli."

Micay waved a hand at her, not wanting to be entirely rude.

Keme just stared at her as though she were some museum display.

The old lady beamed at them, apparently oblivious to their unease. "Nice to meet you all! I'm Deirdre Thistle, and you are all welcome to call me Deirdre. That's quite a rig you have there!" she said, obviously impressed with their Land Rover.

Micay's parents had customized it to fit the demands of their jobs and outdoor lifestyle. Someday she wanted one just like it.

"Thanks, Deirdre! We did it ourselves," said Micay's dad proudly.

"We like figuring out how to do stuff for ourselves," her mom said with an extended hand as she came back from talking with the mover. "It's wonderful to meet you!"

"And you!" the old lady said as she shook the outstretched hand. Her eyes trailed down to their shoes. "Well, I can already tell that you aren't afraid to be different."

Micay groaned and looked down at her unusual shoes. She loved wearing them because they were like being barefoot without the danger of hurting your feet. She much preferred being barefoot, when she wasn't trying to look cool, at least. Concurrently, she didn't like them because everyone stared at them. They couldn't help it! She looked like a hobbit, as the form fitting toe shoes did make her feet a little bigger.

Keme wiggled his toes and blurted out, "They're the best shoes ever! I can climb trees like a monkey in these!" Then he blushed at having been outspoken with a stranger.

Micay's mom laughed. "They make hiking safer as you can grip uneven ground with them instead of teeter-tottering like you do in hiking boots."

"And they're great for rafting because they dry fast," added Micay's dad, looking down at his oversized feet.

Micay couldn't stand it anymore. She addressed her family in Spanish, thinking that the old lady wouldn't understand her and thus not be

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offended. "Come on, we sound like a stupid infomercial. I bet she doesn't even like them!" Everyone glared at her, but she didn't care. She just wanted to be home in her bedroom curled up in her bed and watching adventure shows. Of course she couldn't even do that because nothing had been set up yet.

The old lady gave Micay a thoughtful look then said, "I'll have to give those a try! I prefer to go barefoot or wear sandals, but those look splendid for physical activities." She clapped her hands together with a smile. "Well anyhow, I'm delighted to have new neighbors, and I have high hopes that you won't be spoil-sports like the last ones!"

Micay's dad stifled a chuckle when he saw his children's eyes widen. "Spoil-sports, huh? Well that's no fun! I can guarantee you we are anything but that. Isn't that right, you two?" He nudged both of them gently.

Normally Micay tried to keep witty comebacks on hand, but she didn't know how to respond to this. Keme was shy with new people, which meant they both stared back at the old lady, speechless.

The old lady clapped her hands together again and laughed, saving them from further scrutiny. "Well that's a relief to hear! Speaking of which, I'm sure you all need some relief after your long trip. Do come over for dinner in a little while? I've been cooking this wonderful green chile stew all day long, and it is just begging to be shared."

Micay shifted back and forth on her feet still not knowing what to say while Keme simply looked up to their dad for rescue.

"That's kind of you," said her dad, reaching out to muss up his son's hair, "but we just couldn't. That's far too much to ask of someone we've just become neighbors with."

Keme deftly ducked out of the way and gave his dad a glare.

Micay was glad she'd finally grown up enough that her dad didn't do that to her anymore.

"Oh nonsense," the old lady waved him off, "I believe that doing something like this for someone you've just met is the best time. First impressions are crucial after all. I wouldn't want anyone to get the idea that I'm just some old fuddy-duddy."

Micay's dad laughed while still trying to find a useful excuse. "Well, it's just..."

"We wouldn't want to put you out," finished Micay's mom as she waved to the movers, who were getting ready to leave. "But since you've offered, and we are tired, we'd love to experience some famous New Mexican green chile stew on our first night in this lovely town."

Her husband looked relieved by her interruption and put one arm around her shoulder.

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Micay looked over at her brother and saw that she felt what her brother looked like. Downright terrified.

The old lady looked thrilled. "Wonderful! How does dinner in half an hour sound?"

Micay's mom smiled warmly to their new neighbor. "That would be just enough time for us to be ready. Thank you!"

The old lady patted her arm. "It's my pleasure. See you soon, my dear." She winked at Micay and her brother, but they could still only stare.

"Come on now," their mom tickled each of her family members into action, "we only have half an hour to get our luggage inside and make ourselves presentable."

Their dad sprang into action and started retrieving their luggage out of the Land Rover.

Micay blinked as if coming out of a trance. Though the old lady was, well, old, there was also something charming, even enchanting about her.

Keme still looked stunned when he asked, "How can green chile be made into a stew? I mean, isn't it just a hot pepper?"

Micay's mom teased, "Oh, don't let the natives hear that! Green chile is treated with reverence around here. I've heard that it makes just about anything zesty and delicious, even chocolate!"

Keme raised one eyebrow and looked askew at his mom then turned to take his bags from his dad.

Micay shook her head in disbelief and reached for her own bags. It looked like it might be a long and boring night. Just what she needed. She caught up with her brother, and together they shuffled into their new house. Micay didn't know exactly how to deal with their new neighbor, and she suspected her brother didn't either. The dilemma almost distracted her from contemplating her new life sentence. Almost.

Half an hour later, Micay and her family walked up to the old lady's house in the dark. Micay couldn't make out the details of the yard. She could, however, see through Deirdre's large bay windows and discovered that the front room appeared to be filled with unusual and fascinating things. *At least that was something*, thought Micay.

The old lady welcomed them in as though they were old friends and hurried them into the dining room. There they sat around her hand-carved table. Micay tried not to drool over the mouthwatering aromas that came from the kitchen. The table was set with hand-forged silverware and hand-molded porcelain flatware that Deirdre declared she had made herself. Apparently she was an artisan of sorts as well as a wonderful cook. A steaming basket of sopapillas, a fried pastry also common to countries like Peru, beckoned to them. A pile of homemade

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flour tortillas lay next to their bowls. In the distance, Micay could hear the old lady's melodic humming. It felt oddly familiar, as if they were in Cuzco for a family visit sitting around their abuelita's table for dinner instead of sitting down to dinner with an eccentric old lady in the middle of a desert.

Keme poked at one of the sopaipillas with a finger.

"Don't do that!" Micay's mom said and playfully slapped at his hand.

Micay scrunched up her face; it bugged her when he touched food that wasn't his yet. "You're eating that one, Keme!"

Keme grinned and shrugged.

Their dad put his face in his hands, scratched at his stubble and yawned.

"Tell me, what adventures did you all have out on the open road?" asked the old lady as she entered the dining room carrying a large crock of green chile stew.

Micay's dad got up to help the old lady, but put his hands up in surrender and sat back down when she gave him a stern look.

As the old lady started serving them stew, Micay decided to answer with a wisecrack in French. "I think some rocks were following us..."

Keme snickered behind his napkin.

Her dad's jaw gaped open.

Her mom immediately pointed a finger at Micay. "Don't you dare speak to Ms. Thistle that way or in a language she might not know! You know our rule. This is the second time in one evening! I ought to..."

"It's Deirdre, thank you kindly. Now tell me what type of rocks you think were following you?" interrupted the old lady in impeccable French, her eyebrows raised with interest.

Micay's mom swallowed her words, but kept her finger pointed and her eyes narrowed at her daughter.

Micay almost choked on the sip of water she had taken. She wasn't about to give the old lady the satisfaction of knowing she'd surprised her. She switched back to English. "Geez, I was just kidding." Why did her parents have to be so touchy?

The old lady frowned thoughtfully. "That's unfortunate! I was looking forward to an exciting story. Hmm, well now that means I need to think of one." She pressed her lips together for a moment, her light green eyes looking into the distance. "Oh yes! I have one, since we're talking about being followed..."

Micay avoided looking at her mom by seeming to be interested in what the old lady was saying, which of course she wasn't because the old lady was probably going to tell them about a stray cat following her home or something.

Keme sighed and poked at the sopaipilla with his spoon.

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Micay's mom finally stopped pointing at her, but continued to scowl. Her dad looked like he wanted to hide under the table.

None of this seemed to bother the old lady who began recounting her story in fluent Spanish.

Micay felt supremely stupid and not just a little impressed. It only made sense that someone from New Mexico might speak Spanish, though that didn't explain her speaking French fluently. She wondered just how many languages the old lady knew.

"Machu Picchu has significant geometrics inherent in its design. Some archeologists, like my father and I, believed they were patterns oriented to reveal the secret locations of other sacred sites." Deirdre paused to make sure everyone was still with her.

Micay's mind tripped and took a tumble. She understood the individual words that the old lady had just spoken, but didn't have a clue what they all meant when put together. She shook her long bangs out of her eyes, blaming them for distracting her from understanding.

Her brother had perked up and now waited on the edge of his seat, eyebrows pulled together in concentration. Micay thought that he looked like a confused hedgehog with his hair sticking up every which way.

Even Micay's dad was struggling a bit to catch up, so her mom cut in and explained in simpler terms, "Instead of using street signs that anyone could recognize, like their enemies, they built their buildings, pathways and roadways as a sort of map that would innately point you towards other sites." She paused a moment while a huge smile formed on her lips. "My ancestors were brilliant!"

The old lady gasped in delight that someone understood the significance of what she was describing. "Exactly! And just how did you know that?"

"Well," Micay's mom savored the moment, "Besides most of my family being from Cuzco, Peru, Phillippe is an archaeologist, and I'm a cultural anthropologist. We've moved here to team teach at the University."

"Oh how wonderful!" the old lady beamed at them. "Two people after my own heart. It appears we'll have much to talk about indeed!"

Micay's parents both nodded, obviously relieved as much as they were thrilled.

Great, thought Micay, now they're going to bond over digging for rocks. She sank deeper into her chair.

"Now, where was I?" the old lady asked herself. "Ah yes! I decided to test our theory on one of our visits to Peru. I wanted to see if I could find one of their sacred temples. My father wanted to stay and do some more investigating in Machu Picchu itself. He wished me luck, and I set out on my own."

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Micay had intended to appear mildly bored but then felt an unintentional look of fascinated horror cross her face. Then she asked out loud without meaning to, "By yourself? How old were you? That's insane! There are all kinds of things in the jungle that could eat you!"

The old lady's eyes sparkled like emeralds as she answered. "I was nineteen. I had been raised in the jungles of Central and South America. It was home to me. And though I spent much of my teens in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia, there was little I had forgotten."

Micay's brother watched the old lady with wide eyes. He hardly moved and didn't make a sound.

Micay could barely stay seated she was so caught up in the story. She found herself speaking again without meaning to. "Did you carry a hunting rifle or something?" She gritted her teeth and silently berated herself for being interested at all, but this was the kind of story she imagined herself the hero in all the time.

"But of course! I never went anywhere without a hunting rifle and a trusty machete. But my most reliable and effective weapon of all was this..." The old lady pointed to her head. "With this, I could avoid the trouble that would require me to use other weapons."

Micay felt Keme's foot clunk against her shin as if to emphasize the old lady's point. He had always complained that Micay acted before thinking. Maybe he had a point.

Micay grunted but ignored him. She had to know how this old lady had survived. She swallowed her pride and asked, "You were walking through the jungle all by yourself?"

The old lady nodded, her silver jewelry jingling softly. "Yes. I walked for much of the day before I realized something." She took a dramatic pause.

Keme chewed on his lip anxiously.

Micay's parents shared a satisfied smile.

Micay wondered if they really thought they got away with looks like those. It didn't matter right now; she was about to burst with anticipation! She had to know. "What? Were you lost?"

"No," the old lady gave Micay a wicked smile, "I was being followed!"

Micay squeezed her eyes together for a moment, feeling foolish for not having remembered this whole story had started because of her comment about being followed. Once the feeling passed, she grabbed the edge of the table and asked. "By what?" She had to know!

"A jaguar!" the old lady whispered.

A jaguar? They were the masters of stalking silently through the jungle. Micay was starting to suspect that the old lady was embellishing

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her story. "How in the world could you know it was a jaguar?" she demanded.

The old lady leaned in close to Micay and asked, "Well, when you have that feeling of being followed and you turn around, have you ever found someone there?"

Micay held her breath. "Sometimes, yes."

"And when there wasn't, did you still feel like someone was following you?"

"Yeah." Micay let out a little breath.

The old lady smiled broadly. "Exactly. You see, the Incas believed that jaguars were creatures that bridged the gap between our world and the spirit world. When I could hear nothing and see nothing, but I still felt something...I knew."

Keme, who had been silent until then, blurted out, "What did you do?"

"Well, jaguars are incredibly patient creatures when stalking their prey." The old lady put down the large bowl of stew and began creeping around the table. "They will wait until their prey is completely unaware and blindside them from cover." She made a lunging motion at Micay who jumped in her seat and then felt disappointed in herself for being so jumpy. The old lady chuckled and stood up straight. "I made sure the jaguar knew that I knew it was there by constantly stopping to look around. I did this until I found a place I thought would be safe for the night."

Micay tried to pretend like an old lady hadn't just scared her by throwing her hands up in the air for emphasis. "Where in the jungle could possibly be safe from a jaguar?"

The old lady glowed with satisfaction at their questions. "That is an excellent question, and one I found the answer to the hard way. I looked for a steep cliff, of which there are plenty in Peru, one that would be too high for animals to jump from. I finally found one just before dusk, just before my time ran out. To get to the cliff, I had to first cross a rather swift, waist-high river. This was something I thought at the time was a lucky find, and which added a second element of protection. Also, because the river curved in to meet the base of the cliff to my right, I only had to worry about the jaguar coming from my left."

"Because cats hate water!" Micay stated quickly, trying to beat her brother to the punch. When Keme got a gleam in his eye at what she said and seemed to know something Micay didn't, she couldn't stand it, and she made a face at him.

He frowned back at her.

The old lady gave Keme a knowing look then asked Micay a question. "Have you ever tried to give a cat a bath?"

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Micay snorted. "No, but I saw my friend try once. It wasn't pretty!"

The old lady nodded, chuckling. "With that in mind, I curled up around my hunting rifle and waited for the jaguar to get bored. Though they are patient when stalking, they hate waiting for their prey to leave safely."

Keme looked like he was waiting for the right moment to say something. He wrung his hands together until his fingers turned white.

Micay ignored him and asked, "How long did it take for the jaguar to get bored?"

A thoughtful look came over the old lady's face. "That's the thing. The first couple of hours I could hear it pacing back and forth up above me. Every now and then some small rocks would fall around me. Then everything got quiet, and that's when I fell asleep."

Micay jumped up, almost knocking over her chair. "How could you fall asleep with a jaguar hunting you?"

Her dad shushed her mom who covered a giggle with one hand.

Her brother smirked.

Micay flung a glare their way then looked back at the old lady.

"By that time, I had faced far more frightening things than jaguars." The old lady shrugged. "Besides, you can only be afraid for so long before you finally get tired of it."

Micay sat back in her chair and tried to calm down. The story was ridiculous! "Then what happened? I mean obviously you survived."

Keme started to say something, but the old lady held up one finger to her lips. He looked like she'd blown the wind from his sails.

"Well," the old lady answered, "do you remember how I said there was little I had forgotten about my time in the jungle?"

Micay nodded, wishing she would hurry up and tell her.

Keme looked like he had hope again, which bugged Micay.

"Well, I had forgotten one little thing that I was reminded of when I awoke that next morning." The old lady looked to Keme. "I wonder if Keme can tell us just what that was."

Keme grinned broadly and took the stage. "I can," he said, trying to look academic by drawing himself up straight and squaring his jaw. "Cats from cold climates hate water because it could make them freeze to death. But cats from hot climates like to soak in calm waters to get cool..."

"Yes," Micay interrupted, trying desperately to show her brother up for once in her life. "But she said the river was moving fast!"

Keme looked to the old lady who silently encouraged him to continue, and continue he did. "True, cats hate getting water in their eyes and ears, which is why house cats hate baths. However, there is one cat that loves everything about water."

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Micay sucked in a breath, no longer caring about her brother always knowing everything. "The jaguar?"

"That's right!" replied Keme, a little confused at his sister's lack of sarcasm.

A meaningful look passed between the old lady and their parents. Again Micay wondered if adults just thought kids were deaf and too oblivious to notice their secret looks? They were constantly talking quietly but just within earshot or giving each other looks when their kids could obviously see them. It made no sense, so she just continued to ignore them and waited to hear what happened next.

"Yes! The next morning, when I got up to continue my journey, I discovered jaguar paw prints all around my little camp. Why the jaguar didn't attack, I'll never know. My father claimed I was adopted by the jaguar as one of its own when I was little. He never would tell me why he thought that."

Though everyone else seemed to lean back in their chairs relieved, Micay still watched the old lady intently. "Well, did you ever find the temple?"

The old lady let out a short laugh. "Would you believe that the cliff I had put my back to, where the jaguar had forced me to stop, was the back of the temple?"

Micay put her hand over her mouth and gasped, "That's...spooky and incredible!"

Her parents did their best to hide their smiles in order to not embarrass her. Again, did they think she was that ignorant?

The old lady clapped her hands together gently and returned to speaking English. "Oh dear, our stew is getting cold! And here I am babbling about some silly story that happened long ago."

Both Micay and her brother protested simultaneously.

"That wasn't silly at all!" exclaimed Micay, despite her best efforts to have remained sullen.

"No way!" Keme almost shouted. "That was fantastic!"

The old lady peered at them. "Are you sure you don't mind some dawdling old lady's ramblings?"

Micay felt her head shaking involuntarily.

Her brother had a huge grin on his face.

Micay could feel her own lips wanting to curl into a smile. Their neighbor was apparently not just some old lady, though Micay wasn't going to let her know that she thought that. Deirdre was way more awesome than any of the relic hunters, tomb raiders or adventurous archaeologists in the movies because she was real. But she was still an

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adult, and adults just didn't understand what it was like to be a kid. Still, she was okay, for an old lady.

"Your story was amazing! Do you have more?" asked Micay feeling a profound new respect for someone she had only minutes before regarded as a minor nuisance. She felt more than a little silly.

"Yeah, that would rock!" agreed Keme.

Deirdre sipped at her stew and nodded. "But only if you try my stew and tell me what you think!"

"Wait!" said Micay, sliding her phone out and taking a picture of the table and its delicious food. She titled it, *First taste of New Mexican cuisine accompanied by an awesome story*. She had only needed the autocorrect to fix the words *cuisine* and *accompanied*. She would take small victories where she could. "Okay, now we can eat."

As if of one mind, Micay and her family each took a hearty sip of Deirdre's stew and found it to be far more delicious than anyone had described. Micay's mouth watered in between spoonfuls. They imitated Deirdre and dipped their tortillas into it. Within only a few minutes, they had emptied their bowls and looked longingly at the pastries sitting in the basket.

Deirdre proceeded to demonstrate how she preferred to eat sopapillas by slathering honey on hers. Everyone tried it that way, and soon the entire basket was empty.

With dinner and dessert finished, Deirdre remembered her promise and spoke as though there had never been an interruption, "One time I was floating down the Euphrates..."

Micay could have listened to Deirdre's stories the rest of the evening, and she figured her family could have, too. She wondered silently if Deirdre had written books about them and made a mental note to ask her someday soon. If she hadn't yet, Micay was going to encourage her to do so, even if it meant begging. She could see a book like that getting turned into a blockbuster movie!

Micay's mom glanced at her husband who, despite the interesting stories, looked somewhat glum. She rubbed his shoulder to snap him out of it. He let out a soft sigh and did his best to smile at her. Micay watched this exchange from the corner of her eye, not wanting to intrude. Then she felt a twinge of guilt and reached over to pat her dad on the head. He turned his growing smile on her, which made her feel the full weight of her guilt for how she had been acting all day. She rummaged up a rusty smile just for him then sank back down into her chair.

Micay stayed in quiet contemplation until everyone finished eating and Deirdre got up to start collecting dishes. The veteran archaeologist

looked pleased with herself. "I'm assuming the green chile stew was to your liking?"

Everyone but Micay nodded emphatically. She gave a thumbs up, and her mom glared at her. Micay put her hands up in surrender, not understanding what she'd done wrong this time. Her mom rolled her eyes and shook her head. Micay shrugged at her brother, who was patting his belly.

"I didn't know peppers could be anything but hot. This was yummy!" he said, burping and then giggling.

"Keme!" scolded their mom.

Deirdre chuckled, "In some countries, that's a compliment to the chef! Anyway, here in New Mexico, chile is an art form."

"Yummiest art ever!" added Keme, slumping contentedly in his chair.

"I'm glad I could provide food and entertainment for weary travelers." Deirdre beamed with the praise. "It's getting late, and I don't want to keep you up with more of my wild tales. I'm going to shoo you out of my house now."

Micay's mom almost jumped to her feet. "Oh, I don't think so. Not before we help you clean up."

"Oh nonsense, I'll have this done in a jiffy!"

Micay's dad had his wife's back, "Yes, with our help, of course. Come on kiddos, why don't you take the dishes into the kitchen?"

Keme smiled at Deirdre with almost a certain reverence as he took the plates out of her hands and went into the kitchen.

What a kiss up, thought Micay as she reluctantly started gathering up the glasses and silverware. She wanted to hear more stories.

Her dad helped her carry what she couldn't then the two of them wandered into the kitchen behind Keme.

"How wonderful! Neighbors with manners! But seriously, I insist, you've already had a long day," Deirdre protested as she moved into the kitchen as well.

Micay's mom patted her on the shoulder as she followed. "I guess you'll just have to get used to neighbors who like to do their part. Besides, it's a good excuse for us to spend a little more time with you."

Deirdre laughed and started pulling her hair into a bun. "You needn't an excuse, I assure you. Come over anytime." She reached over and retrieved an old tea kettle from the stove. "Well, then, I suppose I surrender. You may help me clean up, but only if you'll have some tea with me afterwards."

"Deal! Because I'm not sure I could win an argument with you if you didn't want me to." Micay's mom looked relieved and added, "Tea would be the culmination to an exquisite evening."

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Together the two of them went back into the dining room. Micay could hear them finish picking up the rest of the dinnerware on the table. As she and her brother placed the last of the dishes on the counter and awaited further orders, her mom and Deirdre returned with arms full. Micay and her brother helped them put down the remaining dishes.

Deirdre hugged them both and then to Micay's dismay shooed them out of the kitchen. "Go on, you two. Go explore. My house has no end of discoveries awaiting you, I'm sure. Think of it as a museum of the story of my life."

Micay's dismay at possibly missing more stories turned immediately to elation at the thought of exploration, and she grinned at her brother who laughed back. They raced each other out of the kitchen.

Their dad pleaded after them, "For crying out loud, be careful!"

"I'll send you both home if you don't settle down!" threatened their mom.

"They'll be fine. Let them be children, hmm?" Micay could hear Deirdre say.

Her mom protested, "I just don't want them to break anything!"

"Most of those things have survived centuries unprotected in nature, they'll survive two rather well-behaved children," Deirdre assured then changed the subject to end the arguing. "Now, I just wanted to tell you how wonderful it is that you've taught your children to speak more than one language. It sounds like you all switch effortlessly between the three..."

"Well," said Micay's mom, "my whole family speaks Spanish and my husband's whole family speaks French. I guess it only seemed right that they were the two languages we started with..."

Micay didn't know what else was said as she became absorbed in her surroundings. She had the coolest house ever to explore!

Chapter 4:

The Letter Home

Micay knew exactly what her brother would do first. Sure enough, he stood caressing the spines of antique books and tomes as though they were bricks of gold. The first thing Micay did was what her parents had always taught her to do: look around and soak in all the details you could. She imagined herself as a pulp-fiction archaeologist who had just unlocked an ancient tomb. Immediately she noticed that all of the artifacts were sitting in custom made antique chests of all shapes and sizes. The bookshelves Keme stood in front of were the two largest. Micay found it disconcerting that everything appeared to be ready to move at an instant's notice, and she made a mental note to ask about it later. She adjusted her imaginary wide brimmed hat then dove into her work.

Though the most numerous artifacts were coins, stone figures and books, the most impressive were a three foot diameter Mayan calendar that glittered with multicolored gemstones, a set of intricately carved Egyptian Canopic jars and a Sumerian clay tablet. Micay stood mesmerized and couldn't comprehend all of the places Deirdre must have been and seen. She slowly drew out her phone to take pictures. Her friends would never believe this! Ten photos later, she uploaded them, calling them *The House time forgot*.

She put her phone away and turned and looked up to find more treasures when a piece of fluttering paper falling to the floor caught her eye. Keme was carefully looking through a book on early history of the Wild West, and he hadn't noticed the weathered paper falling at his feet. Micay moved quickly to pick it up before he did. Upon closer inspection, she realized it was an envelope with a letter inside.

"What's that?" he asked with surprise, rubbing at his messy hair.

Micay shrugged, slid the pages out and carefully opened them. They were starting to crack in the places they had been folded. Some of their edges looked burned, and there were even a few holes burned right through them. "I don't know, but the envelope fell out of that book you're holding." She tried not to gloat.

Keme crinkled his nose, making a face at her. He didn't like it when she noticed things he didn't.

She looked back down at the letter. It was written in a steady, neat cursive and addressed to a woman named Hannah. Micay started to read it to herself when her brother nudged her.

"Come on, share!" he whined.

In a moment of generosity, she began to read out loud instead of teasing him further. The words and letters danced around on the page more than usual because she was excited, which made it impossible to read smoothly. She almost handed it to him to read but swallowed back the frustration and clung to the letter instead. There was no way she was going to let anything stop her from uncovering this mystery herself.

01 May 1878

My Sweetest Hannah,

I know this letter comes sooner than expected. I am writing to you now in case something nefarious befalls me. As you well know, I feared the Wonder I have discovered will be desiccated by those who do not value history and ancient things, which is why I had to leave you earlier than I wanted. Now I know it will be if I do not take drastic measures. Forgive me, my love, but things have become far worse during my absence.

I know I promised to be careful, and I swear to you I have been. However, I have recently become aware of someone trailing my every move. It is apparent that Colonel Belgrave has become suspicious that I am hiding something, and he means to find out just what. This leaves me no choice but to desert my station and implement my backup plan.

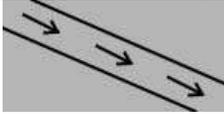
I will be concealing the information I know by scattering it throughout the beautiful places I have seen. I will keep a journal for us to follow when we finally feel it is safe to reveal the Wonder to the world. As soon as I am finished, I will hide the journal where no one will find it except us.

I mean to hold you in my arms again within one year from the date on this letter. That should give me sufficient time to do what I must and cross the distance to you. If I have not returned within one year, you must carry on without me; contact our dear friend Dr. Mark Reese for he will know what to do. Know that if this is the case, I am with you in spirit always and am exceedingly sorry I could not fulfill my promise to you. Follow my directions in this letter and in the subsequent journal exactly, and trust where and why I take you. See through my eyes that which I wished to show you in person. Know that I think of you constantly, and I love you with all my heart.

Your journey begins with a visit to the Three Sisters who once were fiery in temperament but now sleep on the western horizon. The eldest sister holds within her arms our family crest and the code that leads to the journal. Look through the crook in her arms and you will see the general direction in which to head. Blessings upon you and the good you do, my love.

Yours Truly,

Lt. David Thistle, U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers



Keme blinked at her for a moment. "You read that really well!"

Micay felt a jolt of satisfaction go through her at having surprised her brother and that he admitted it. The last time he had heard her read out loud was when he was little. "Not bad for a hoodlum, huh?" She looked back down at the letter, memorizing the details.

"Yeah, for a hoodlum."

She looked up to find her brother smirking at her. "What do you think?"

"I think that's one heck of a story Deirdre could tell us," he replied, completely transfixed.

Micay nodded, unable to keep a grin from splitting her face ear to ear. "I guess this means that her family discovered something magnificent! We have to go ask what!" Without waiting for her brother's response, she sprinted back into the kitchen with the letter in hand.

"Hey! Wait for me!" whined her brother, scampering behind her.

When Micay turned the corner, she found the adults all standing around drinking a dark wine and laughing. So much for tea. They all startled a little when they saw Micay, and Deirdre's eyes grew wide when she saw what Micay held in her hand.

"Leave it to children to find things best forgotten," Deirdre grumbled, downing the last of her wine.

Micay looked at the letter. "What? This? We didn't mean to find it!"

"It fell out of a book I was looking through," finished Keme before Micay could say it.

Micay gave his shoulder a playful punch.

He stuck his tongue out at her.

"And you need to put that letter right back where you found it," said Deirdre more seriously than they'd ever heard her. "I should have let the blasted thing burn in the fire where it was thrown!"

"Oh, of course we will," Micay said in placation. She felt like she had done something wrong even though she hadn't, and that wasn't fair. She deserved an explanation! "We were just wondering who the letter was from and what eventually happened?"

Micay's mom put down her wine and stepped between them. "Micay! It's obvious she doesn't want to discuss it, now put it back!"

"Oh jackal tails! I know what it's like to be kept in suspense, so I'll tell you what I know, but after that, not a word more about it!" Deirdre conceded with a gentle hand on their mom's shoulder. Her voice softened as she spoke.

Their mom nodded slowly, giving her children a warning look, and went back to her glass of wine.

Micay shifted her weight back and forth, unable to stand still. Her brother looked down at his toe shoes as though he'd been scolded.

"Lt. David Thistle was my great-grandfather. My family's interest in archaeology began with him." Deirdre drew in a deep breath and then remained silent for several moments, lost in remembering. Finally she nodded once to herself and began explaining, "When my grandparents passed away, their estate went entirely to their only son, my father, Darroch. It was a substantial estate with countless artifacts rescued from various scoundrels and kept safe until museums were ready to display them. Organizing, cataloging and continuing the tradition was left to us."

Micay and her family listened in awe and reverence.

Deirdre smiled wistfully. "My favorite artifacts were the old books, of course, and I was put in charge of them. I discovered that letter in the same manner you did. When I brought it to my father's attention, I thought he was going to faint on the spot." She clapped her hands together, a small smile playing on her lips.

"You mean his parents never told him about it?" asked Micay, too excited to be polite enough to wait till the end of Deirdre's story.

Her mom glared at her, but Micay ignored it and waited intently for Deirdre's answer.

"No! They hadn't!" exclaimed Deirdre, her eyes afire with mysterious things. "They had only told him that his grandfather had gone missing in action in the service of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers. Apparently his wife was expecting him to come home soon on leave like he did every five months. She was going to surprise him with the news that they were having a baby, but after this letter, she never received another, and he never came home." Deirdre shook her head. "He never knew that he had a son."

"That's terrible!" said Keme, his eyes as wide and round as the Mayan calendar Micay had discovered.

"It is," Deirdre agreed, her smile slipping away. "Of course, I wasn't thinking of such things because I was beside myself with the thought of a new adventure, one that involved my very ancestors! I didn't even give a second thought as to why my great-grandfather's son, my grandfather, had decided never to speak of it at all to his children." The remnants of her smile vanished. "My excitement was short lived. We were stumped after we followed the first clue to the second. Though we were afraid to trust anyone, we decided we needed help, and we turned to the only family my great-grandfather had trusted. We did some research and followed Dr. Mark Reese's family tree, which at times became muddled. After almost two years of work, we finally tracked down his great-grandson."

Micay started to ask another question, but her mom's blazing glare made her hold her tongue.

Deirdre continued, "Apparently my great-grandmother wasn't about to go on some dangerous adventure across the country while she was carrying a baby. She made an exact copy of her husband's letter and gave it to Dr. Reese with her blessings. He then employed a sizable search-and-rescue party, but it was to no avail. They, too, were stumped trying to follow the second clue. With no help there, we spent a long time racking our brains and expending resources, but in the end, concluded that we would never find the journal." She sighed heavily, "It was painful to let it go, but it is what you both must do now."

Micay started to protest, but Deirdre gave her a look that stopped her in her tracks. She was definitely hiding something.

Micay stuttered, "Thanks for explaining...and I'm sorry you never found the journal. We'll put it back now."

Deirdre smiled tightly. "I try to think of it as leaving that mystery for someone else to uncover and solve. Believe me, there are enough to go around! Now, your parents and I are almost done with our discussion. Go on and see what other trouble you can get into!" Her smile had loosened up as she spoke and found its old shine again.

Keme never looked up from the floor as he shuffled back into the living room. He whispered over his shoulder to Micay, "We shouldn't have asked."

Micay gathered up her tattered enthusiasm, followed behind, and hushed him. "We didn't know. Besides, it's obviously something that still bugs her. I think we should try and help her!"

Her brother spun around on his heel and shoved a finger into her chest. It would have been aimed at her face except she was taller than him. "We're going to put that letter back just like we were told to! I'm not going to get into trouble because of you!"

"Oh come on! Where is your sense of adventure?" Micay asked, ignoring her brother's finger.

"Micay! Give me that letter! You heard her! The journal is lost somewhere, so what's the point?" Her brother lunged at her, but Micay easily dodged his clumsy attempt.

Instead of making fun of him like usual, she pleaded, "Even though she didn't find it, it doesn't mean it's not still there! What would it hurt for us to look? I mean, what if we do find it?"

Her brother put his hands on his hips, his face turning impossibly red. "Give me that letter or...I'll tell!"

Micay couldn't help but laugh in his face. "No you won't, and you know why? Because you know you're dying of curiosity just like I am."

His shoulders slumped, and he crossed his arms.

"Besides," Micay continued before he could answer, "it's auspicious timing, don't you see? You wanted to plan our summer trip...well now we know where we want to go first!"

Her brother's blazing blue eyes rolled back and forth while he took everything in and a battle waged inside him. "Auspicious? Do you even know what that means?" he said, stalling.

She surprised herself when she said, "Yes, I do. It means lucky."

Her brother arched an eyebrow at her, waiting for further explanation.

"It's because you and our parents are always using complicated words, I guess," she offered.

His other eyebrow rose to join the first. Then they scrunched together in the middle of his forehead as the battle continued inside him.

Micay put the letter back inside the envelope then handed it to him, knowing that showing him trust would be the last leverage she would need. "Come on, Keme. This could be an adventure of a lifetime. And if we don't find it, at least we'll get to see something cool, right? And if we do find it, we'll be heroes! And we'll bring Deirdre some peace about it."

Keme slowly looked at the letter then back to the book on the shelf.

"Deidre didn't find it because she didn't have a brother like you to help her." Micay slid one last piece of her argument into place.

Keme shuddered with a sigh and handed the letter back to Micay. "Fine, you win," was all he said.

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Micay vibrated with excitement and started to slide the letter into the waistline of her pants.

Keme grimaced at her. "Don't do that! That paper is over a hundred years old!" He reached for his rucksack that he always had slung over his shoulder. She called it his portable library. And sure enough, he drew out the only book he was never without. It looked innocuous with a dull brown leather cover and an unreadable faded title. There seemed to be nothing special about it until it was opened where the pages inside were blank and hollowed out. He slipped Lt. Thistle's letter into the book, into his own little treasure chest.

Micay felt privileged to know the secret of Keme's favorite book, and she knew the letter would be safe inside. She grinned at him, put her arm around him and squished him with a sideways hug. "Sorry, I'm just excited!"

He gave her his famous dubious look and a lop-sided smile. "Yeah. Me, too!"

They grinned at each other for a few moments then started to explore again. She nearly swallowed her own tongue when the harsh sound of an antique phone rang in the hallway. Her brother giggled at her, and she scowled back at him. She would have gone back to exploring except that the phone conversation was immediately more alluring.