

Wish
UPON A
Stray

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CHAPTER 1

“Well done, María Emilia!” said Mrs. Prescott as she placed a corrected test on my desk. Though her voice was soft, I was sure the rest of the class had heard her too.

My cheeks burned, feeling like they were the exact same color as the red *10/10* on the corner of the paper. “For real?”

“Why are you so surprised?” she said, her blues eyes sparkling. “I expected nothing but the best from you.” She beamed at me and continued handing out papers to the rest of the class.

Surprised? I was relieved! The feeling was so intense that the whispers of a song started blooming in my heart.

I wanted to sing. I wanted to dance. But my life was not a musical, so instead, I wrote down the beginning of a verse in the lined pages of my notebook.

The mountain's hard to climb, when you think you're all alone . . .

Surprisingly, the lyrics came to me in English. But then, this English practice test had consumed my life for weeks. I hadn't wanted to let my family down. And all my hard work had paid off. When finals arrived in November, less than three months from now, I'd definitely be ready to move on to the next level of English class.

I couldn't wait to tell my parents and Lela, my grandma. Last night, she'd had a dream that we'd be celebrating something today.

Lela's dreams always came true in one way or another.

"Psst!" Violeta, my cousin, called to me from the other side of the room.

When I read the question on her pretty face, I gave her two thumbs-up, joy spilling from me. She smiled back, but her hazel eyes were watery.

"How did *you* do?" I mouthed at her.

She shrugged, and my victory song died down with a sad twang.

Violeta . . .

Violeta and I were the only seventh graders in this after-school English class at the American Institute in downtown Mendoza. While the rest of our friends spent their free hours hanging out at the park, she and I studied for hours. After school. During the weekends. She knew the verbs and vocabulary just as well as I did. And if I was being honest, her English accent was a teensy bit better than mine. Okay, a lot better.

What had happened?

I tried to send her a reassuring smile, but Mrs. Prescott was already back at her desk. “Overall, I’m satisfied with your grades,” she said.

Around me, most of the kids smiled.

My heart gave a little gallop when Nahuel caught my eye and winked. With his black hair that swooped over his large brown eyes, he was the cutest boy in class. Although he was only a couple of months older than me, he was already in the first year of high school, which in Argentina starts in eighth grade.

Before he saw me blush red as a beet, I turned back toward Mrs. Prescott.

“The scores in the written section were good, mostly,” she said. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought her eyes flitted to Violeta. “Still, I feel most of you aren’t quite ready for the listening comprehension and conversational parts of the final tests. I need all of you to practice with someone who’s fluent in English or with each other any time you can.”

Violeta and I could practice with my parents, who spoke English, but what about the rest of the class?

As if she’d read my mind, Mrs. Prescott added, “There’s a lot of technology at your fingertips, kids. Use your noggins.”

The class laughed. Mrs. Prescott was a proper English lady, straight from London, but every once in a while, she threw in random slang words in the best American accent ever.

Decades ago, when she was young, she’d come to Mendoza on a tour of the world-class wineries in the valley and had fallen in love with not only the place but also the tour guide. They’d gotten married shortly after, and she’d moved to Argentina. Their story was super romantic.

“See you Monday at half past six. *Now* you can go back to speaking Spanish.”

“Castellano,” a boy called from the back.

I cringed, but Mrs. Prescott laughed and said, “Yes, Castellano. Once my brain learns something, it’s hard to switch.”

Around me the class laughed. We all knew how true that was.

The sounds of chatting filled the air while I gathered my stash of flash cards and the pile of books I’d brought from school. Seventh grade was in the late shift that got out at five thirty, which meant that by the end of English, I was already exhausted and ready for a break.

Halfway to the door, Nahuel caught up to me and said quietly, “Good night, María Emilia.”

He kept walking, but I saw a pinkish hue spread across the brown skin of his face. My cheeks went pomegranate mode.

“Good night,” I replied a second too late.

Nahuel passed Violeta, who was waiting for me in the doorway. She had the *most* expressive face in the world. Dozens of embarrassing questions were painted on it. I hoped Nahuel couldn’t read any of them.

Violeta clutched my arm as we walked out to the lobby and exclaimed, “What was that all about?”

I playfully shoved her. “Violeta! Quiet!” A flutter of tiny wings tickled my tummy, making me giggle.

Mrs. Prescott, who had followed us out, looked as if she were trying not to laugh.

“Nahuel said good night to you!” Violeta squealed.

“Stop it!” I said, watching Mrs. Prescott and Alejandra, the receptionist, exchange an amused look. “He was just being nice.”

Violeta wiggled her eyebrows like a dork. “I’ll say. Ah, María Emilia! Your life is practically perfect!”

“Of course it is! I have you, don’t I?” I hugged her with one arm, looking out the window to see if Lela was on her way.

Violeta was a week younger than me. We had photos of our moms, who were cousins too, with smiles as big as their bellies, and then of us two together, from the cradle we’d shared during naptimes at Lela’s house to our last year of elementary school. Two peas in a pod. Even if I occasionally wished she came with a mute button, I couldn’t imagine my life without her.

Violeta’s dark eyes sparkled when she looked at me. “You’re the luckiest girl in the world! You’re beautiful. You have the

two sweetest little brothers, perfect grades, and such a perfect voice you got the choir solo at graduation. The cutest boy ever said hello to you . . .” She ticked off all these blessings on her fingers. She didn’t sound jealous at all, and my heart quivered. To me, she was the prettier and smarter of us.

She didn’t see it though. She was so hard on herself.

“Knock on wood,” I said, rapping my knuckles against her head, part superstition, part joke. What if because she mentioned my life was perfect, everything fell apart? “Your life is perfect too.”

Before Violeta could contradict me, Mrs. Prescott sneezed. Violeta’s eyes went wide with surprise, as if she had just noticed our super-proper teacher could hear our conversation all along.

“Sorry,” she mouthed at me.

I tried to suppress a smile.

After a few seconds of embarrassed silence, Mrs. Prescott looked up from her phone and asked in English, “Do you need to call your ride, girls?”

Although we weren’t in the classroom anymore, I made an

effort to reply in the best accent I could muster. “No, thank you, Mrs. Prescott. My grandmother is on her way.”

Lela was never late.

In that moment, Tía Yoana, Violeta’s mom, opened the door and a gust of frigid August air blasted over me.

Tía Yoana and my mom looked a lot alike. Some people thought they were twin sisters. They both had the same pointy face, almond-shaped brown eyes, and high cheekbones. Short and slender, Tía kept her hair long and curly, while my mom kept hers in a chin-length bob of straight black hair. Violeta looked a lot like them, while I’d taken after my dad. I was taller and curvier than Violeta, but some people said we had the same laughter, explosive and loud.

“Mami!” Violeta said, surprised, and kissed her mom on the cheek.

I gave her a kiss too, and she smiled and said, “Hola, mi amor.”

“Hola, Tía,” I said, grabbing my backpack. “Bye, Mrs. Prescott.”

Tía Yoana’s eyes widened. “Actually, Mimilia, Lela is still coming to get you.”