



# WILD *Anna-Marie McLemore* BEAUTY



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS  
*New York*

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK  
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*For the women in my family,  
for all women who hold the light for their families.*

*For the girls who've become my sisters,  
for all the girls with the misunderstood hearts.*

*If you look the right way, you can see  
that the whole world is a garden.*

—FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT



Quiero hacer contigo  
lo que primavera hace con los cerezos  
*I want to do with you  
what spring does with the cherry trees*

—PABLO NERUDA

# ONE



Later, they would blame what happened on the little wooden horses.

Estrella had found them when she was five, the set of them dust-frosted and forgotten on a high shelf. They had been small enough to fit in her hands, carved wooden wings sprouting from their painted backs.

No one could tell her where the little horses had first come from, or who they'd belonged to. Estrella took her mother's shrug as permission to keep them. She dusted them off, lined them up by colors, their wings rounded and splayed like stouter versions of a dragonfly's. At night, she counted them like sheep. She trotted them along her bedspread like the folds in her quilt were hills.

Now, eleven years later, they were more charms than toys. When she couldn't sleep, she ran her fingers along their wings like her grandmother did with her rosary beads. And tonight,

she lay in the dark, turning each one in her hands, trying to ignore that hundreds of blue borraja flowers had sprouted from the ceiling of her bedroom.

Outside the door, she heard her cousins talking. Whatever they were whispering about was good enough to keep them awake; they were all worn down from work. Today they had finished bringing La Pradera into its spring bloom. The gardens were thick with lilies and irises. Morning glories covered the arbors. The blossoming trees floated their clouds of lilacs and mimosa.

There would be more work, of course. At La Pradera, there always was. Keeping up the bulb gardens, stopping the borders from overgrowing, filling in the flower beds. But it wouldn't be the same task they had each spring, forcing their fingers down into the hard earth, bringing the ground back to life after the cold months. Their hands were raw from it. They had called up new flowers so many times that the crescent moons of dirt under their nails seemed as much part of them as their skin.

Each spring felt like all of them, not just the gardens, coming back to life. They spent winters giving their flowers to ceramic pots they kept indoors, or pulling snowdrift roses out of patches of land soft enough to grow. But now all of La Pradera was theirs. They had every acre to let out the blooms that had been waiting in their hands all winter.

Estrella looked up at the ceiling, all those starflowers crawling over the rafters. Now that the season was coming on warmer, she had hoped she could wring herself out, give the ground all

the flowers she had in her. But this still happened, borraja painting the space above her bed blue, no matter the season.

She left the little horses on her quilt and found her four cousins in the hall, all of them eyeing one of Azalea's ballet flats. Estrella couldn't tell why until she looked closer, and spotted the three letters Azalea had inked into the lining, where the writing would follow the lower curve of her anklebone.

*Bay.* Those three letters were as damning as a confession to a priest.

They all rushed into Azalea's room, Azalea calling protests after them. Now that they knew to look, they found the same three letters in her clothbound journals. In her books, as though they belonged not to her but to that name she had written on the fly leaves. On the pale inner satin of a velvet choker.

Then, there was no stopping them. They raided one another's rooms the same way their mothers checked for bottles of violet liqueur, or the dark-dyed lingerie they weren't supposed to have until they were older.

In Gloria's room, they found the creased photo she had pressed against the bottom of her middle drawer. The back looked sponge-painted in the lightest pink and coral of her lipsticks, the faint imprints of the hundred times Gloria had kissed the picture's backing.

The length of yew in Calla's closet told the same story. Bay, the girl those three letters and the face in that photograph belonged to, had been showing her how to carve her own bow. They had been sanding down the wood together, smoothing it in the last daylight hours before dinner.

Azalea eyed Estrella, willing her to be the next to confess.

Her glare reminded Estrella of the story neither of them had ever told. How Estrella had once kissed Bay under the flowering trees, how Azalea had seen it and, that night, gone after her like a lynx. Both of them had grabbed each other's hair until Gloria pulled them apart, demanding to know what this was about. They had traded stares, understanding that they would not tell the truth, instead piecing together some lie about a dress borrowed without permission.

Now Azalea looked ready to grab Estrella by the hair again. She must have assumed Estrella had grown out of that small, fierce love that made her kiss Bay under the mimosa trees. Estrella had thought the same thing about Azalea, that she was done with wanting Bay, or at least that she'd gotten distracted. She'd seen Azalea flirting with the young wives who grew bored at La Pradera's parties, their husbands talking of business they thought women couldn't understand.

But Azalea had been caught, and that stare was her way of telling Estrella that if she, too, didn't confess, Azalea would do it for her.

So Estrella opened her jewelry box to her cousins, showing them the collection of thick ribbons coiled together like a nest. They were each lengths of satin that had fallen from Bay's hair during La Pradera's summer parties and winter balls. When a ribbon slipped from the end of Bay's French braid without her noticing, Estrella lifted it from the flagstone courtyard before it got trampled.



Gloria's eyes slid upward, where the thick blanket of blue starflowers coated the ceiling. Her gaze made the rest of them follow.

Each five-pointed bloom was the deep, clear blue of a new night, the twists of vines flashing sea green between the flowers.

Dalia shook her head at Estrella, not in disappointment but in sympathy. Gloria gave her a small smile, gentle and sad, like Estrella was a child they were looking after. As though Estrella, not Calla, was the youngest Nomeolvides girl.

Calla, for her part, studied the flowers, asking if Estrella could remember what she might have been dreaming this time as blue stars opened over her bed.

"No," Estrella said, the same thing she said every time Calla asked.

Calla let out a disapproving hum, like a doctor being denied the satisfaction of making a diagnosis.

Azalea shuddered, the way she always did when Estrella grew a dark sky over her bed. Estrella didn't take it personally; Azalea had more superstition in her heart than she'd ever admit. It was the rest of them that worried Estrella, their concerned faces, like she was a child suffering night terrors. The rest of them drew flowers from the earth and over wooden arbors only when they wanted to.

Azalea drew her eyes away from the ceiling. She nodded at Estrella's jewelry box, those nests of ribbon, satisfied she didn't have to tell Estrella's secrets for her.

Dalia had been smart enough not to keep any evidence. But

her cousins knew, as soon as they saw the color bloom in her cheeks. Dalia, too, had fallen a little in love with Bay Briar. With Bay's laugh, reckless as any boy's. With how she dressed like a character from one of Gloria's old novels. Satin trousers to the knee, cinched coat, ivory stockings. On anyone else, it would've been a costume. On Bay, it seemed as ordinary as her fine, straw-pale hair, as though she'd been born in a waistcoat.

All five Nomeolvides girls loved Bay Briar. They didn't just flirt with her to needle their mothers and grandmothers. They didn't just admire her as some ornament that moved through La Pradera's gardens. They didn't all harbor crushes on her just because she was there.

They had all fallen in love with her. With how she could beat her grandmother's friends at card games, stirring their roars of cigar-smoke laughter as she took their money. With how she swirled and sipped the red-black wine at La Pradera's parties. (Estrella and her cousins stole bottles and passed them around behind the hedges, seeing how fast the wine could make them feel warm.)

It took only a few minutes standing in the unlit hall for them all to realize what this meant, the love held between them for a girl named Bay Briar.

For as long as anyone had memory, longer than the Nomeolvides women had been at La Pradera, each generation had borne five daughters. Only daughters, always five, like the petals on a forget-me-not. And ever since La Pradera had gotten its hold on them, sure and hard as a killing frost, every generation of

five daughters had been trapped in these gardens, like their hearts were buried in the earth.

But Estrella and her cousins couldn't have five daughters if they were all in love with the same woman.

If they all loved Bay Briar, if they were too lovesick over her to sleep with men, their wombs would stay empty as their hearts were full.

They could be the last generation of Nomeolvides girls. The last ones bound together like forget-me-not petals. The last ones who could not leave La Pradera unless they wanted to die, spraying their pillowcases with bitter pollen they coughed up from their lungs as though it were blood.

The last to see their lovers disappear.

Then dread passed between them.

Nothing good came from the love of Nomeolvides women.

Five years ago, Calla's father had vanished. Before him, the traveling salesman who'd stayed at La Pradera longer than he'd stayed anywhere in a decade, all because he'd fallen in love with Abuela Flor's bright laugh. And before him, a man who collected old maps, and who became more of a father to Gloria than the man who'd given her half her blood.

If the love of one woman in this family was enough to make her lover disappear, what would the obsession of five Nomeolvides girls do to Bay?

"No," all five of them said at once, quiet as whispers, at the thought of Bay vanishing under the weight of their love. Not Bay, who visited the stone house where they all lived by ringing

the doorbell, bowing, and announcing herself as *the Briar bastard, at your service*. Bay, whose mother had left her husband for Bay's father but had not bothered to take Bay with her. Bay, whose heart always stayed a little bit broken no matter how often her grandmother told her *Bay Briar, being rid of the two of them was the best thing that ever happened to you*.

And now, with her grandmother in the ground almost a year, the Nomeolvides women gathered around Bay like she was some fragile egg. Estrella's mother and her cousins' mothers brought Bay to their table at meal times, expecting her there as much as their own daughters. When Bay was sick, their grandmothers took bowls of blue corn pozole up the hill to the brick house Bay now slept in alone. They set cold cloths under her neck, changed her sheets when her fever soaked them through.

Estrella and her cousins saw the brittle sorrow, the grief drifting off Bay like a mist, and they all wanted to set their lips against her forehead to warm her.

They could not let their hearts destroy this girl they had all secretly loved.

Then Gloria had the idea for the offerings. She whispered into the space between them. "Why don't we ask it"—here she looked at the floorboards under their feet, as though staring into the ground below the house's foundation—"to protect her?"

The tilting of their heads turned to slow nods, all of them drawing closer to this hope.

The only thing stronger than the curse of their blood was

La Pradera, this flowering world that possessed the Nomeolvides women so deeply it killed them if they tried to leave it. If they did not want Bay vanishing, they needed La Pradera to guard her. From them. If anything could save Bay, it was the force and will of this place. Bay had grown up here the same as they had. This land must have fallen in love with her light footsteps and loud laugh, too. So they would beg La Pradera to give Bay its charm against the venom of their hearts.

In return, they gave the ground everything else they loved. Not just the photo at the back of Gloria's drawer, or the ribbons Estrella had collected. They took down lockets they admired so much they hung them on walls instead of keeping them in boxes. They gathered copper-backed hand mirrors and tins of apricots they'd sugared on Easter Sunday.

Gloria volunteered her best earrings, the color of champagne, bubbles embedded in the small globes, and her favorite apron—the ruffles in every shade of purple, from lilac to blackberry. She had worn it so many times to candy rose petals that even after she washed it, it smelled sweet as meringue.

Dalia chose the best perfume from her collection, a heavy bottle that held the scent of lavender and dry wood and bergamot oranges. Then, the fondant rose Bay's grandmother had saved for her off a princess cake from a summer party. She had kept it under a drinking glass so it wouldn't gather dust, and it had stayed as perfect as when it had topped the cake's green fondant.

Azalea gave up the spoon she ate dessert with every night, the

pewter handle ending in a spiral like the curled tip of a fiddlehead fern. Then she surrendered her favorite candles, the wax as bright pink and red as the flowers she grew.

Calla offered the candy hearts she'd saved over the years, the big kind they carried at the shop in town. She'd collected ones with single words etched into the sugar. *Dream. Honey. True.* Next, she tore down the tissue paper flowers that hung on fishing line in her room; she had saved them from being thrown out after a spring ball.

Estrella parted with her favorite dress, the sheer layers of the skirt ending in points like the petals of starflowers. From her collection of carved horse figurines, wooden and winged, she chose her favorite, one with just enough color left to show the indigo it had been painted.

They scattered Gloria's earrings and Calla's candy hearts. They poured Dalia's perfume onto the flower beds. Into the thick hedges, they tucked her fondant rose and Calla's paper flowers. Azalea buried the pewter spoon, and Estrella planted the little indigo horse deep in the ground like a bulb.

Then they gathered at La Pradera's lowest point, a dark pond at the center of the sunken garden.

Gloria's apron and Estrella's dress floated in the water for so long the cousins all shivered, the ruffles waving as though they felt the loss of the girls who'd once worn them. Azalea lit each of her candles before throwing them in, the flames flickering before they went out.

Later, they would all swear they had seen something bright

in that water. A few trails of light swirling around the things they gave. A glow buoying up the apron and dress. An echoing of the candles Azalea lit and then let go.

It was this that let them sleep that night, this sign that La Pradera had heard them.

# TWO



When he realized he had hands, and a body, he crossed himself. Even before he could open his eyes, he lifted his fingers to his forehead and prayed the words. *En el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo.*

He could not remember when he had last had hands and a body, so thanking God for them seemed the thing to do if he didn't want to lose them again. *I exist. I thank God for my existence.*

It was too cold to be el Cielo. If he was with God in Heaven, why would he feel so cold? He wondered if he was in el Purgatorio, the place he would pay for his sins.

But the air. The air smelled too sweet for this to be Purgatory, like the sugar of fruit and the green of trees. These scents came to him as familiar, but he didn't know why.

He could not remember dying. He could not remember where he had been before this either.



A damp chill soaked his back, and under his fingers he felt the wet brush of grass. He opened his eyes to columns of white sunlight. Those fingers of sun spread out over a world that looked like a single garden but stretched as wide as a valley. They cut through a gray mist turning a little blue at the edges.

Everything else was color. Trees rose toward the sky, letting the pale sun through their branches. Vines crawled up the walls of the valley. The grass was so bright it looked polished. The flowers stood sharp against the green valley and the blue-gray morning. They grew in pink and orange and violet. It was vivid and beautiful enough that it hurt him to look at it, and again, he wondered if maybe this was el Cielo.

A figure floated through the light so slowly he did not flinch or startle. The blurring of mist and sun fell away, and he saw her, a dark-haired girl in a green dress, the mist collecting into drops on her hair. The brown of her shoulders looked familiar, not because he knew her but because the color felt like something that was his, too.

He looked down at his own hands and forearms, remembering this body he once had and now had again. He and this girl were the same brown but close, like as the bark of two different trees in this garden.

She spoke to him, but he did not hear her. She sounded as distant as the far-off call of a bird echoing through the valley. His own heartbeat, a thing he had not understood to be there until that moment, grew louder in his ears. The pressure in his rib cage made his chest feel like it was hardening into wood. He hadn't realized he was trying to get to his feet until

the act of sitting up and trying to stand left his lungs raw and worn.

The girl knelt near him. Her skirt spread around her, the hem lapping at his thigh. He tried to breathe, but the shame of realizing how dirty his clothes were made the feeling of weight on his chest worse. The stains on his shirt matched the soil caught under his fingernails, like he'd been raking his hands through the ground. Flecks of earth fell from his forearms but dampened and stained his collar and the hems of his pants.

They could have come from sleeping and waking on this ground. But each dulling stain felt like the sign of some transgression he had yet to confess. Maybe this girl had come to give him a chance to unburden his soul, but how could he confess the things he had done if he couldn't remember them?

Again, the girl spoke to him, this time with light hands on his shoulders, like she was telling him not to move so fast.

The wonder of her struck him still. He wanted so much to both run from her and be in her presence that she must have been some saint he did not recognize. She had been sent there to find him, and now she would judge his spirit.

But she was not dressed as some angel of Heaven, in the golds of saints' light and the blues of la Virgen. Nor was she the flame colors of the damnation he knew to fear; she was not some beautiful demon who would turn to fire and ash when he touched his fingers to her dress. Instead, there was the dark brown of her hair and her eyes. The lighter brown of her face

and her hands. The faint red of her lips, and the soft green of her dress.

She was warmth but not fire, light but not sky.

“Fel,” she said, and because he did not understand, he shook his head before he realized he was doing it.

She touched his shoulder.

“Fel,” she said.

He followed the line of her arm down to her hand. Between her thumb and forefinger she grasped a scrap of cloth sewn to his shirt. She pulled it until the end came free from under his suspender strap.

Three letters, *F-E-L*, had been scrawled onto the cloth.

It looked like there might have been more letters, but the scrap had been torn, and those three were all that was left. The loss of the other letters felt as heavy as a prayer unsaid, like they were a map to this garden valley.

“Is that your name?” she asked.

He opened his mouth to say no, but then realized he did not know what name to tell her instead. He didn’t remember what he was called any more than he remembered where he had been before this garden.

If this was el Purgatorio, maybe it was his first test to resist her. The quiet force of her made him want to tell her things he did not know. It made him want to make things up, lie just so he could give her something that sounded true. And maybe she knew this and was waiting to see if he would lie in this way, or if he would admit that he knew nothing.

But her dress, green as the trees that softened the edges of this garden valley, her dress made him think of something.

Some understanding about the color drifted toward him but then skittered away before he could grasp it. And because he wanted to follow that understanding, to see if it would come back to him, he let this girl take his hand.

# THREE



**T**his boy was La Pradera's answer. Estrella found him in the same corner of the sunken garden where she had buried her little wooden horse. But she wasn't telling her cousins that. If they thought the indigo horse had been the thing to do it, they'd look at her the same way they looked at her on the nights she woke with starflowers covering the ceiling. Like she was a girl whose dreams and favorite childhood toys were things they had to protect her from.

What they knew, all they needed to know, was that the five of them had brought their nighttime offerings, and the gardens had given them something back.

Gloria tried to hand the boy the phone and asked, "Is there someone you want to call?"

He blinked at the phone like it was something not only unknown but unknowable.

He reminded Estrella of the partridge silkie chick Dalia had as a pet when they were little. That was before the old cat Azalea kept started batting at it, and Dalia got worried the cat would eat it. Dalia had long since given it to an old woman who now fed it peaches and read it the Psalms, but Estrella remembered it. Scrawny and funny-looking and made presentable only by its fluff, a mix of brown, black, and gold.

Instead of fluff, this boy had his hair, coarse and dark as Estrella's, but uncombed, and his loose clothes. Brown pants, and a shirt that had once been cream or tan but that the earth had darkened.

Dalia whispered something to Calla about his clothes.

The rough shirt, trousers, and thick suspenders were work clothes, but ones as out of place in this century as Bay's waistcoats.

While Bay made the clothes of some other time seem as natural to her as her hair, everything about this boy seemed misplaced. He had an underfed look made more pitiful by the lost way he studied everything from that phone to the windows. He seemed like he had wandered into a world he did not belong to.

"How old do you think he is?" Gloria asked.

Dalia shrugged, looking at him as though he could not see her staring. "Seventeen? Eighteen?"

Dalia glanced at Estrella, and Estrella knew she was not saying the rest. He seemed about seventeen or eighteen, but he had the diminished sense of a boy the world had worked hard.

It made them all feel a little guilty for having not just mothers who plaited ribbons into their hair but grandmothers who read to them when they had all had the chicken pox at once.

Being a Nomeolvdes girl, living so closely with generations of five women each, meant they all had not just their own mothers, not just their own grandmothers, but five.

“Who loved him?” Azalea asked.

They all turned to her, understanding even with just those three words.

Azalea wanted to know which Nomeolvdes woman might have once loved this boy into disappearing, and how La Pradera had returned him from whatever cursed place lovers vanished to. She looked at him like he was a spirit, despite Estrella leading him by the hand and showing him to be as solid as the flowers they made.

“I don’t like this,” Azalea said, shivering as though a draft had come through the house.

“Well, we can’t leave him like this,” Dalia said, her voice low in case the boy could understand her. “Look at him.”

Azalea flitted around the hall like a bird caught under the rafters. “I still don’t like this.”

Estrella let go of the boy’s hand. She felt the slow, shared breath in that always came before they started arguing.

To her and to Dalia, La Pradera had given them this boy, and they were asking for its wrath if they did not take care of him. If they ignored him, they risked La Pradera stealing Bay Briar, that girl they all loved, out of spite.

To Azalea, he was a lost lover returned from some disappearing place, and to touch him was to provoke La Pradera's curse.

Before Gloria and Calla could choose their sides, all five of their mothers gathered around this boy the way they did around Bay. Gloria's mother put her hands on either side of his face like he was a child, not an almost-grown man who stood a head above her.

"Pobrecito," Estrella's mother said.

The boy shuddered, eyes opening with recognition.

"¿Comprendes?" Calla's mother asked.

Dalia's mother shoved between them. She spoke better Spanish than any of her cousins, swearing she had learned it all by reading la Biblia in two languages. Now she spoke to the boy in a low voice, reassuring him in words Estrella and her cousins could neither hear nor understand.

When she caught the younger girls staring, she took them all in with one sweep of her eyes.

"He's not stupid," she said. "He just speaks a language none of you bothered to learn."

Estrella's grandmother and her cousins' grandmothers had no time for the pity with which their daughters greeted this boy. They led him upstairs, stripped him out of his earth-darkened clothes, and put him under a shower. Estrella heard the water turn on, and the old women's calming murmurs told her that the spray had startled him.

Estrella floated between rooms, listening outside doors and catching scraps she could piece together.



Her mother and her cousins' mothers whispered that maybe this boy was a sign from God. The lovers they had lost would reappear. The grandmothers, who now left the boy alone to wash himself, agreed that he was a gift from the land. The Nomeolvides women did not have sons, so this boy was the son they would never bear themselves. He was a son, a nephew, a boy cousin, a brother.

He was all these things this family did not know.

"The land doesn't give us gifts," Azalea said when Estrella told her cousins.

Even Estrella had to admit she was right. The land did not give anything without stealing something else. It had given their family a home, but in return it demanded the women stay. It insisted with such force that if any of them left, they weakened and grew sicker until they either came back or died.

"Watch your tongues," Abuela Magnolia said, and both Estrella and Azalea jumped to realize she was alongside them. "You don't know what it was like. You weren't alive before we came here."

"Neither were you," Calla said under her breath. The Nomeolvides women had been at La Pradera for a hundred years. And despite Abuela Flor and Abuela Liria's jokes that they were old enough to have seen the birth of Christ firsthand, no one alive in this family today had memory that far back.

Abuela Lila set her hand beneath Calla's chin, gentle but still correcting. "Do you know what it was like for our family before?"

Calla nodded. She could have recited, half-asleep or deep in a fever, all that Abuela Lila was about to say. They all could have. Before La Pradera they were *las hijas del aire*. Children of the air. Children who, on paper, did not exist, and so were considered invisible and formless as the air beneath the sky. It had been an insult thrown at their family as they moved from place to place, after new treaties had declared their land now belonged to another country.

So they wandered, with no birth certificates, no paperwork proving their names and their homes, no proof they had ever been born except the word of their mothers and the *parteras* who helped bring them into the world. Some—a girl who grew Mexican sage, another with a gift for tulips—tried to bury their last name and the lore of this family. But when their legacy was discovered, when blooms they never intended sprung up without warning, when their cursed love claimed the lives of adored sons, they were marked as witches, or killed.

Some had tried to suppress their gifts for the ground. They'd tried to pretend they had no flowers waiting in their hands. They looked for job listings like *secretary* or *shopgirl*, nothing to do with anything growing or blooming. They rented apartments in cities, or houses in towns too small to be printed on maps. They tried to act as though they had not been born with petals in their fingertips.

The blooms inside them always found their way out. Pushed down, they rose strange and spiteful, in ways as unexpected as they were dangerous. The girl christened after the purple velvet

of Mexican sage had woken up to find a hundred thousand vines splintering her house apart.

Another with a gift for the petaled cups of ranunculus accidentally grew enough to flood the schoolhouse where she worked. The children ran from them like snakes, and mothers and fathers drove her from town.

The one with a blessing for tulips had resolved not to grow a single bloom, not even in a window box or flowerpot. She had not wanted to flaunt her gift in the middle of the drought-parched town where she hid.

Then, one morning, the yard in front of her rented house turned from the bristle of dried grass to tulips so thick she could not find the ground. Cream and orange. Lipstick pink and pale green. Color-broken red and frilled peach. All with smooth leaves as green as algae on a pond. And before she could clear them, her neighbors saw. They thought she was a witch who'd stolen all the water, and a group of barely grown sons shot her like a scavenging bird.

"La Pradera may keep us here," Abuela Lila said now, "but we had a worse life before these gardens."

They all knew. Their mothers never let them forget.

The legacy of disappearing lovers made the Nomeolvides women reviled, called the daughters of demons. They had endured the taunts and threats that came with being considered witches. Towns cast them out, not wanting them near their sons and daughters for fear Nomeolvides women would love them and they would vanish.

“And now the land is softening toward us,” Abuela Flor said.

Estrella could almost hear the unspoken hope hovering in this house.

La Pradera had given them back a boy a Nomeolvides heart had once loved out of existence. His presence in their house held the enchantment and wonder of making a vanished love reappear.

If La Pradera could bring back a boy lost a hundred years ago, maybe it could break this curse they had carried here in their hearts. Maybe it would give them back other vanished lovers. Maybe it would lift the awful legacy from this generation of daughters.

That hope calmed Azalea, quieting her for as long as it took the boy to wash himself.

But then Abuela Liria volunteered clothes that had once belonged to her vanished husband.

“You’re putting him in the clothes of the dead,” Azalea said, paling.

Abuela Magnolia and Abuela Mimosa handed him the trousers and pulled the shirt over his head.

“Fine,” Azalea said. “You don’t care what you’re bringing down on us. But what about him? You could be cursing him.”

“Enough,” Gloria said. The word came low, Gloria not wanting the boy to hear. But she hit it so hard it turned rough. Her eyes flashed to each cousin, first Azalea, then Dalia, Calla,

Estrella. “If there’s any chance he belonged to one of ours, we treat him like one of ours.”

They all hushed under her logic.

If he had been loved and made to vanish by a woman in their family, no matter how long ago, then in some way he belonged to them. His lostness was, in whatever far-removed way, their fault. Every woman in this house had inherited it, the same way they had inherited the loss and broken hearts written into their blood.

This was Gloria, quiet, her posture straight and unyielding. She held back so often that sometimes her voice startled them. But when she thought the four of them were acting like children, she took certain hold of their whispering and wondering and she decided.

“So until we have a reason to say otherwise, he’s our brother.” Gloria caught each of their eyes again. “Understand?”

The pride in their mothers’ and grandmothers’ faces was so open and full that Estrella thought it might lift them off the floor, each of them floating to the rafters and bobbing beneath the ceiling like balloons.

In the easing of their shoulders, Estrella saw their faith that, one day, this family could be left in Gloria’s hands.

With the same rough efficiency as they’d gotten the boy naked and clean, the grandmothers went about feeding him. They fried eggs and tortillas for huevos divorciados, Abuela Mimosa spooning salsa verde over one egg and salsa roja over the other, and they sat him at the kitchen table.

Tía Hortensia and Tía Iris told him to “Eat, mijito, you’re so skinny, mijito,” as though it was his own gaunt frame, and not the legacy of this family, that put men at risk of vanishing.

“Gracias,” he said, the first word Estrella heard him say. Then he bowed his head and said grace as though he had been speaking the whole time.

## FOUR



**T**hey asked him if he wanted to sleep. He shook his head; he felt as though he had been sleeping, or dead, for a long time before this.

They asked him if he wanted to read, and handed him an age-softened Biblia. The insistence with which they pressed it into his hands made him wonder if they could see into his soul, if this was in fact el Purgatorio, a softer version of it than any he could remember hearing of.

He set la Biblia on the kitchen table.

What he wanted most was not to be a bother to these women who acted as though they were all his mothers and grandmothers. They had already taken off his clothes like he was a child, put him under water that washed the earth off his skin, given him clothes that did not belong to him, fed him without asking if he was hungry because they seemed to know he was.

In the same soap-bubbled water where the pan soaked, he

washed the plate he'd eaten off of. Then the pan, scouring the cast iron with a stiff brush. He knew these things. His hands knew how to wash his face and knot the laces on his shoes and scrub an iron pan. He understood that around him in the garden valley were flowers, and he knew what flowers were, even if he could not remember the last time he saw them. Even if it seemed impossible that so many could crowd together in one place.

He was grateful for his hands, how they acted without waiting for him to tell them how. But they did not know what he wanted to know. He wanted to know things held not in his fingers but in memories so dull and tarnished he could not make out what they were.

He dried the plate and pan, and then stood holding them, realizing he did not know where to put them away.

A girl swept into the kitchen and whisked both the pan and plate from his hands. She looked a little like the girl who had first touched him, but younger, and both taller and thinner.

"Did you disappear?" she asked.

He didn't know what she was asking. He hadn't gone anywhere but across the kitchen.

She put the plate away in a cupboard. "Did you disappear and come back?"

He shut the cupboard for her. Instead of risking giving her a wrong answer he pretended he hadn't heard.

"I know you can understand me," she said, hanging the pan on the wall. "Don't pretend you can't."

On his back, he felt the pinprick of telling a lie.



The girl pulled aside thin curtains, letting pale light in through a window above the sink. “Do you have any sisters?”

She gave him the time it took for the dust to settle in the streams of light before adding, “Do you want sisters? Because we’ll all be your sisters if you want.” She opened a drawer and gathered up a handful of forks. “But if you fall in love with the same woman as us we’ll have to kill you. Five is already too many.”

He tried to keep the shock off his face. If the five younger girls were all in love with the same woman, who was she? He imagined a figure twice his height, her saint’s halo bright as the sun off the forks in this girl’s hand, some divine being only those who lived in this place could stand to look at.

The other girls filled the kitchen. The one in the green dress, and three others who looked a little older than she was.

The light through the kitchen window fell on the girl’s forehead and collarbone like it had in the valley, before she led him to this house. The hem of her dress brushed the leg of the wooden table.

“Azalea, no,” the girl in the green dress said to another girl.

“You told me to be nice to him.” The other girl—Azalea, he guessed—opened the cupboard. “They always make *me* feel better.”

“Yeah, and they make everyone else feel worse,” another, one of the two who looked oldest, said.

Azalea took down a thin box, shook it at her, and set it on the counter.

“Yes, perfect,” one of the oldest ones said. “Thank you for your valuable contribution to this situation.”

“Dalia,” the youngest one said to one of the oldest girls, but neither of the oldest girls turned. “He can hear you.”

Fel picked up the box. The words *Instant Mashed Potatoes* arched across the front, over a picture of swirled white fluff.

“But how do they get the potatoes in there?” he said to himself, jumping a little to hear the words in his own voice. Low, quiet, but spoken.

They didn’t seem to hear this voice that startled him. His own voice, which he had not yet used except to thank the grandmothers.

But the girl called Azalea noticed him looking at the box and brightened.

“You’ve never had these?” she asked.

“Azalea, don’t,” the girl in the green dress said. “Nobody likes those but you.”

“And maybe him,” Azalea said. “We don’t know yet.”

“Bay settled this last week,” one of the oldest ones, the girl called Dalia, said. “They’re disgusting.”

“She said she liked them,” Azalea said.

“She was being polite,” the other oldest one said.

“Don’t let them scare you off,” Azalea said, to him this time. “They’re the best thing to come in a box.”

She filled a pot with water from the sink.

This family had its own taps that ran inside. When he’d washed the pan and plate, he’d done it in the filled sink, one side soaped, the other clear, and hadn’t noticed.

Whatever place this was between death and the next life had water that ran inside houses.

Azalea added salt and butter to the boiling water. The girl in the green dress and the two oldest girls kept talking. The youngest one hopped up on the counter, smirking at him like she was enjoying catching what the other girls missed.

“What do you want to tell Bay?” one of the oldest ones asked.

“The truth?” the girl in the green dress said.

“All of it?” Dalia asked. “Really? Even the part about why we did all this?”

“Why don’t we just let Bay talk to him?” the other oldest ones asked. “She can get anyone talking.”

“You could get him talking too,” the youngest one said, “if any of you were paying attention.”

She hopped off the counter. The slap of her bare feet on the ceramic tile drew all their attention.

“He just read that”—she pointed at the box—“so I think he can understand you.”

Azalea’s hand paused, a snow of white flakes falling from the open box.

“You can understand us,” Azalea said.

The youngest one nodded at him, slowly, leading him to imitate her nod and admit that, yes, he knew what they were saying.

That cautious nod started the questions.

“Where did you come from?”

“Where were you before this?”

“Did you disappear and come back?”

“Did you love somebody who looked like us a long time ago?”

“Who are you?”

“What are you?”

And, from the girl in the green dress, the question so soft it sounded breathed more than spoken, “What’s your name?”

“I don’t know,” he said, with the full, slow breath of telling the truth. Wherever he was, he had this on his side, that each of these questions could be answered with the same truth. “I don’t know.”

# FIVE



**E**strella had worried that the boy might resist the work of her grandmothers' hands. But he had not fought. He had not wrenched out of their hold as they took his clothes or gotten up from the kitchen table when they told him to eat.

She wondered if he could feel in their hands how many times they had done this before. Not for boys who turned up in the sunken garden, but for their daughters whose lovers had vanished. For their mothers. For one another.

For Bay Briar.

After Bay had buried her grandmother, she had let go the men and women who kept up the great brick house, giving them a year's pay on top of what Marjorie Briar had left them each in her will. Then Bay had gotten into bed in the same black pants and waistcoat she'd worn graveside. She'd stayed there, face pressed into the pillow, no light in the room but a seam between curtain panels.

She lay there, dust graying everything in the house, her stillness mourning the woman who had been both mother and father to her when her own mother and father had not stayed. Marjorie Briar, who never sent invitations to her midsummer parties and Christmas balls, because on those nights everyone in town was welcome at La Pradera. Marjorie Briar, who lured wealthy men to invest in businesses that were weeks from closing.

The curtains in the windows of that brick house had stayed drawn. Estrella and her cousins worried Bay was starving. Their mothers feared she would wither from lack of sunlight.

But the Nomeolvides grandmothers had climbed the grass slope to the brick house. They threw open the curtains, ignoring Bay's groan against the light. They shoved her out of bed and toward the shower, dusting her room and changing the sheets in the time it took her to dress in clean clothes, shower steam curling off her skin.

They told her she would eat with them from then on, and even though Bay had inherited the land they all lived on, she obeyed. She bowed to the gravity of belonging to these women.

After a thousand meals at the Nomeolvides table, Bay Briar still came to the front door. The Nomeolvides girls crowded onto the sofa that let them see, between curtain panels, Bay waiting on the front step. For months, they had each assumed that the others only wanted the first look at Bay's newest outfit.

Now they knew better. They flushed at the fact that she waited to be let in, like a boy picking one of them up.

Tonight, Bay wore riding boots over plain trousers, but with a satin coat that looked like a smoking jacket. Her hair was so pale that against the burgundy lapels it glowed.

She stood against the deepening blue of the evening, and she bowed low, saying, “The Briar family bastard, at your service.”

Pulling back up to her full height, she caught sight of the boy, and said, “Oh,” as though a few blinking moments would help her understand.

Fifteen Nomeolvides women and Bay Briar and a nameless boy ate their cazuela in the quiet of the evening and the cool air of the propped-open windows. They stirred spoons through the potato and sweet corn.

Estrella and her cousins felt their mothers’ observations passed like the cazuela. A boy who would be a little bit handsome if he weren’t so starved and nervous sat at their dinner table, and the mothers worried that their daughters would all be pregnant from him by spring.

But when Estrella caught her cousins checking their lipstick in the backs of their spoons, she knew it wasn’t for this boy but for Bay. If they were watching the boy, it was for how Bay would react to him.

They waited to see if Bay would speak to him, which language he would thank her in when she passed the water pitcher or the salt.

To Estrella’s cousins, the boy from the sunken garden was a curiosity. Bay was an obsession.

Tía Jacinta leaned toward Estrella. “I think it’s a good thing,” she said, adding chili to her cazuela. Nothing made in this house was ever spiced enough for Tía Jacinta’s taste. “Pobrecita could use a friend.”

This time, *pobrecita* was Bay.

Abuela Magnolia gave a slow nod, looking toward Bay. “She’s lonely, that girl.”

Estrella tensed at how Abuela Magnolia did not lower her voice. But they were far enough down the table that neither the boy nor Bay could hear them.

Abuela Magnolia shook her head, clucking her tongue. “Sleeping alone in that house.”

“I’ll go and sleep with her,” Azalea whispered without looking up from her bowl, and both Calla and Estrella bit their napkins to keep from laughing.

“No, you won’t,” Azalea’s mother said, not looking up from slicing her knife through pieces of potatoes.

Heat twirled through Estrella’s face and forehead. She looked around, her cousins all in the same posture, faces bent to the table, shoulders a little hunched.

Their mothers had known about their crushes on Bay. Of course they had known. But now the fact that Estrella and her cousins saw their love mirrored in one another’s hearts made her worry about how much their mothers knew, if they could see into their daydreams.

After dinner, the grandmothers passed plates of coyotas, and they all cracked the sugar cookies in two, revealing the ribbon of brown sugar in the middle.



The boy looked at the soft, damp center with the wonder of having broken open an egg filled with confetti.

In the noise of the table and the breaking of sugar cookies, Estrella did not catch what her grandmother told Bay. But under the chatter of her cousins and their mothers, Estrella heard the thread of Bay's voice.

"Stay with me," Bay told the boy.

Not a question, or an offer. A command no less final than five grandmothers shoving the boy up the stairs.

"I live over there," she said, glancing at the windows as though the Briar house was across a dirt road instead of up a grass-covered hill. "I have the room."

Estrella felt the hearts of every mother and grandmother at the table fill. This was a thing Bay's grandmother would have done, offer a place to a strange boy.

The boy did not answer Bay Briar. He lowered his head, studying the deep amber inside the coyota. Estrella felt his shame like a palm on the back of her neck, his embarrassment that a pale-haired woman had to offer him a place in her house.

But he did not say no. He did not shake his head. And for a boy who said little more than grace for the things put in front of him, this was a *yes*.

After dinner, the boy stood in the kitchen doorway, hands in his pockets, looking like he wanted to pace but didn't want to get in the way. Estrella's mother handed him a dish towel and made room for him at the counter. Drying plates and spoons seemed to calm him as much as watching the snow of Azalea's flaked potatoes.

Bay had just brought handfuls of silverware to set the table for tomorrow's breakfast when she stilled, her eyes fixed on the window.

"Oh no," she said.

"What?" Dalia asked.

Bay set down the forks and the spoons.

She made a line for the front door so certain that none of the Nomeolvies girls dared to cross it. She threw the door open, and in the seconds before she pulled it shut again they saw him. A man on the grass in front of the stone house.

*Reid*, Bay called him. Reid, said in a way meant to make it sound like a greeting. But Estrella caught the apprehension under the name. The wavering in her voice stretched the single syllable.

He looked a little older than Bay, closer to thirty than twenty. He wore pressed slacks, the kind Estrella thought men wore only to church, but a shirt so wrinkled he looked like he'd slept in it. He kept his hands in his pockets, not in the way the boy did, as though he did not know what to do with them. This man seemed to rest his hands in his pockets as a way of reminding anyone watching how at ease he was in the world.

He had a frame not so different than the boy's. A few inches taller if Estrella had to guess, and almost as thin. But while the boy looked underfed, this man, Reid, looked like he had come this way. Ash and red wine stained his wrinkled shirt. Her grandmothers would have done something about that, fearing

what became of young men who drank and smoked more than they bothered with proper meals.

A knot grew in Estrella's throat, turning harder with each thread she drew between this man and Bay.

They both had that pale hair, the color of sand and shells. It held fast in the Briar family no matter how many brown-haired men and red-haired women they married. They both had eyes so light that a shift of sun could turn them from blue to gray. Fine freckles crossed the bridges of their noses like a dusting of nutmeg. Their noses had shapes so similar that, if it weren't for the difference in their jawlines and foreheads, Estrella would wonder if he was a brother Bay had never mentioned.

Estrella and her cousins spied between curtain panels.

"Should we invite him in?" Gloria asked.

Azalea laughed. "What do you think?"

"Look at her," Dalia said. "I don't know who he is, but I know her, and right now she wants to push him down the steps of the sunken garden."

They all saw it, the tightness in Bay's neck like she was trying to swallow a tablespoon of black pepper honey that would not go down.

Bay led Reid around to the side of the house, so Estrella and her cousins could not see them.

"Then maybe that's why we invite him in," Calla said. "To find out who he is."

"I have a better idea." Gloria pulled on the end of the

embroidered cloth Bay had just fluffed out for breakfast. The silverware clattered to the wooden table. "Let's do some laundry."

"What?" Estrella asked.

"Laundry," Azalea echoed, the word as light as a sun-bleached sheet.

Estrella listened for the sarcasm but didn't find it.

They followed Gloria to the laundry room, the tablecloth spilling from her arms.

The window gave them a framed view of Bay and Reid, walking the grass slope up to the Briar house. Calla sat on the windowsill, Azalea on the dryer, helping Gloria refold the tablecloth they had pretended needed a wash.

Dalia sprinkled lemon juice onto stained napkins. Estrella checked the pockets on their aprons and sweaters. Their mothers would let them spy on Bay and Reid only as long as they looked like they were doing something.

Estrella lifted the boy's clothes from the woven basket. The smell of iron was so strong on his shirt that she touched it lightly, cringing, waiting to find it starched with dried blood.

"It's the dirt," Calla said.

Estrella looked up.

"It's not blood," Calla said. "It's the minerals in the dirt."

Estrella shoved her hands into the boy's pockets, the second-nature checking that kept lipsticks and hairpins from going into the wash.

Her fingers found the rounded edges of something small. Wooden. She drew it out from his pocket.

A carved horse. Painted wings sprouted from its rounded back. The same as the ones she kept on a shelf and the one she had buried.

But this one was green. She had never seen one painted green. The ones she had left on her shelf were painted yellow, red, violet, orange, white. And the one she had buried, her favorite, had been indigo. This winged horse was as green as the trees of life in the sunken garden. Green as the dress she had worn when she found this boy.

Azalea's eyes held the same worry as when she stood under a ceiling of Estrella's starflowers. She fixed her stare first on Estrella and then on the green winged horse.

"What did you do?" Calla asked, shaking her head.

"Nothing," Estrella said, her voice pitching up. It was a lie and not a lie, a word said more in reaction than because she meant to say it.

Even though they'd found it in the boy's pocket, they all counted that horse as a thing belonging to Estrella. It was as much hers as the blue borraja clinging to her bedroom ceiling.

Her cousins fell quiet. They all watched the carved horse, as though it might beat its rounded wings and flutter from her cupped hands.

Whether all this was Estrella's fault or not, whether it was the fault of those little horses or not, they all understood this as she understood it. That wooden horse was a small, painted sign

that if they wanted to keep Bay, they had to do as Gloria said and care for this boy the land had given them.

Estrella had buried a blue wooden horse under the earth, and La Pradera had answered with this boy. A lost brother or son or lover who had turned up with a green wooden horse in his pocket.