

ROSES IN THE DRAGON'S DEN

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

First, a quick note from your author!

Hi, friends! I'm so excited to share the first three chapters of *ROSES IN THE DRAGON'S DEN* with you. After two and a half years of work on this, it's incredibly dear to my heart, and I hope it finds its way into your own or that of a middle grade reader in your life. Or both!

I should mention that the content is still subject to change between now and release day, though it will be very close to what you're reading now! Also, I'm no formatting expert, so this preview isn't as pretty as the real thing will be. (But based on what I know about who *will* be doing the formatting, the finished product is going to be suh-weet!)

When you finish, feel free to email me back and tell me what you think. I might even send you something just for reading. ☺

Ok, I'm gonna stop talking now because I'm SO EXCITED. Enjoy the preview! *dims the lights...*

KARINA

Our Famous Estranged Uncle

“Here, there be dragons,” Uncle Diego declared in a forced pirate voice. These were the first words any of us had spoken since we’d gotten on the Fernweh Express a few hours ago.

My twin brother, Charlie, raised an eyebrow, not looking up from the Spider-Man portrait he was sketching in a notebook. “Doesn’t that mean you don’t know where we are?”

Uncle Diego frowned, his lips a perfect crescent moon under his aviator shades. “How’d you know what that means?”

“I learned it in school. People used to put it on maps to mark areas where they didn’t know what was actually there. Duh.”

Duh was Charlie’s new thing. A step up from his last thing, which was *so?*

“Smart guy.” Uncle Diego turned back to the train’s window.

Even though it was our summer, we had a view of snowcapped mountains that reminded me of a scene on the front of a Christmas card.

“This is my first time traveling this route. I haven’t hiked these mountains yet. But I’m excited to spend a few easy days, eating some authentic Swiss chocolate and doing a little stargazing with my favorite niece and nephew.”

“Aren’t we your only niece and nephew?” I asked.

Nobody could look at our family and miss the blood between us, and people glanced all the time. Only nobody stared because of our looks. They stared because my uncle was famous, and he was unmistakable. When people saw the golden-brown skin, shiny raven hair, and tall, lean figure, they at least did a double-take to see if it was really him. Then they’d zoom in on the full eyebrows and the dimples, and they’d remember exactly where they saw him, be it a TV show or a fitness magazine cover.

“So you are.” Uncle Diego tinkered with the necklace at his throat, a thin silver chain with a spherical pendant he kept twirling between his fingers.

There was a time when I would’ve been proud to call him my only uncle.

That time passed when Charlie and I were in kindergarten. Our mom brought us to our uncle’s house for a mini-camping trip, despite the iron-gray clouds brewing in the desert sky that

night. When it came to camping, Uncle Diego went all out: s'mores, a striped bedsheet tent, and *borchata*.

We spent a few hours in the tent, playing with some toys Uncle Diego helped us win at a pizza place. The man was a Skee-Ball demigod, and as we learned from the photos he showed us from his travels, Skee-Ball wasn't his only area of strength. One day he pushed back against the Leaning Tower with one finger, and a few nights later he held the Pyramids of Giza on his shoulders. I'd heard stories of him surviving bear encounters, of the day he crossed the Sahara with only an empty water bottle and half a credit card, and I imagined he was the kind of invincible hero who could star in our bedtime stories—the kind who sweeps kids and princesses out of dragon-guarded towers.

When the sun went away, Charlie confessed to a fear of the dark and Uncle Diego brought out a hulking flashlight he probably used to do arm curls. “That better?” he asked. “Now you can see all the little crickets and those big, strong muscles of yours.”

And then this epic roar gurgled in the distance, probably no more than a couple football fields away, and I swear my heart was going to explode.

“And it helps us see dragons, too,” Uncle Diego said.

“Dragons?” Charlie repeated.

Somewhere over Uncle Diego's fence, a fiery light burned on the horizon and raced in our direction. The shrieks and moans repeated, growing louder.

I screamed and clung to my brother with the fierce grip of a *luchador*.

But Uncle Diego stood tall and lean and marched to the fence, cool as Superman.

“Don't let it eat you.” I gripped Charlie tighter. But after only seconds, Uncle Diego turned around, grimacing as his bare feet padded along the gravel between the blanket and the fence. Clearly he didn't understand the danger we were in, because he laughed.

“Aren't you going to fight it?” Charlie asked.

“C'mere.” Uncle Diego wrapped his arms around our shoulders. His warmth stopped my tears in their tracks. “Rina, Charlie, that's just the train. It won't hurt you. Watch—let's go look at it. I'll be right behind you.”

There's a famous drawing that circles the internet sometimes, where they ask whether it looks more like an ancient witch or a youthful princess. Well, for the longest time, I looked at that train and only saw the dragon spewing fire, sparks, and smoke. But after a minute, the wings

collapsed into tight metal boxes on squeaky wheels, the fire crystallizing into warmly lit windows, and I couldn't unsee the train blazing its path into the mysterious desert night.

"See?" Uncle Diego pumped his arms twice. "*Choo choo*. That's all it is. We're okay."

"It's not a dragon?" Charlie asked.

"Not that one, no." Uncle Diego winked. "But you know, even if it was a dragon, you guys still wouldn't need to be scared. Sometimes dragons are nice. And the mean ones?" He stretched his arms over his head, grasping at stars. "Your *tio*'s bigger than all of them, and so are you. If one of them ever took you away, I would find it and would punch it in its stupid face."

Charlie smiled, showing off his baby teeth. "Really? You would punch a dragon in the face?"

"Always. I would punch all the dragons for you two." He cleaved a fist through the air.

"And if a dragon ever took me away, you can punch that one, too. But you know, maybe try to give it a cookie first. Remember, nature's kind if you're kind." I'd heard him say that on TV before.

"Dragons like cookies?" I scrunched my nose.

"Well, doesn't everybody?" Uncle Diego tousled my hair and beckoned us inside.

We shuffled into the kitchen behind him, where he pulled a new pack of Oreos out of the cupboard. I immediately decided I liked him more.

"And if you meet a dragon that doesn't like cookies, that means we get all the snacks, right? More for us."

We nodded, fascinated by Uncle Diego's logic. Our mom would never have agreed, and he knew it. He showed off his bare palms, rubbed his hands together, and reached behind my ear. When he pulled his hand away, he held an Oreo. My jaw dropped.

"Does your mom know you hide cookies in your ears?" he asked.

I rubbed my earlobes, feeling for crumbs. "I don't. I swear!"

Charlie looked astonished and then appalled. "Gross, Rina."

"And Charlie! Look at you." Uncle Diego replicated his magic trick with my brother, to his embarrassment. "You two have some explaining to do. Don't tell your mom we're about to eat all these cookies at midnight. Deal?"

We nodded again. I wasn't going to argue.

Uncle Diego poured some cold and frothy milk in the glasses he pulled from his freezer. "Look. There are some scary things out there," he said. "I wish we could protect you from them all. But there many more beautiful things out there, like bees and—"

"Bees are scary, though," I argued.

“Even the scary things can be beautiful. Did you know bees make honey to put on your waffles? And spiders eat mosquitoes so you don’t get sick from them.”

I twisted a cookie open. No one would ever convince me spiders were good. “What about chupacabras? Werewolves? Or giant squids? What do they do?”

Uncle Diego took a few gulps of milk, made an *abbb* sound, and wiped his upper lip. “I don’t think I’d ever want to mess with a werewolf.” He winked. “But one day, I’ll get another break from my show and we’ll have a real adventure together, just the three of us. Then I’ll show you what I mean about all the beautiful things out there.” He paused, and crickets and cicadas chirped their symphony outside. The train had passed, carrying away the ghostly echoes of the dragon. Uncle Diego must’ve read my mind because he slid me another cookie. “Don’t be afraid of dragons, either of you. We won’t be seeing those around.”

Well, we wouldn’t be seeing him around either. At least, not for about seven years.

A tap on the window compartment door startled me out of my memory, rocketing me seven years ahead to the present. I turned my head, and a tall guy who looked about nineteen years old with bright-red hair, a black flannel, and suede hiking boots tapped his finger against the door. I pushed it open.

“Hey, sorry, our compartment’s full,” I said.

“Excuse me.” The guy turned a light shade of pink and swept his hand over the back of his neck. “I’m sorry to bother you all, but are you . . . are you Diego Rosas?”

Oh brother. Here we go again.

Uncle Diego flashed his million-dollar smile, one I liked to think Charlie and I inherited. Our uncle tipped his cap, and I understood why he wore it so low with those big aviators. He was trying to avoid conversations like this one. Still, he extended his hand. “Sure am. What’s your name, man?”

“Oh man, I knew it was you.” The traveler took a deep breath, wiped his sweaty palm on his jeans, and shook Uncle Diego’s hand. “I’m Evan. Dude, I want you to know I’ve seen every single episode of your show and have all your travel guides. I’m a huge fan. Do you think I could get a selfie with you?”

Uncle Diego took off his sunglasses. “Evan, good to meet you. Would you settle for a high five?”

Charlie and I had already heard this spiel a couple times in the airport, the train station, and everywhere. Uncle Diego didn’t like to do photos with fans anymore because he said it diluted the

magic of actually meeting somebody. Plus, it took away his privacy. One simple photo sometimes led to a hundred retweets, and suddenly Uncle Diego had stalkers in Rome.

Evan nodded. “Heck yeah, man, I’ll take a high five.” Their palms connected with a smack like thunder. “Can I have your autograph, too?”

“Sure thing.” Uncle Diego fished into his leather backpack for a pen. “Anything you’d like me to sign for you?”

“Oh. No.” Evan turned his pockets inside out, producing a wad of Euros, a rail pass, and a gum wrapper. “Uh, maybe you can sign my arm?” His eyes lit up. “Yeah. I’ll go home and tattoo your signature to my arm.” He rolled up his flannel sleeve.

The half-hearted, casual smile on Uncle Diego’s face suggested he’d heard this way too often. I, on the other hand, swept my phone out of my pocket and texted my brother: *Ugh*. Purple demon emoji. Uncle Diego uncapped a black marker with his teeth and made a flashy scribble across Evan’s freckled forearm.

Everything about these interactions boiled my blood. We hadn’t seen Uncle Diego in years, and still he let all these actual strangers hijack our time with him and give him hugs and express their undying adoration just because they saw him on TV. None of them knew him like Charlie and I, and after all the time we’d spent apart, we hardly knew him at all.

“Wow, this is so cool.” Evan beamed from ear to ear. “You inspired me to travel the world, Mr. Rosas.”

“Is that right?” Uncle Diego swept the finishing stroke on his autograph, the harsh Sharpie smell stinging the air. “Where are you from, Evan?”

Evan marveled at the fresh ink on his arm. “Uh, D.C., sir.”

“Just call me Diego.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“D.C.” Uncle Diego capped his marker, waved his hand over the signature, and dried the ink with a quick blow. “Home of the Lincoln Memorial, one of my favorite places in the US. Reminds me just how small I am and how big I can become.”

Even I had to admit that was deep.

“I’ve never actually been to it,” Evan confessed.

“Well, may you see everything you want to see, Evan. Including your own back yard.” Uncle Diego gave Evan another handshake.

“I will, sir.”

“Diego.”

“Well, uh . . . thanks, Diego. It’s cool to finally meet you. Sweet necklace you’re wearing, by the way.”

“Likewise, and thanks. Safe travels.”

Evan walked away with a spring in his step, bouncing toward the back of the Fernweh Express.

When my phone buzzed, three puking emojis from Charlie lit up my screen. I smirked at Uncle Diego. “So, how often does that happen?”

Uncle Diego popped his shades on and pulled his hat over his eyes again. “Every. Day.”

“Do you ever wish for something different?” Charlie asked.

Our uncle shrugged. “I have my grumbles sometimes. But I’d never trade it away. Somewhere down the line, I inspired that kid. That’s a good feeling.”

Seriously, people were crazy about my uncle, and not for the dragon-fighting, Oreomunching Skee-Ball warrior I used to know. They loved the man he disappeared to become. Around the world, he was known for his travel show, *Off the Beaten Path*. His program appealed to people who wanted to know things like where to have the craziest rafting adventure and where to safely snap an amazing photo of an active volcano. Often, he would tackle a new place with minimal resources and show his viewers how to survive. *Now here’s how to fight off a grizzly bear. Here’s how to stay warm on Everest. Here’s how to purify your own pee.* Things the average twelve-year-old really needs to know, right?

Practical or not, people watched, and that meant I had to put up with my fellow seventh graders squealing over him, along with all the school posters my gym teacher hung up with the speech bubble coming out of my uncle’s mouth: “*Eat right, exercise, and climb your mountain.*” Which he’s never said in real life, by the way.

I would always be proud of him, but the cost to his fame was that we hardly ever heard from him. We gave him a lot of grief for this at the airport, right until he revealed that June 2nd—the day after we’d arrive in Switzerland—was his birthday and that we were the only ones he invited to spend it with him.

And we hadn’t even realized today was his birthday.

After Evan left, Uncle Diego picked up one of his boots and flipped it upside-down. Gripping it by the ankle, he swatted the rubber heel a few times. All the while, my heart was breaking. I knew why my uncle always checked his boots before he put them on. One of his habits

was to check his footwear—and his bedsheets—for scorpions, spiders, and creepy-crawlies that like to sneak into warm, dark places. I knew this about my uncle, but until recently, I had no idea his birthday was coming up. “I’m going to the coffee cart. Want anything?”

Charlie wrinkled his nose. “Coffee? Gross.”

A metallic bang sounded beneath us.

The Fernweh Express literally shook and lurched as if it had gone over a nasty bump in the tracks, and my forehead hit the window with a hard *thunk*. The impact sounded worse than it felt, but it was still enough to rip my phone out of my hands, webbing the screen with deep cracks. Charlie lost control of his pencil and cleaved a jagged, messy line through his Spider-Man sketch. Uncle Diego had a white-knuckled death grip on his armrest.

His eyes went wide, and my heart responded with a leap against my ribs.

“Um,” Charlie said. “Are trains supposed to go *whumph* like that?”

As if in answer, the train bumped again. This time, I swear it teetered on its wheels a bit, shaking my view of the mountains. Instinctively, I reached for Charlie’s hand, my heart drumming on my bones. “Uncle Diego?”

Uncle Diego aimed a palm at us. “Just stay seated, all right? We’re okay.”

But when I looked outside our compartment door, passengers were doing anything but staying seated. They pushed from the back to the front in panicked globs. Women herded their children through narrow halls and doors. A man in a suit ran with a baby clutched firmly to his chest while a teenage girl pushed a man in a wheelchair.

“Do you think we should follow them?” Charlie asked. “Are there bombs or something?”

The intercom blared to life, and the air crackled with static. “This is your conductor speaking. We have an emergency situation on board. All passengers please—”

Another boom rocked the train.

This time, an orange glow painted the walls, seats, and windows. The Fernweh Express whistled, and I flashed back to when I was five years old, panicking in Uncle Diego’s yard.

It’s just the train, Rina. It won’t hurt you.

But this dragon of a train swept me up with my family, ready to zoom us all away on wings of fire. There was nowhere to brace. Uncle Diego stood and shoved the door open.

He’ll protect us. We’ll be okay.

The crowd had packed forward as far as it would go, banging on doors and windows and trampling over each other in panic. Smoke, thin and wispy, curled through the air, and my throat

rejected the fumes. I ducked down and covered my nose with my shirt, coughing until I thought my lungs would burst.

There was one more *boom*, and it was the loudest and most haunting of all. Uncle Diego turned and wrapped his arms around me and Charlie in a sort of cocoon, throwing his chest against my back with such immense force that all three of us hit the ground.

“Karina,” Uncle Diego coughed. “Charlie—”

Then the Fernweh Express rolled over, tipping me like a log against the wall. The windows flashed from milk-white to pea-green, and suitcases hammered together over my head. A hard, blunt force struck my temple, and the world faded to black.

CHARLIE

Happy Little Train Wrecks

I woke up with bees in my stomach and a fire in my skull. Ma always told me to be grateful I didn't inherit the migraines that ran in the family—Karina had them real bad—and here was my first one, like a train wreck in my head.

Train wreck.

I blinked until my vision swam into focus. I remembered the accident. Somehow, the Fernweh Express to Switzerland flew off its rail. My mind replayed our tio throwing his body over us like a shield and that burst of crisp-orange light, like flames.

Only now, the world was green.

Too green. Like emeralds.

Instead of snow-capped mountains and frosted ground, everything around me was covered in grass and leaves. The view couldn't have been more different from the sky-spearing, snowcapped fangs we saw from the train.

With concrete in my arms, I pushed off with my left elbow and made myself sit. The world flipped right-side-up again, revealing rolling hills all around me. I coughed into my fist, and my stomach lurched. Warm blood trickled down my arm. A scrape marred my skin from elbow to wrist. My jeans were ripped at the knees.

“Karina?” I called. My throat stung like I'd swallowed a thumbtack. “Tio?”

A bit stiff in the neck, I turned my head and studied the hill behind me, studded with smooth gray stones and lumps of earth that looked like they might burst open at any minute and release some kind of shaggy green monster. A crimson bird cawed overhead and tore across the sky. I rubbed my shoulders and then my throbbing temples. How had I been thrown so far from the train that I couldn't even see it anymore? That I couldn't see the mountains? In fact, there was no evidence I had even been through snowy land. The air was warm, about seventy-five with a breeze that smelled of pine, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Switzerland was nothing like how I pictured it.

“Karina,” I yelled, my heart leaping into my throat. “Tio, where are you?”

Where is anyone?

Fear drenched my palms in sweat. What if Karina and Uncle Diego hadn't woken up? Or what if the Fernweh Express spat me out and rolled on without me? If it crashed, tons of people should have been all around me. Luggage, torn leather, shredded metal, train tracks—anything.

I peeled myself off the ground, dusted my knees, and fished my phone out of my pocket, surprised to find it unbroken. *Whew*. Thirty-nine percent battery. No notifications. No service bars. And even though the sun blazed high above, the clock on my phone read ten at night.

I started for the hill, my calves protesting with every step. *Maybe I'm dreaming. This is some twisted nightmare, and I'm still asleep in a burning train. Or maybe I died.* All this greenery and too-perfect temperature did kinda look like Heaven, at least the way I pictured it. Hell wouldn't have been this green, or so I'd been taught.

When I approached the top of the hill, a thin, barely detectable plume of smoke appeared from the other side, charmed from an unseen source like a snake out of a basket. My heart rose in my throat, and I ran.

The train.

I expected to see my fellow passengers cleaning each other's wounds, dialing home, and helping each other out of the wreckage, sharing hugs and a round of *Kumbaya*. I wished this nightmare would end with a fist in the air and a freeze frame, Captain Underpants style.

But no. An empty, deserted train wreck stared back at me.

No passengers, dead or alive. Just the steaming metal husk of the Fernweh Express planted in the grass.

And that meant I was alone. No Tio. No Karina. Just a single, lonely Charlie.

Check the wreckage, my brain said. Comb through every cart, and look for signs of your family. Maybe I'd find them sleeping or see the conductor calling home. But my heart was a bloody mess, and in the epic war between my heart and brain, my heart won. *Cry*, it urged me like the devil on my shoulder. Obediently, I fell to my knees and bawled out a waterfall.

By the time I was a red-eyed, goobery mess and convinced my entire life was over, I saw my sister trudging up the hill with her pink hair in a tangle. And Mom always said I wouldn't get my way by crying.

"Rina." I wiped the tears from my face. "You're okay."

Karina and I met in the middle and hugged like we'd never hugged before. She smelled a little smoky, and she was almost as scraped up as I was.

Words poured from her like water from a bottle. “Oh my god, Carlos, I’ve been freaking out. Are you okay?” She grabbed my arm. “You’re bleeding.”

Most days I might’ve told her not to use my full name, but she got a pass this time. I wasn’t alone, and that was enough to make me laugh off my crying fit. “I thought we died.”

“What happened to us?” Karina asked. “Where’s Uncle Diego? What do you remember? The last thing I remember is hitting my head in the train car. Ay, Mom’s gonna freak out. We must have made national news by now. Does your phone work?”

I skipped to the last question, unable to keep up with Karina’s pace for asking them. “No service.”

Karina bit her thumbnail. “Mine didn’t survive.” She paused. “But we did. We’re lucky.”

“Lucky.” I rolled my eyes. “Sure.”

“I’m just saying—”

“I’m glad you’re looking on the bright side, Rina, but I don’t feel lucky at all right now,” I said.

“Then let’s change that,” Karina said. “Let’s search the train.”

I considered the metal monster in the field. Now that I wasn’t completely on my own, I was ready to face the wreck. Seven charred, broken train cars lay scattered in ruins along a seemingly infinite plain. Everything about it looked wrong. The landscape would have been fit for a Bob Ross painting if it weren’t scarred by a steaming skeleton of aluminum and leather. Happy grass. Happy hills. Happy train wrecks.

We were probably stupid to crawl back into the train that exploded and spat us out. We had no idea what had really happened. For all we knew, a bomb could’ve gone off and there could be more. Maybe there were terrorists in Europe blowing up railways. But we knew two things for sure: We needed help, and the wreckage was the best place to start.

My arms prickled when we ducked back into the train. The first car we explored was upside down, and some of the seats dangled from what used to be the floor. Suitcases and backpacks lay torn and open, but the weirdest thing was what we didn’t find: anyone else.

The Fernweh Express brimmed to the max with people when it departed, and yet every bit of evidence told us we were the only ones wandering the wreckage. I wouldn’t have been able to handle seeing any bodies, but I would’ve felt a lot better if someone else was in our situation. I doubted the passengers had all got up and left. So where were they?

We also didn't find any clues about where we were or any way to communicate with the world beyond the train. I looked for a radio but couldn't even find the conductor's cabin. The café car wasn't around either, which would've been nice because I was starving. From what I could tell, the back seven cars seemed like they were scattered around the field. And that was it. Karina and I checked the only other phone we could find lying on a seat. No signal. Even the Map app put our little blue dot on an empty grid.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Karina said. I think we'd both known it for a while, but neither of us wanted to name it. *Nowhere*. "Do you think someone's coming to rescue us?"

"Don't they monitor the railways for obstacles and stuff? I feel like somebody would've been here already," I said. "According to my phone, it's almost eleven. We should've been in Switzerland by five. So if we crashed somewhere in the middle, that would've left at least six hours for them to send a rescue team to come look for us. It can't take that long, can it?"

Karina didn't say anything. She bit her lip and dug her knuckles into her hips. She could have started crying and I wouldn't have made fun of her, but she didn't. She was a lot like our mom, tough and strong. Karina gathered her hair in a ponytail, sighed, and then knelt next to a random suitcase and unzipped every pocket.

"Whoa, hey, what are you doing?" I asked. "That's not yours."

"Looking for bandages and snacks. Help me."

"You can't just dig through other people's stuff."

Karina gave me the look she learned from our mom, only it made me laugh when my sister did it. "Where's our stuff then?"

Good point. I didn't know.

I opened a random duffel bag, where I found ankle socks, boxers, jeans, crisp button-downs, a pair of boots about my size, earbuds, and all the men's extras from deodorant to hair gel. Bandages weren't on this guy's packing list, but I did find some nutty granola bars. I tossed one to Karina and tore another open right away, feeling a little guilty at first. I promised myself if I ever met the owner, I'd share some Oreos with him or something.

Karina found bandages in another bag and managed to scavenge some snacks, but nothing our mom would be super proud of: chips, crackers, candy. I wasn't complaining.

The last car we checked turned out to be our own, and that's where we found what we really needed.

"Uncle Diego." Karina waved her arms, her eyes wide with fear. "Charlie, he's here."

He lay unconscious over one of the train seats, which flipped upside down and carried him in a lopsided L, his arms dangling under him and his knees bent side by side.

“Tio.” I ran to his side, my heart in my throat.

Karina grabbed one of his hands, calling his name with heavy breaths. “Wake up. We’re here.”

When Tio didn’t move, my blood ran cold. I pressed the back of my hand to his forehead, relieved to feel some warmth radiating from his skin. His lips were slightly parted, but his eyes were shut tight. I put my ear by his mouth, listening for breaths and hearing nothing.

Karina squeezed his hand. “Uncle Diego?” Her voice cracked. “Please wake up.”

When he didn’t answer, I gripped Tio’s shoulder and gave it a rocky shake, the way my mom did when I missed my alarm. “Hey.” I thumped his forehead. “Quit fooling around.”

“Charlie.” Tears burst from Karina’s eyes and carved smooth paths down her cheeks.

“What?” I bit back. “If this is his idea of some sick joke, it’s not funny. It’s stupid. This whole idea to come to Europe with him was stupid.”

“Stop,” Karina hissed. “You’re going to regret talking like that if he doesn’t wake up. Stop it right now or—”

“Or what? Huh?” I was on a slippery slope now, and I couldn’t calm myself down. “You’re gonna tell Mom? Good. I hope you do. Because in case you haven’t noticed, there’s a good chance we might not even see them again. So you keep threatening to rat me out, and I’ll keep jabbing and poking our stupid—”

Tio lurched and his eyes snapped open.

I leapt back against the wall, startled by the sudden movement. But the relief after that was like a warm hug.

Tio took in sips of air, rolling his shoulders and tilting his head back and forth. His eyes grew wider and wider as he soaked in the wreckage. “What the—”

I knew exactly how he felt.

Karina swatted Tio’s shoulder, fury in her eyes. “Don’t scare me like that.” She punched him again for good measure and slumped down against the wall, pulling her knees to her chest as the tears spilled freely. “I thought you . . .”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. She *Mom’d* me for barely tapping him, but suddenly he wakes up and she gets to jab him like Muhammad Ali? Okay. “How you feeling, Tio? Here, let me help you up. Are you hurt?”

Tio braced his weight on me. “We crashed.” It was more of a statement than a question. Luckily, he didn’t scream or reveal evidence of injuries besides a drop of blood crusted onto his forehead. He looked somewhere past my shoulders, and a faint light sparked in his eyes. “My hat.”

“Awesome,” I grumbled. I didn’t mention that I might have accidentally crushed his aviators a few minutes ago. “We crashed, but at least your hat’s okay.”

Tio let out something between a cough and a laugh. “That’s your ma’s sarcasm.”

“Nice of you to know that after all this time.”

He leaned on me until he could support his own weight. “Thank you.” He clapped me on the shoulder and turned to help Karina up, wiping her tears. “Hey, chin up, Rina.”

Karina buried her face in Tio’s shoulder. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Okay seems . . . generous, but look. We survived a train crash. Can you believe the luck? Both the good and the bad. Of all the things that could’ve happened in this world. We can be grateful.” He knelt, caught his breath, and picked up his hat. “Maybe your mom won’t kill me after all. Did you call her yet?”

Karina shook her head. “No signal.”

After he beat the dust off his hat, Tio put it on his head. He patted his pockets and fumbled around for his phone. “Maybe somebody has a hotspot or something. So we can send a message and let her know you’re okay.”

“That’s the thing, Tio,” I said. “We’re alone. Karina and I looked all around, and . . . there’s nobody.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Nobody? As in—”

“As in no bodies. There’s only us.”

“But that’s impossible.”

“Look out the window.”

Tio obeyed, and I watched him cycle through all the same realizations I’d struggled with on the hill. “What? Where’s the . . .” *Snow? Mountains? People? Cell signal?* He buried his fingers in his hair, pushing his hat back to the ground. “Never mind. Your mom is definitely going to kill me.”

KARINA

It's a Bat! It's a Cicada! It's . . .

We had two good things going for us: We had our uncle back, and we found our backpacks. Together, we retraced our steps through the carts one more time, sifting through wreckage and stuffing our packs with random goods from protein bars to compact mirrors. At one point, I unzipped a leopard-print suitcase and discovered a blue dress, a teddy bear covered in faded marker scribbles, and a passport belonging to a woman from Tennessee. My heart broke when I saw the passport. I didn't remove a thing—not even the half-eaten bag of M&Ms or the fully charged tablet. Matching its contents to an actual woman's identity made it feel wrong. Well, more wrong than I'd felt collecting items from faceless, nameless individuals.

I patted the teddy bear, zipped up the suitcase, and then pushed it into a corner. When I turned around, I found Charlie fishing a phone charger out of a bright-red bag. “A charger? Really, Charlie?”

“I'm at thirty-five percent, though.” He wrapped the cord around his wrist.

Uncle Diego applied a fresh bandage to his temple and tightened his backpack. He processed everything with minimal hysterics, rationalizing our situation as well as he could. Like me and Charlie, Tio didn't know how to explain the complete change of scene and lack of bodies, but he stood tall and put on his adventure face, the same way I had a writing face, Charlie had a soccer or drawing face, and our mom had a cooking face. We all had this really intense stare when we were focused on something. I could only imagine how our mom would have reacted over everything that happened. Jorge, our stepdad, probably would've lost his mind and started doing the rosary. But Uncle Diego stood tall. All things considered, we couldn't have picked a better person to get into a train wreck with.

“Here's what we know. We have no cell signal, no data, no remote communication.” Uncle Diego's first idea was to try the conductor's cabin. I was proud Charlie and I had already thought of that. “We wrecked somewhere between Florence and Switzerland, a roughly three hundred and fifty-mile gap. And we haven't broken any major bones. So now? We're going for help. Staying put won't do us any good.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “What if we miss the helicopters and rescuers and everything?”

“Someone should have been here a long time ago, Rina,” Uncle Diego said, confirming Charlie’s theory. “We gotta go to them.”

I slung my backpack over one shoulder. “Then I’m down to leave. Going through all this luggage is depressing.” I took another look at the Tennessee teddy bear, and my heart burst all over again. “How far are we going?”

“As far as we need to,” Uncle Diego said. “I’d maybe bring all your stuff, just in case.”

“In case what?” I asked.

“Exactly.” Uncle Diego nodded. “In case what. Always assume there will be a what. Make sure you have enough snacks, water, bandages, whatever you need. Shut your phones off. You’ll wanna save battery life in case we find good reception again. All we need is one call.”

“You don’t want a selfie with the train wreck first?” Charlie joked. “Sign my arm, please?”

I rolled my eyes, hoping Evan and the other passengers were okay.

“It’s just like hiking,” Uncle Diego said. “Hiking on uncharted lands, looking for lost civilization. That makes this sound like a lot more fun, right?”

I managed a weak smile. “Here, there be dragons?”

“Here, there be dragons.” Uncle Diego put on that pirate accent again and swung his fist in front of him. “We’re gonna be okay. Think of it as an adventure. If you see me freak out, then you have permission to freak out. But I’m Diego Rosas, and I promised your mom I’d take care of you. I don’t freak out.”

“Never?” I asked.

“Never ever.” Uncle Diego stepped out of the train car, and we followed him into the rolling greens. “And when you get home, you can tell your friends and brag about how cool you are, and your ma will never let me back into your life again. You’ll go back to the safety of the city, and I’ll slip quietly into the night.”

“So another seven years will go by before we see you again?” I asked. “Great.”

I didn’t mean to throw so much shade, but the last he knew, I was still into *Dora the Explorer* and Charlie’s career goal was “the red Power Ranger.” There was too much history in that gap. Charlie and I had a combined total of fourteen years of life between us since we’d last seen Uncle Diego. Fourteen birthdays, first days of school, and summer vacations. Did none of that matter?

Uncle Diego averted his gaze, taking a second before he responded. “That hurts, guys.”

Charlie shrugged. “Sure does.”

“Look. I know I haven’t been an active figure in your lives. But I do care, and I always did.” Uncle Diego put a thumb to the horizon, which was something I’d seen him do on his show to figure out when the sun would go down. “Let me get us out of here, and I promise we’ll make up for all that lost time. Every minute of it.”

“Then how do we get out of here?” Charlie asked. “We don’t even know where we are. What kinds of things could we run into? Scary animals and stuff?”

“You don’t have to be afraid of anything in nature if you know what you’re dealing with,” Uncle Diego said. “You just have to respect it, treat it right, and know how to respond. You see a wolf in the wild, and you earn its respect by making yourself bigger. You see a bear, and . . . well, you have to know what kind it is before you do anything.”

I tried to remember what he meant. Was brown bear *play dead* and black bear *try to scare it away*? How did Uncle Diego manage to fit so many random tidbits of nature information in his head? “What if we’re wandering around for days?” I asked. “How do we survive?”

“This kind of setting, we should be okay in. It wouldn’t be too different from camping on Mt. Lemmon, for example. A rolling green like this doesn’t hold a candle to a place like Everest.”

I thought about the posters up at school. The cheesy *Climb Your Mountain* ones. Everest was Uncle Diego’s personal mountain—his biggest challenge. He was one of the youngest people to attempt the climb, and he almost didn’t survive. But not only did he reach the top, he went back a second time and filmed it all, teaching his viewers about the dangers of the cold and the funny ways elevation can mess with the mind.

We walked for what felt like hours, until I couldn’t ignore the burn spreading up my legs and the sweat beading down our faces. I started to get the sense that we’d been walking through the plains for days. Uncle Diego made us stop, drink, and eat protein bars a couple times, and we’d sit on the ground where he’d stretch his legs and touch his toes.

“I’m sure we’re getting close to something,” he said. “Any minute now.”

Charlie was the one to finally say what I’d been thinking for a while. “Tio, I’m exhausted.” He curled his hands behind his head and caught his breath. “Can we just rest our eyes?”

The sun had finally met the horizon, throwing the plains and hills into a pinkish glow.

Uncle Diego shielded his eyes with a palm and squinted into the distance. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep going a little more? We could be five minutes away from a town or something.”

“My legs are on fire,” Charlie said. “This is the most I’ve ever walked in my life.”

“Karina? Do you want to stop?”

I brushed the back of my hand over my forehead. “Please.”

After a brief moment doing that famous Rosas concentration stare, Uncle Diego agreed. “Real quick then, okay?” He pointed to one of the hills beside us. “Let’s get on the other side of this hill and see if it’ll give us some shade.”

We moved around the giant hill, and as Uncle Diego predicted, it threw a patch of land into shadow. It had also been concealing something strange: a squat cylindrical monument resting just beyond the base of the hill. The object might’ve been polished stone, a shimmering gray obelisk adorned with a huge carving of a wheel, the kind I imagined a pirate would use to steer a ship. Jagged and narrow, the stone leaned toward the hill on a steep angle. Had it been standing straight, it might have been about as tall as Uncle Diego.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I’ve never seen that in my life.” Uncle Diego dropped his backpack at his feet and approached the stone, wild curiosity in his eyes. He used a finger to trace the wheel, which was chiseled with smaller symbols on the spokes. “Let’s see . . . we’ve got a rose and a tree and a teardrop and a crescent moon . . . This looks like maybe the sun . . . How have I never heard of this?”

“Never? In all your travels?” I asked.

“I have no idea where we are. Maybe I hit my head too hard. I have no knowledge of anything like this in Europe, or anywhere.”

“Do you think it means we’re close to help?” Charlie asked. “Maybe it’s a historic landmark by some sketchy little town off the maps?”

“Could be,” Uncle Diego said. “Maybe you two can rest in the shade for a bit and I’ll go see if we can get any closer to help.”

“I don’t think we should split up,” Charlie said, pulling the words right out of my mouth.

Uncle Diego crossed his arms, squinting like he was running through a hundred scenarios in his mind. “All right. We’ll rest here together. But not for long, okay? I didn’t sign you guys up for a camping trip. We need to get ourselves to Switzerland or get you two back home.”

Charlie and I exchanged shrugs. “We don’t mind camping,” I said, though every syllable hurt my soul. “For a little bit, I mean.”

So we sprawled out in the shadow, took off our shoes, and enjoyed a meal of granola bars, water, and chewing gum.

“Dinner of champs,” Charlie said.

Uncle Diego laughed. “Right? I’d really prefer some *carne asada* right now, but all we need are a few candles and we’d have a five-star meal.”

The thought of beef wrapped in warm tortillas made my stomach rumble. That was one thing Charlie and I loved about our stepdad. Jorge rocked the *carne asada*.

I stretched out on the ground, letting my hair fan out on the grass. The sun had almost completed its descent below the horizon, throwing the sky into a light tinge of purple. “It’s so nice outside,” I said. “So quiet and peaceful. I sort of understand why you do this.”

“I love everything about it,” Uncle Diego said. “The things it can teach you about the world around you and about yourself. You don’t get the depth of that experience in front of a screen.” He crossed his legs and brushed his palm over the grass. “Just look at that stone. That sunset. These plains. Doesn’t it all make you feel like you’re a part of something bigger?”

I smiled, but Charlie looked disinterested. “Speaking of phones.” He pulled out his smart phone and powered it up. “Still no service. But apparently it’s two forty-three in the morning.”

“And the sun’s barely going down,” Uncle Diego marveled. “This doesn’t fit the time zone.” He dug through his own backpack, brushing aside a rope and a pair of jeans before producing a cracked leather book. Uncle Diego unwound the strap that held it together and coiled it in his hand. “I need to make some notes here.”

The first time I saw him take out that journal in Florence, my heart leapt. I loved paper and notebooks and filled many diaries of my own. Uncle Diego kept different kinds of notebooks, some for tickets and photographs, some for rubbings and drawings of interesting things he found, and some he purely enjoyed to write in.

He flipped the diary open and scribbled a few notes. When he finished, the sunset cast a melancholic gleam in his eyes. “Guys, I’m sorry about all of this. I wish we were doing this under better circumstances. But this moment? This here is perfect. If you really listen, I think I can hear the wind.”

I shut my eyes and concentrated, letting the breeze sift through my hair. For a second, I almost forgot how the Fernweh Express derailed my life only hours before—and the strange place I’d woken up in. For this second, Uncle Diego was right, and everything was perfect.

But then I heard the wind whispering.

And it wasn’t a gentle whisper, the kind friends used to share secrets. The wind was cold, the kind used to whisper a curse. The harder I concentrated, the louder it grew and the more I hated it. My eyelids flew open. “Uncle Diego?”

He held up a finger and shushed me. Even Charlie looked creeped out, his lips in a perfect circle as the breath of the wind intensified to a cold, voiceless shriek, penetrating the air in every direction.

“Cicadas?” Charlie guessed.

“Shh,” Uncle Diego hissed.

Charlie swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. He fidgeted with a blade of grass. “Bats?”

“Be quiet,” Uncle Diego ordered. “I’m trying to figure out what that is.”

Then came the harsh sound of a *whoosh* beating metronomically from the sunset . . . the sound of something cleaving the air, the way a parachute snaps open.

After hours of being alone, the unexplained *whoosh* and the shrieking wind raised the hair on the back of my neck. I’d never heard anything like this back home.

“Wings,” Uncle Diego said.

I crinkled my brows. “Wings?”

Uncle Diego pointed into the sunset, and the last thread of hope I had for the Fernweh Express and our way home came unspooled. Maybe that thread was my sanity. Uncle Diego hadn’t been kidding. The source of the *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh* had leathery green wings that spanned as big as five train cars laid end-to-end. The creature rose over the horizon, flapped upward, and made a deliberate beeline in our direction. In fact, I was certain the glowing emerald eyes were drilling straight into my soul as it moved, a gold serpentine tail whipping back and forth behind it like a pendulum.

Charlie gulped. “Not a bat.”

“Not the wind,” I whispered.

There was no mistaking what it was, even though I’d never seen one before. Any other day, I could identify one in a book or a movie with a thousand percent certainty that I would never encounter one in the real world.

But wherever I was now, it couldn’t be farther from Europe.

Not even Switzerland was home to dragons.

“Rina? Charlie?” Uncle Diego threw on his boots—without checking them—and scrambled to his feet as an orb of fire hurtled from the dragon’s mouth to the crest of the hill. “Run.”

Wanna find out what happens next? Here are a few things you can do to make the wait feel shorter:

- Mark [ROSES IN THE DRAGON'S DEN](#) on your to-read pile on Goodreads!
- Follow Jacob on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) for the latest updates on the book, and watch for the cover reveal in early 2019!
- Check out the [ORDER OF THE BELL trilogy](#) on Amazon.
- Listen to the ROSES IN THE DRAGON'S DEN [playlist](#) on Spotify.

Thanks for reading!

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

