

Dark and Dreary Sneak Peek

Note to Readers: This book is still in the drafting stage, so expect some changes to this scene before it makes its way into the final book!

At least I don't have to watch them die.

That's what I keep thinking to myself, over and over again, as I relive the memory of my uncle, Ramon. If I have to see my family's lifeless bodies, the ruined fragments of immortality in their pale faces, at least I don't have to watch them die.

They were already gone when he got there.

The memory starts with his first footfall onto the rich red and gold Persian carpet of my grandparent's entryway, its pattern chasing around and through the colors like a maze. It's been years since my uncle entered this home, and I can feel his apprehension in that first footstep. Despite his picture hanging in the hallway, this house, the safe base of all his childhood marvels and teenage tantrums, isn't his home anymore. It hasn't been for a long time.

Following his actions from that day, I shut the front door behind me. With him, I put my hand in his pocket to pull out a crumpled piece of paper. Before he calls out, alerts his family that he's here, he needs to read the note one last time.

It's written on his father's expensive stationery, embossed with his name. *From the Office of Frederico Canto.*

As if he needs an office. *My father hasn't worked a day in his life*, Ramon thinks as his fingers curl into a fist. *He doesn't need to, not when he and the rest of my family leech off honest, hardworking people's labor through their investments like they've leached off their victim's time, the parasitic—*

As Rosie, it takes all of my willpower to keep my own thoughts separate from my uncle's seething, swirling fury. It surprises me, the venom in his anger, especially when I notice the words written on the note. With Ramon's experience, I recognize the handwriting as his father's, my grandfather's.

To my son,

I am ill. In fact, I am dying. And I am sorry.

Please come home.

I know I don't deserve it. I know I have wronged you.

Come anyway.

Tonight, 5:00. Your mother is making steak.

-Dad

My uncle rubs his thumb over the words, and I realize he's reading them, too. His anger softens, though it doesn't go away. Not after they had him committed, destroyed his life so thoroughly he almost wishes someone would hum it all away.

Frederico's right, he doesn't deserve it. But he's dying, and he's my father.

Ramon calls out into the house. "Mama! Dad! I'm here, so you can send out your friends in the white coats to take me back to the asylum now, if that's your plan!"

No response.

Ramon is more irritated than concerned. After all, it was his father who asked *him* to come, not the other way around. The least the man could do would be to show up.

But as Rosie, I'm holding back a scream. I know why this house is so quiet. I know what Ramon is about to find around that corner.

Don't go any further, I want to beg him. Please. Stop here.

But I'm the silent intruder here, and even though Ramon's thoughts dance with mine in a halting ballet, he thinks it's a solo performance. He has no idea that someday there will be someone here with him.

He takes one more step, then another. Calls out again. Ignores the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Of course he's nervous, the clammy palms and staggered breath. He's seeing them for the first time since his release from the psych ward. That's the reason it feels like something's wrong.

One last step through the empty parlor, and then he turns into the kitchen.

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"No!" I cry, pulling out of the memory.

I'm back in my living room, standing across from my uncle. The sunset light through the window is painting his face in shades of yellow and red, a good fit for the anger-tinged thoughts in his memory from so long ago. How is it that I know the colors of his thoughts, but his face is still one of a stranger?

"You can't have seen it all that quickly, Rosie," Ramon accuses. "You need to finish."

"I don't want to see this," I say, taking a few steps back. The touchstone that holds my ancestors' memories, which before seemed to fit so easily in my hand, digs into my palm. "I don't want this memory."

Ramon clears the distance between us in just a few steps and grabs my arm hard, shoving his face close to mine. "And you think I do?" he says, his breath hot in my face. "You think I want to see my mother, my father, my brother-in-law Barry this way? This is what I see when I close my eyes each night, every time I blink. Always, they are there. *Always.*"

In the edge of my vision, I can almost glimpse the tears clinging to the tips of my eyelashes.

"I don't want to see this memory," I repeat, trying to tug my hand away.

"I don't want you to see this just to torture you," he says, pulling me back. "You need to bear witness, just as I have all these years. We bear witness because we can. Because we *must.*"

"Why me?" I ask. "Why now?"

"First, you need to see," he says, finally letting go of my arm. I rub the spot, my tanned skin a bright red. "*Then* we talk."

Taking a shuddering breath, I close my eyes and rub the touchstone once more, just in time for the uncle of long ago to take his first step onto his parents' Persian rug.

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Ramon finds his mother first.

She's slumped over the white marble counter in the kitchen, half-seated on one of the island stools, and at first, he thinks she's just passed out. He rushes forward, shouting out so his father and sisters might hear.

"Mama!" he says again, shaking her with increased panic. "Mom!"

I try to pull away from Ramon's consciousness as much as I can as he calls out to her, as he pushes back her hair to reveal her glazed face. Usually in memories I try to sink in further, experience it rather than watch, but this time I curse the fact that it's his eyes I'm looking through, because it means I can't turn away during the moment he realizes she's gone.

He looks around wildly, the air suddenly either too thin or too thick to breathe, maybe both. Ramon went to a semester at least of med school before he lost his scholarship, but there's not even a thought in his mind to start CPR. He doesn't grab the landline to call 911. There's a strange, tilted quality to the memory that makes me think he might be going into shock.

"Papa!" he yells out hoarsely, stumbling away from his mother's body and out through the door of the kitchen into the formal dining room beyond. "Claudia! Anyone, please help!"

That's when he sees his father's body, pale and staring.

Frederico's note had proven to be prophetic. He *had* been close to death.

"No," Ramon mutters, leaning against the table to keep from toppling over. "No no no no no..."

"Maya! Maria!" He screams, barely holding himself up from the dining room table. Can he even check their room? If they're there, lifeless, it might just break him forever. Maybe they were at school, at a friend's house...

With a sudden chill, Ramon remembers something, a snippet of words in Daniel's voice, my father's voice. It's a memory within a memory, and I can't quite catch the sound of it, just its echo in Ramon's thoughts. He recalls how my father told him Claudia and her husband, Barry, had moved back home after he lost his job at the firm.

She's almost nine months along... *Oh, please let them not be here.*

Ramon tries to shout out his older sister's name, tripping over himself on his way to her old bedroom, but barely any sound escapes at all.

The door to her old bedroom is ajar, and Ramon practically falls into the room, shoving it open further.

There's a body on the ground, but it isn't Claudia. Barry's stretched out on his stomach, his face hidden in the crook of his elbow. He must have heard them coming, Ramon thinks. His other arm is twisted behind his back, as though they held him down. His hair has started to go gray in the last few months since Ramon has seen him, despite his young age.

Ramon leans over to turn him around, look at his face, when suddenly someone grabs him from behind.

He bucks back as a reflex, a lurching panic taking hold, but his attacker wraps an arm around his neck, holding him tight. He spreads his other hand over Ramon's face, and I taste sweat and metal

on a stray finger that finds my uncle's mouth.

Ramon reaches up to pull the hand away, and he's just staring to pry the fingers off his face when the man behind him starts to sing.

He's singing Ramon's song. I've never heard it, but I recognize it immediately, familiar with its story from my uncle's face and mind. Its melody is low and rhythmic, seemingly simple at first, but layered with a surprising amount of complexity in its intervals.

The sudden influx of memory is familiar too, and I sense Ramon's mind sinking into the onslaught of time and recollection just as I did when my cousin Felipe drained his memories into me, striving to rid himself of the one driving him to murder. The scenes crash and break onto each other like ocean waves, rising and falling with the storm inside his head:

A teenage girl's face, familiar from my father's sketches of his twin sisters. *"C'mon, Maya, just take the test for me. You already took it once..."*

The now-familiar scowl of my grandfather Frederico as he unties his tie in the low lamplight of his bedroom. *"I just don't know what to do with that boy, Alexa. He's out of control..."*

A mustached man, solemnly watching a train ride into a dusty station. *"I know you want to fight, mijo, after all that has been taken. But in America, we'll have a chance for a fresh start. For peace."*

Ramon's collapsed on the ground, though I didn't notice it happen, and neither did he. The arm that was around his neck is gone, but he still can't breathe, not with his family's stolen time threatening to drown him.

He staggers to his feet, out the door, fighting off phantoms of his father's voice, his mother's smile.

I can fix this.

Desperate, he collapses on the chair next to his father's body, barely able to see the real, solid world in front of him. Trembling, he reaches out a hand and places it on his father's cheek.

The melody doesn't come at first, but he forces it out through his lips, a hail-mary of music. His father's song is bold, confident, but there's always been a layer of longing in it, and Ramon clutches to that emotion like a lifesaver in the midst of a sea of competing memories.

Give him his memories back, he pleads. *Save him*. If he can give his father back his time, revive him just enough to save him...

His mother isn't a hummer, but his father can fix this. Fix her, if only he would open his eyes. "Open your eyes, Papa," he pleads aloud. "Just open your eyes."

The song tastes like tears on his lips.

His father's eyes remain closed.