



## *Chapter One*

### *Adoro*

*I entered the courtyard. Delicate petals bathed in amethyst and pearl surrounded me, bid me welcome. Even the sublime portal, half of a circlet the color of the first snow, knew their names.*

*My heart laughed and I spun around.*

*Left, right.*

*Back, forward.*

*Around and around*

*I climbed upon the top of the portal. It beckoned me forward like the call of a siren.*

*No, it was much sweeter.*

*It knew no poison.*

## *I Thirst*

*It remained unstained, tainted by no defilement,  
tarnished by nothing.*

*It was free.*

*It was everything.*

*The portal grew...*

*Larger, fuller, deeper*

*I was in a palace of stone white. I moved to the rhythm of  
the music.*

*The Music.*

*It was here.*

*A music beyond music.*

*My vision blurred and, once again, I stood before the  
portal of flowery wonder. And, beyond the portal, was a great  
shroud of mist.*

*What lay beyond? I had forgotten.*

*All was lost.*

*No, all was found. The portal, once entered, lost the  
world behind it...*

*Baila.*

*Baila, Rebecca.*

*I opened my eyes to the sparkling sunlight of Easter  
morning and recalled.*



## *Chapter Two*

*Te*

It was the first day of Lent.

*Ash Wednesday.*

My eyes were fixed intently upon the Crucifix before me, silently praying a wordless prayer, as sweet waves of harmonic voices allowed me to travel to another dimension. In this moment, I did not know exactly what I was praying. Yet it existed, and I understood...understood without understanding. It was a thought, a feeling, a glimpse of the moment and, perhaps, the past and future.

I turned quietly to my mom, who was, as usual, singing along, her strong, triumphant voice holding

close the words, "Let it be done." My heart smiled, and it was then that I saw the unfamiliar, solitary figure.

He was tall, with golden brown hair and eyes that brought color to the auditory waves of the choir. His shirt, white as the wing of a dove, shone brilliantly, a harmonic counterpoint to the deep azure of his tie. He was walking slowly, making his way from pew to pew with an offertory basket in hand. His countenance revealed an expression of peace—yet did not seem to be completely relaxed out of formality—and something else that I couldn't quite comprehend at the time.

When he neared our row of pews, I realized that I might have been staring, so I purposely averted my eyes slightly, pretending to be enthralled by the pews to my left. There was another reason, too, but I couldn't pretend to guess at its significance.

Despite my precautions, I soon realized that I was seated at the end of the row. *Great.*

Great? Why did it matter?

Yet I still turned, quickly facing forward, when, despite the much more dominant sound of choir music, I heard light footsteps gradually growing more pronounced. As I placed our envelope in the basket, a flash of gold appeared before my eyes, fluttering to the ground in a brief displacement of air. Yet I barely noticed, my heart still pounding strangely in my chest. I cleared my throat, turning again, in the most nonchalant manner possible, to my right. As I handed him the basket, his eyes met mine for an instant, an unreadable, yet penetrating, gaze illuminating his face. Then, he was gone.

I looked down at the floor, reaching quickly to retrieve the object that had flashed before my eyes.

It was a folded piece of paper, golden in color, that read, "For you."

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

I closed my eyes as the coolness of ashes gently marked on my forehead became the Sign of the Cross.

The Sign of the Cross before which I now stood.

*An outer sign of an inner grace.*

And a prayer. An embrace.

And, once again, I was drawn into the Song, the Beauty surrounding me. Yet, throughout the rest of Mass, I also somehow sensed the newcomer's presence without seeing him. He had seemed, by my brief observation, to be seamlessly woven into the fabric of the church and, yet, there was, at the same time, something so entirely distinctive about him, something that marked him as very different from the rest of the parishioners and, truly, from anyone that I had ever encountered. The thought crossed my mind that I was just nervous, and a vision of my reluctance in high school to introduce myself to an exchange student from Spain flashed before my eyes. I had watched with fascination this singular figure, unknown and mysterious, from a distance. Yet I somehow understood that this was something more.

At the end of Mass, I put on my jacket and grabbed my purse, still feeling, despite myself, the need to appear busy. I looked at my mom. She seemed to be searching for something in her purse. I couldn't help

but smile. My mom's purse was a filing cabinet, a collection of a million years...only without any form of labeling system. I noticed with amusement a movie ticket from two years before.

*And, since I'm waiting...*

I sat down again, opening the note that I had retrieved from the floor.

There was a single word within, type-written in a flowery font like the words on the front:

*Intermission.*

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. *Well, that was random...*

"Rebecca!"

I looked up to observe a short, dark-haired girl waving frantically from behind the last row of pews in the center aisle. Her greeting had only been a loud whisper at most, yet her hands indicated more extreme sentiments. A contagious smile lit up her face.

It was Adriana, my best college friend...no, my best friend since the tenth year of my life.

I quickly stashed the note in my purse, tapping my mom lightly on the shoulder.

"Hey, Mom. I'm going to talk to Adri for a sec."

My mom nodded distractedly, still fumbling with her purse. I walked towards the back of the church and soon reached Adriana. She was still smiling, more widely than usual.

"Okay, dude, you look like you're on a mission."

Adriana continued to grin and bobbed her head excitedly. I must have given her a weird look because she was barely able to stifle a fit of laughter.

I lifted a finger to my lips. “No hyenas in church. Of course, you could just *say*, ‘LOL’.”

That didn’t really help matters; the two of us automatically burst into laughter. I grabbed Adriana’s hand like a young schoolgirl, and pulled her towards the back section of the church. I glanced backward for a second, hoping that my mom would figure things out. I had left my cell phone in some undetermined place in the house.

I stopped before the door, dipping my finger into the small stone basin before me. I only had a moment to touch the coolness of the holy water to my forehead before Adriana made an attempt to drag me out of the church. An elderly usher, upon observing us, cocked his head to one side as if to establish the view that aliens had taken over the planet. I smiled apologetically as Adriana whisked me away, but not before I saw the beginnings of a smile form in the man’s large, gray eyes.

*Okay, so maybe they were nice aliens.*

I closed the door lightly, amazed that I accomplished this much with Adriana’s strange, yet not particularly anomalous, mood.

*There is an unspoken pact between best friends that stipulates the following:*

To induce laughter, all you have to do is *look* at your partner-in-crime—even in the absence of said crime.

A few days earlier, Adriana and I had been browsing books at the local library. I happened to turn around and look at her...and that was it. The man who

“loved to laugh” in Mary Poppins had nothing on us. And the man browsing the books next to us had nothing but a vindictive nature.

And today, on Sunday of all days, and in front of church, of all locations, that was exactly what happened.

I rolled my eyes. “You should be excommunicated.”

“Oh yeah? Because I’m the one who celebrates the doorknob’s birthday? Surely that defies some sort of moral standard.”

“Not at all. The doorknob is one of the most important inventions yet,” I responded dryly.

Adriana snorted and the two of us burst into laughter once again. After the sugar in the air had dissipated, I eyed Adriana again with mock seriousness.

“Enough of this. What’s up with the drama y misterio?”

“Your tendency to randomly insert Spanish words into everyday dialogue...or *monologue*, rather...” Adriana smiled mischievously.

I glared at her, pretending to ready a sword in the air.

“What I was saying,” Adriana continued, brushing away my invisible weapon as if it were a fly, “is that that very tradition of yours connects to the matter at hand. In fact, it almost *answers* your question.”

Her eyes twinkled with amusement, seeming to take pleasure in my complete and utter confusion.

(Which, of course, she did.)



I rolled my eyes again. "Thou speaketh in riddles."

"I hate Shakespeare."

"And I hate loud, discordant so-called 'music' defined so appropriately by the term 'heavy metal rock,'" I pronounced, enunciating each word deliberately and with clear distaste.

Adriana burst into laughter again, seeming to enjoy a private joke.

"Well?"

"Well," she said, "it so happens that there's a salsa dance at the park gymnasium the Friday after next at precisely 8 PM. Wanna go? We could grab Chelsey and it would be a girls' night out."

She smiled sweetly, demonstrating her expectation of my reaction.

The local "park" was ironically as much defined by "inside" activities as outside. As a child, it had defined my every summer.

I stared at Adriana, this time in true disbelief.

"Since when have you been interested in dancing?"

"The last time I checked, I wasn't the one who tripped over a glass container of sugar that I had myself dropped...after, of course, having received several bruises from an attempt to retrieve a flip-flop that had somehow ended up in the sink."

"I suppose the contents of that unfortunate container were symbolic?"

"Possibly," Adriana snorted.

"Anyway, dude, what's up with the dance? What's the *real* reason behind your sudden interest?"

"Does there have to be a 'real' reason?"

"Yes."

"Okay. My favorite member of Rising Potatoes took up an interest in salsa dancing and will be present at the event."

Adriana always seemed to be obsessed with obscure bands. This was the loudest and most obnoxious of them all.

"Nooo!" I screamed, mimicking Luke Skywalker to the best of my ability.

Several people turned around, eyeing me with curiosity...and either slight amusement or annoyance.

I cleared my throat. I did not frequently exhibit my insane tendencies in public. I turned back to Adriana. The smile of amusement touching her lips had reached her eyes.

"I love to dance, whether I'm good at it or not," I lifted an eyebrow like a Vulcan before continuing with a glare. "So, despite my reservations as to the guest list..."

Adriana snorted again.

"...I'll attend the event."

"Good. I'll notify Chelsey of your decision."

"She already knows? I must say, I'm...offended. Unlike her, you've known *me* since fourth grade."

"Dude, she's in my Saturday art class. You're not."

"I was just joking."

"I know."

"Anyway, I'd better get going."

"Me, too."

"See you on Friday at 8, then?"

"Indeed."

I heard a familiar step behind me.

"Hi, Mrs. Veritas!"

"Hi, Adriana! Heard that you got a new job...how's that going?"

"Well, it's a *job*, but it's going well," Adriana replied with a smile.

"She's in Adriana Sanctuary," I said, grinning at Adriana, "all those antique CDs."

Adriana put on her best stuck-up Nineteenth Century English Noblewoman expression.

"I'll have you know," she retorted with assumed haughtiness, "that we have an assortment of selections to entice many different tastes. All varieties of heavy metal music CDs."

"A *wide* variety of musical selections for sure," I muttered, grinning.

Adriana pretended to ignore me and continued, "From classic caveman metal..."

She stole a mischievous glance at me.

"...to Rising Potatoes."

We both burst out laughing. My mother eyed us with the "aliens taking over the world" expression that we had received many times earlier. Minus the curiosity, that is. She had long given up trying to understand our many inside jokes.

"Well, girls," she eyed us warily, "time to go."

I gave Adriana a hug. "Parting with such sweet sorrow, dude."

"Farewell, dude."

Our constant switching between two seemingly opposite dialects—that of a bygone century and that of

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the current century that my mom would rather disregard—was likely whiplash for the random observer. For my mom, it was something far from out of the ordinary...she just thought that we were weird.

I grinned.

*Ciao.*