

THE WORLD BETWEEN BLINKS



AMIE KAUFMAN
AND RYAN GRAUDIN

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BETWEEN
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FOR TRACY GRAUDIN AND PHILIP KAUFMAN.
WE REMEMBER OUR ADVENTURES WITH YOU EVERY DAY.



THE WORLD BETWEEN BLINKS IS ALWAYS THERE.

It is everywhere and it is nowhere.

It is in every wreck, every abandoned lot, every city block, every scraggly patch of woods. It's the place you glimpse out of the corner of your eye, reflected in rain puddles and car windows. Blink. There and gone. Shoved just out of the streetlight's reach.

People see it every day, but they rarely pay attention. The grown-ups are too busy doing grown-up things—like ordering coffee or picking up dry cleaning—to stop and look, really *look*. Most kids are too distracted to examine it for long. They see the boarded windows and the DANGER: KEEP OUT sign posted by the entrance, and they shrug and go on with their lives.

Most kids.

But there are those who pause a little longer. The daydreamers—kids with burrs on their socks, who name sticks after legendary swords and call out the names of lost cities in their sleep.

They stare into the dark places: blink, blink.

They see.



MARISOL

MARISOL LOVED THE AIR AROUND THE OCEAN.

It smelled mostly of salt, yes, but there were so many other things happening inside it too. Sunscreen and crying seagulls and driftwood discoveries and waves washing castles back into sand. One breath held all of this.

When Marisol was younger, she used to think that's why her lungs felt so crowded whenever her family traveled to South Carolina, but now she knew the reason was more scientific. Something to do with altitude. La Paz, her home city in Bolivia, was surrounded by mountains, and Folly Beach was, well—a beach.

Every summer when Marisol Contreras Beruna went to her grandmother's house, her body had to adjust. This summer, the very first one after Nana's death, her heart was a big part of that equation.

“We’re almost there!” Her mother’s accent changed too, shifting to fit the southern Lowcountry around them. It always did, as soon as the drive from the airport became green marshes stretching forever. “Are y’all excited?”

Victor, her thirteen-year-old brother, grunted.

“¡Contesta! Tu madre no está pintada,” their father chastised from the driver’s seat.

Victor’s second grunt at least sounded like a word. “No.”

“No?” Dad protested.

“I’m creeped out,” Victor replied. “Do you think the beach house is haunted now?”

Her mother’s lip trembled in the rental car’s side mirror, just above its printed words: OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR.

There were almost tears in her eyes, which Marisol hadn’t seen since the funeral last winter. Victor, looking out of the opposite window, had no idea.

Brothers are treasures—that’s what Nana always told Marisol whenever she got mad at hers—*though some days you have to hunt a little harder to see the gold.*

Marisol had to hunt a lot when it came to Victor.

“If Nana were a ghost, she wouldn’t stay in the beach house,” she pointed out. “She’d be off having more adventures! Diving with sea monsters! Having a picnic on top of Mount Everest! Flying to the moon!”

“Ghosts can’t fly to the moon.”

“How do you know?”

“Because—” Victor caught himself, remembering like he always did that he was too important to argue with his little sister about ridiculous things. “Never mind. Do we really have to pack up *all* of Nana’s stuff? It’s going to take forever.”

“Only the personal items,” said their father.

“But . . . ,” her brother faltered. “That’s everything.”

Mom’s almost-tears turned into a laugh—though it was sad still. “You’re right, but the realtor told us the house will be easier to sell if someone else can see themselves living in it.”

The marsh outside the window had changed into ocean. Blue, blue, blue and a glitter of sun. It looked larger than Marisol remembered. Nana’s house, on the other hand, seemed smaller. There was no FOR SALE sign yet, but that didn’t stop Marisol’s teeth from tightening. She didn’t *want* to imagine a name besides Beruna on the mailbox, couldn’t think of some strangers nailing a HOME SWEET HOME sign over the screen-porch door.

“Looks like we’re the first to arrive!” Their father announced as he pulled their car into the driveway. “You have the keys, right, amor?”

“I *did*,” Mom said, frowning in confusion as she dug through her purse. “I thought I did.”

“Marisol?”

Both parents turned in their seats, not to blame her for the missing keys but to ask for help. Marisol was good at finding things. Keys, socks gobbled by the washing machine, even once a friend’s escaped guinea pig.

It wasn’t that she looked harder than other people. In fact, she barely had to search at all. It was almost as though lost stuff had a way of finding her. . . .

Marisol closed her eyes and felt for the *tug* that often prickled her fingertips. Sometimes the sensation was so strong it seemed as if her hand was pulled, though she’d never admitted this to anyone. She knew how it would sound. This time the force made Marisol reach for her mother’s purse. “They’re in the side pocket, with the zipper.”

“So they are! Thank you, reina.”

The porch looked the same as it did last year—lined with conch shells and sharks’ teeth, wind chimes singing in the corner. Sunlight flashed through their strung sea glass, speckling the wood with blues and greens. This pattern had always made Marisol think of a fairyland, which had often led to Nana telling a story about the time she stumbled across Icelandic elf folk inside a cave on a beach much stranger than Folly, with black sands and icy tides.

Victor never believed the tale, but it wasn’t much more

outlandish than any of the other things their grandmother did. To Nana, life had been one big adventure. There was photographic evidence all over the beach house, which Marisol studied as soon as she followed her parents inside. The oldest pictures—black and white—dated from Nana’s days as a nurse during World War II. Her smile was young and brave, matching her friends’ who wore the same khaki uniforms. Grandpapa was there too, saluting alongside Nana’s brother, who’d been lost in the war.

As the hallways wound and stretched, so did the years. Nana’s library held the adventures she’d shared with Grandpapa: riding camels through the Sahara, dogsledding in Alaska, canoeing on the Amazon.

The photos often had maps framed next to them—yellowed with age, filled with Nana’s travel notes. Sometimes she marked spots with an elaborate curling **Ƶ**. Other times she recorded the sights: *Pink dolphins*. *Aurora borealis*. *Sandstorm*.

Every time Marisol studied the landscapes—using a magnifying glass her grandmother had bartered off a Parisian bric-a-brac vendor—she found something new.

Today, it was *White reindeer*, written on a map of Sweden that was hanging in the kitchen. Marisol had been in here hundreds of times, chatting with Nana over glasses of sweet tea, but she’d never heard about that adventure.

Maybe she never would. . . .

“Mom?”

Her mother, who was already packing some silverware into a KITCHEN-FRAGILE box, paused. “Yes, reina?”

“Do you know when Nana saw a white reindeer?” Marisol pointed to the map and its adjoining photo, where her grandparents stood in knee-deep snowdrifts—bouncing a two-year-old between them.

“Well, let’s see. . . .” Mom squinted at the photo. “Your uncle Matt’s in this picture, so . . . 1956. Maybe?”

Marisol’s chest ached, until even the ocean air couldn’t fill her lungs. It wasn’t the *when* she was asking for, so much as the story Nana would’ve told.

Nana would have said something about how the reindeer moved like a ghost, and maybe it was one, for all she really saw was the outline of horns scraping the snow-spun air, and eyes trapped like coal in the white of everything.

For a moment, Marisol could almost hear her grandmother’s voice speaking the words. Imagining the scene was better than nothing, but it was worse too, because it reminded her that the true story was now lost. Too lost for even a girl who could find things others couldn’t.

“You should ask Uncle Matt when he gets here,” her mother went on. “He’d have a better idea.”

Marisol rescued a sugar spoon when she passed the KITCHEN-FRAGILE box, sneaking it into her pocket. She kept following the photos up the beach house’s main

staircase, toward the bedrooms. More and more people appeared with Nana in each picture. By the time color film rolled around, turning Nana's hair auburn, she had five children—Marisol's mother the youngest by a minute—and they were all adventurers.

Mom's adventures had taken her to Bolivia, where she'd met Dad at the nonprofit where they both still worked. Her twin sister, Kate, traveled the world as a diplomat, constantly moving to new cities.

Then the adventurers had *more* adventurers: Marisol had plenty of cousins on the Beruna side, most of them much older. Their family portrait—taken last summer, before Nana got sick for the last time—sat in the living room, alongside pictures of their ninety-one-year-old grandmother hot-air ballooning in France.

Here Marisol paused, listening to the nearby wind chimes and Victor's heavy footsteps as he hauled luggage up to the porch. The beach house didn't feel haunted . . . but it did feel strange. Full of Nana's life, empty of *her*.

It made Marisol want to cry.

It also didn't help that all of her grandmother's things were about to be packed into a storage unit none of them would ever visit. The suitcases her brother wrestled down the hall were big enough to make him complain, but they couldn't fit Nana's shadowbox collection. Or the giant piece of driftwood she'd converted into a coffee table.

Marisol took a wobbly breath and walked to the nearest bookshelf. It held lots of knickknacks—a paperweight with a four-leaf clover, a white peacock feather, sand dollar doves—smaller things that fit neatly next to the sugar spoon.

She stuffed what she could into her pockets.

Her fingers started to tingle.

Qué raro. She wasn't looking for anything lost, but the buzz grew stronger when Marisol picked up a picture frame covered in macaroni. Maybe she was hungry? That didn't seem right. Besides, the pasta wasn't very appetizing, uncooked and coated in gold spray paint.

“Hi, Mari.”

That voice didn't belong to her brother! Marisol turned to see a different boy in the doorway, with a shock of blond hair and a shy smile. “Jake! I thought you weren't coming until tomorrow.”

“The embassy let Mom off work early. We caught the first flight we could out of Madrid. Didn't want to miss a day here.” Her cousin's smile rearranged his freckles. “You're taller.”

“So are you.” It'd been six months since the cemetery—where the Spanish moss spilling off the oak branches matched the winter sky. Jake's hair was much brighter now that it was June. “You're blonder too!”

“Y más inteligente,” he said.

It was Marisol's turn to grin. "¿Estás aprendiendo español, primo Jake?"

"Poco a poco. Slowly," her favorite primo emphasized in English. "I figured, you know, what with some of the family speaking Spanish, and us being posted to Spain this year—they said maybe even for a couple of years—it's about time I tried to learn some, don't you think?"

"¡Sí!"

Marisol was still holding the frame when she gave Jake a hug. He let go, studying the picture inside. It showed Nana standing with the two of them at the far end of Folly Beach, where dead trees twisted from the sand and a lighthouse jutted straight out of the water and the wind tangled their hair like seaweed.

"It's weird, being here without her," he whispered.

"I know." Marisol cradled the frame with both hands. Its macaroni suddenly felt extra brittle. "I hate it. But I hate selling this place even more. Mom's already packing up stuff in the kitchen. . . ."

Jake cleared his throat. "We have to, Mari. Beach houses cost a lot of money to keep, and Mom says this one needs a new roof, plus, like, a hundred other repairs."

Marisol's parents had offered the same explanation. Now that Nana no longer lived here, it didn't make sense to pay so many bills for a place the family only visited

once a year. Marisol knew they were right, but this didn't make her any less sad. If only the macaroni elbows were made of *real* gold . . .

One of the noodles snapped under Marisol's buzzing thumb as she offered the frame to Jake. Those were his initials on the back, after all. "Do you want this?"

He shook his head. "I don't have room to take it back to Spain."

No room? Marisol knew this was just an excuse. Her primo liked to travel light. After a day at the beach, when she was lugging buckets of broken shells back to the house, he'd race ahead empty-handed.

"It's nothing special," he continued with a shrug. "Just a bunch of pasta and paint. A six-year-old could make it."

"A six-year-old *did* make it!" She pointed out his shaky signature. "Nana told you it was the best Christmas gift anyone could ever give her."

Jake's face went very still at the edges.

"I can't," he said.

Marisol's fingers felt like fireworks as they popped open the back of the frame. "What about the photograph? There has to be room in your suitcase for—"

A folded sheet of paper fell to the floor by Jake's feet. He blinked with surprise and knelt down to pick it up.

"What is that?" she asked.

"It's a map!"

But this one wasn't as old as the others; the creases didn't tear when Jake unfolded it. Nana's handwriting still smelled like ink when Marisol leaned in to read. As usual, their grandmother had written what she'd found on the map: *message in a bottle, pod of dolphins, home.*

"Not just any map!" Marisol breathed excitedly. "Jake, it's a map of Folly Beach!"

"Looks like there's gold nearby!" Her cousin was mostly joking. Nana had drawn ⚔s all over her maps, but whenever they'd asked about them, she'd always had a tease in return. *Treasure*, she'd said, eyes twinkling. *They lead to treasure!*

Marisol had never been sure whether she meant the same kind of treasure that was allegedly hiding inside Victor or real treasure.

"Can I see it?" Her hand stopped humming as soon as Jake handed her the map. Her stomach flipped instead. Maybe . . . just maybe, this frame *did* hold gold. Marisol had never been close enough to explore any of Nana's ⚔s before.

"It's right in the middle of the ocean!" Jake pointed to the mark: so deep it tore the blue paper. "The treasure must be some sort of shipwreck."

"No." Marisol squinted to read Nana's curly handwriting beside it: *Morris Island Light. Door.* "It's the lighthouse! Nana must have taken the fishing boat out

there. Mom said it's all closed up now, because they don't use it anymore. I wonder if she got in through the door?" She stopped as the strangeness of Nana's absence washed over her again. "I'm going to miss her adventures."

"Me too." She could hear her own sadness echoed in Jake's voice, but his expression was calm. Jake didn't give away a lot on the outside, except for smiling, but Mari-sol had had practice over the years at understanding the things he didn't show.

He studied the map, and she studied him, wondering if she should say something. "Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"I think we should search for Nana's treasure." Mari-sol tapped the ∞ . "Let's go on an adventure of our own!"