

GHOST SQUAD



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Ghost
SQUAD



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 To my parents, Anazaria and
Pablo Ortega: Thanks for
making me so wavy.
And for my brother, Pablo Jr.:
Thanks for giving me
the gift of the fireflies. 

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CHAPTER ONE

LIGHTNING STRUCK, and a brilliant white light bloomed, illuminating the night sky outside Lucely Luna's bedroom window.

Four hours had passed since her bedtime, but the thunderstorm outside kept her wide-awake.

She'd tried every one of her abuela's tricks—including taking slow, deep breaths while focusing on the warm glow of the fireflies coming from outside her bedroom window—but nothing had worked.

Lucely hugged her knees to her chest, gazing out the window. She counted the seconds between the flash of lightning and clap of thunder, praying that it was still too far away to strike her home.

“One, two, three . . .”

BOOM!

Lucely threw the covers over her head with a shriek.

“Niña,” a voice whispered.

Lucely slid the blanket slowly from her face so only her eyes were exposed. The soft glow of one of her firefly family members filled the room.

“Mamá?” Lucely asked.

Like water sparkling in the sun’s rays, the firefly transformed before her. The translucent form rippled before becoming whole, solid.

Lucely’s grandmother, Mamá Teresa, settled onto the bed beside her. Well, her ghost did.

“¿Qué te pasa, mi niña?” Mamá reached for Lucely’s hand. Her touch was soft and warm, just like it had been when she was alive. Her voice always comforted Lucely like fuzzy socks and Dominican hot chocolate.

“I’m scared,” Lucely whispered to her abuela.

Mamá brushed Lucely’s curls out of her eyes and kissed her forehead before beginning to sing softly, her accent thick yet clear as the sound of rain on a metal roof.

“Duérmase, mi niña,

“Duérmase, mi amor,

“Duérmase, pedazo de mi corazón . . .”

Mamá’s voice wrapped around Lucely like a wool blanket, and before the song had ended, Lucely was drifting

away from the storm outside and to a place that was quiet, safe.



Lucely woke the next morning to the smell of white cheese frying in the kitchen downstairs. It was still early enough that the sun was beginning to flood the sky with warm orange and yellow hues, as if erasing the dark and stormy night before.

She stared up at the ceiling of her bedroom, which was covered with hundreds of stars. In the daytime, they just looked like beige stickers on a white ceiling, all running together into a big blob of nothing. But when night fell and the lights were off, an intricate galaxy of constellations extended to every corner of the room. It was like having her own little universe all to herself.

Lucely's father, Simon, had helped her paint the walls of her room a seafoam blue, the color of her abuela's house in the Dominican Republic. Above her desk, Lucely had a corkboard with all her certificates from school on it, a calendar where she meticulously kept track of her homework assignments, and a pamphlet for the Luna Ghost Tour. Beside the corkboard hung a periodic table poster that had all hip-hop artists on it and a portrait of the Taíno rebel Enriquillo.

Simon Luna was what Lucely liked to call an “enormous history geek.” He even started his own ghost tour company in town, and people actually *paid* to hear him tell stories about the history of St. Augustine, Florida. He had insisted on hanging pictures of his favorite historical figures in every room of the house. Enriquillo wasn’t the worst to get stuck with, but she would’ve preferred the portrait of the Mirabal sisters that was in their living room. At least it wasn’t Blackbeard. Now *that* dude was scary looking.

Though it was early, Lucely could already hear noise coming from downstairs. At first, she thought it was just the sound of her dad cooking in the kitchen, but as it got louder, she realized it was . . . *oh no* . . . merengue music.

Lucely tried to pull the blanket over her head, but an invisible hand stopped her, flinging the comforter to the other side of the room.

“Que linda.” Tía Milagros’s voice was steeped in sarcasm as she surveyed Lucely’s room. She wore the same curlers, face mask, nightgown, and slippers that she had died in. Everyone thinks dying in your sleep is the most peaceful way to go, but no one ever thinks about being stuck in their pajamas for the rest of their afterlife.

“Up, up. It’s time to clean. This house is filthy! Look at this!” She pointed at a small pile of clothes near Lucely’s hamper and a solitary gum wrapper in her wastebasket.

“Tía, no, it’s Saturday. Don’t dead people get tired?”

“Nobody can get as tired as you, *sin vergüenza*. Imagine being so young and having so little energy! At your age, I would’ve already been up for three hours. Fold that *colcha*.” Tía Milagros pointed at the quilt she’d thrown, and she walked out of the room.

Lucely snorted and put her *chanclas* on before going downstairs. She’d help clean up after breakfast. If it were up to Tía Milagros, she’d be cleaning from sunrise to sunset.

Plates of hot and fluffy banana pancakes were set out on the long kitchen table. Extra crispy bacon, fried cheese, *salchichón*, and platters of fresh fruit sat next to pitchers of freshly squeezed juice and *morir soñando*. The Luna family sat around the table chatting loudly and excitedly. Well . . . most of them were talking. Simon was still making pancakes at their stove with one hand and dipping rectangles of cheese in flour with the other.

“Good morning, *mamá*.” He smiled at Lucely.

“*Cion, Papi*.” Lucely took her place at the table and took turns greeting each of her cousins, asking for blessings from each of her older relatives before digging into her plate of food.

It made Lucely happy to know that even after you died—but only if you were good when you were alive—you still got to eat delicious food. If Lucely hadn’t seen it with her own

eyes, she'd think it was some sick way to keep her from misbehaving, but for the Lunas it was all true.

Anybody looking in through the window would see only Lucely and her father, the two living beings in the Luna household. But there were a lot more of them there; they just happened to be ghosts.

“Lucely’s hogging all the queso again,” whined Prima Macarena. She winked at Lucely before piling cheese onto her own plate. Even though Macarena had survived a life of being asked if she could do the dance, she still loved to tease Lucely any chance she was given.

The five tías at the table shot her matching death stares. Tía Milagros reached for her chancla under the table. Lucely opened her mouth to protest just as her dad placed another mountain of freshly fried cheese on the table.

“That enough food for everyone?” he asked Lucely, and she nodded in response.

Simon smiled, but Lucely could see the small tug of pain on her father’s face.

There was a time when her father could also see the family spirits in their human form. But now all he saw were fireflies. “Sometimes, when your heart is too heavy and sad,” he had told her, “you lose that part of you—that connection.” It hurt Lucely to imagine the kind of heartbreak her father

had been going through ever since her mom left them, four years ago.

The spirits of your dead loved ones living on as fireflies, or cocuyos as they were called in the Dominican Republic—where Lucely’s family was from—was supposed to be a myth, a story people told to ease the sadness of loss. But for Lucely, it was very real. When they weren’t in their human forms gossiping about the neighbors or fussing over her, their fire-fly spirits inhabited the ancient willow tree in their backyard.

“Ta muy grande, Lucely.” Tío Chicho went for Lucely’s cheeks, but she ducked to avoid the painful Tío Cheek Pinch.

Unfortunately for Lucely, her uncle was just as quick and snagged the other side of her face in a death grip.

“Ouch, sheesh.” Lucely rubbed her cheek as Tío Chicho’s wife, Tía Tati, slapped his hand softly and scowled.

“We’ll start with the bathroom downstairs, then move up to the foyer.” Tía Milagros was greeted by a chorus of groans.

“Tía, can’t we have at least one weekend off?” asked Manny, another one of Lucely’s cousins.

“She can’t help herself; cleaning is her life,” said another cousin, Benny.

“But she’s *dead!*” Lucely said.

The table screamed with laughter now, drowning out Tía Milagros’s threats. Nobody but Lucely noticed when she made

good on her promise to throw her chancla by flinging it across the room and knocking over a pitcher of guava juice.

“No ve!” Milagros smiled smugly, as if she hadn’t been the one to make the mess.

“Tía Milagros?” asked Simon.

“Yeah.” Lucely nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“I left the cleaning stuff upstairs. Would you mind grabbing it?” Simon asked.

“Sure. Con permiso.” Lucely excused herself.

As she rummaged through the hall closet in search of the cleaner that Tía Milagros insisted they use only on tile, the doorbell rang.

Who could be coming over now? The only visitors they ever had were Lucely’s best friend, Syd, and her family, but they never bothered to ring the doorbell. Lucely had found Syd’s grandmother, Babette, asleep on their couch with a daytime court show on TV more times than she could count.

Lucely heard a deep voice coming from downstairs but couldn’t make out what they were saying. She crept down the hall, trying her best to avoid stepping on the creaky spots, and crouched down at the top of the landing to peer between the thick wooden railings. The strong smell of lemon cleaner made her scrunch her nose.

From her perch, Lucely could see that it was a man she recognized from the bank.

“I’m disappointed, Mr. Luna,” the man said.

“I promise you we’ll get caught up soon, Mr. Vincent. If I could just have a bit more time.”

The plea in her father’s voice stung. It reminded her so much of the phone calls with her mother, of how he had begged her to come home. The answer was always the same: no.

“I’m afraid the most I can do is give you until the end of October. Maybe with Halloween coming up you’ll have an influx of tourists?” Mr. Vincent picked a piece of lint off his shiny jacket, and Lucely’s cheeks went hot with anger. All people like Mr. Vincent cared about was money. She could tell by the way he looked at her father that he was silently judging his old shoes, faded jeans, and ten-dollar mall haircut. It was the same look the kids at school gave Lucely.

Simon scratched his head, clearly flustered. “Thanks. I’m sure we’ll be able to manage.”

“I do appreciate the timeliness with which you’ve always paid your bills, but I’m afraid with the market growing again, my only option will be to foreclose on the house.”

The pressure that had been building in Lucely’s stomach all but exploded, and she struggled to find her next breath. They couldn’t lose their house. It was the only home Lucely had ever known. It was where her parents had brought her after she’d been born, where her dad had grown up and his

parents had lived before him. It was tied to every memory of her mom, and her spirit family was anchored to the willow in their backyard. If they left, what would happen to them? Her eyes watered, and she wiped at her face.

Lucely's dad seemed to stand up a bit straighter, his voice steady. "And I would hope that our years of responsible payment would be enough to give us a little leeway now. Especially with all the work we put into the house after the last hurricane. But I guess that's not how your bank does business."

Lucely smiled. *Tell him, Dad.*

Mr. Vincent ruffled and nodded curtly. "Beginning of next month. I'll be back then. Oh, and I would very much like to see your ghost tour for myself, Mr. Luna. Perhaps a rousing performance will help me convince the bank to give you a bit more time?"

As soon as the door closed behind him, Simon's shoulders slumped, and he let out an exasperated breath. Lucely's heart lurched. She wanted to run down and hug her dad, tell him everything would be okay. But with the way he held his head in his hands, Lucely doubted there was anything she could say to make things better.

"Lucely, if you're eavesdropping up there, you better come down now."

Lucely cringed and pulled back. How did he always know?

She waited a minute, took a deep breath to settle her thumping pulse, and walked down the stairs casually. Her dad hitched an eyebrow, but she tried not to show any signs that she'd overheard his conversation. He liked to pretend everything was under control all the time, and Lucely liked to let him.

Act natural, act natural, act natural, Lucely repeated to herself silently. Simon Luna was an expert at sniffing out a fake.

“How much did you hear?”

“Huh? I was just looking for the cleaning stuff upstairs before I heard you call my name.” She crossed her fingers behind her back and tried to keep the fear of what she'd just overheard—that they might lose their home—from showing on her face.

He inspected her closely, eyebrow still raised. It was like he could look into her very soul when he did that. She shifted uncomfortably, hoping he'd drop the subject. He let out another exasperated breath.

“That was Mr. Vincent, from the bank. He just stopped by to talk about how the ghost tour was doing.” Lucely winced at her father's lie. “I think he might be coming to the tour tonight, so we have to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

He put one hand on Lucely's shoulder and squeezed gently.

“I’m going to go clean up the kitchen before Tía Milagros has a fit. How they can make such a mess baffles me,” he laughed to himself.

The moment her dad was out of sight, Lucely bolted into the small first-floor bathroom. She tried to calm her breathing and wrap her brain around what Mr. Vincent had said. They only had until the end of the month? But that was in less than two weeks! How much money did they owe? She knew they’d been in trouble with the bank before, but ever since the Cryptly’s Can’t Believe It Ghost Tour expanded into their town, red envelopes and urgent notices seemed to be piling up. Where would they go if they lost their home?

Lucely ran some cold water and splashed her face.

When she opened her eyes again, her cousin Macarena sat perched on the edge of the sink.

Lucely let out a small squeak before scrunching her face and throwing the hand towel right through her. “I told you to stop doing that!”

Macarena laughed so hard that she almost fell to the floor. Even though she died before Lucely was born, Macarena was like an older sister to her. Though in just a few years, *she’d* be the younger sister.

“You look pale. Mamá said you need to eat more,” Macarena said softly. “Tía saw you run in here and went back to tell everyone. You know how it is; they’re just worried.”

Lucely arched an eyebrow. “Worried? About me?”

“Not about you. I mean, they’re always worried about you, prima. But something in the air feels . . . off.” Macarena looked up as if she could see through the ceiling. “And there’s a . . . weird energy. That’s the only way I can describe it. A really strange energy.”

Lucely thought about how the storms had kept her on edge every night for the last week and knew Macarena was right.

“The others feel it too?” Lucely asked.

Macarena nodded and got up from the sink. “Especially Mamá. She hasn’t been feeling well, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

A knock at the door startled them both, followed by her dad’s voice, “Did you fall down the toilet, Luce?”

Macarena disappeared in a blink and flew through the cracked window.

Lucely opened the door. “Yes. Also, I drank a lot of guava juice at breakfast.” She flashed him a mischievous smile, trying to hide the worry on her face.

She made her way back to the kitchen to sit among her spirit family. Her father had cleaned up the spilled guava juice, and everyone was helping themselves to seconds and thirds. Lucely kept pretending she was fine—that she wasn’t freaking out about what she’d overheard—for her father’s

sake. And, okay, also to avoid interrogation by her family. But as she looked at Mamá Teresa from across the table, she saw something she hadn't noticed before.

A gasp threatened to escape her throat as she watched Mamá's human form flicker slightly, like a candle whose flame was moments from going out.

"Mamá?" Lucely asked cautiously. Mamá Teresa was the toughest person Lucely had ever known and she'd never seen her spirit do anything like this.

Her abuela looked up from the plate of fruit in front of her.

"No pasa nada, mi niña," Mamá said, smiling. "Everything is okay."

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