

# THE CURSED MOON

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# 1

## THE STORM OUTSIDE

**AFTER THE TALK ABOUT HIS FUTURE WAS DONE,** Rafael Fuentes rushed out the school's main door as fast as he could. His sixth-grade teacher, Ms. Cortez, followed behind. He walked straight to the trash can and threw away the letter she'd given him.

"Throwing it away won't change anything, Rafa," she said from the doorway. Her voice was kind despite everything she'd just told him about his failing grades, attitude, and required summer school. "I've already spoken to your grandma. She knows."

Rafa felt like he'd been punched in the gut. His grandma knew? How many times had he promised that he'd do better in school? He'd lost count. He gazed around

the deserted schoolyard. Everyone, including his best friend, Jayden, had already scattered off to start summer break. For Rafa, there'd be no break. Summer meant more school and his mom being released from prison. He took a deep breath through his nose, the way the school counselor had taught him, and let it out through his mouth. *Inhale. Exhale.*

"I know your mom is coming home," Ms. Cortez continued. "Things must feel out of your control, but you hold the pen to your own story."

"Not when Nikki is around," he shot back. He never called Nikki "Mom." Even if she was. She hadn't acted like a mom to him or his little sister in a long time. She'd been Nikki—short for her first name, Nicole—since the day she was arrested.

Ms. Cortez gave him a patient smile. "I'll see you in summer school, Rafa. I look forward to reading more of your scary stories soon." She went back inside. The school door closed behind her.

Rafa never expected the school year to end this way. The only class he passed was language arts, and that's because Ms. Cortez let him submit a notebook full of scary stories for extra credit. Horror stories were easy for him. His whole life with Nikki was a horror story. He could write them in his sleep.

Nikki was being released early because she was a so-called model inmate. Grandma explained that this meant that Nikki was well-liked and had improved herself in prison. She had started online community college classes. She even tutored other inmates. More important, his grandma said, Nikki was eager to prove she could be a good mom. Rafa wasn't impressed. His mom was tutoring inmates while he was failing school. *Way to go, Nikki!*

Rafa hadn't seen Nikki since she was put into a police car and arrested. He refused every invitation to visit her in the women's prison three hours away. His little sister, Brianna, didn't go either. She always stayed with him. After every visit, his abuela brought him a letter from Nikki. Rafa refused to even touch them, as if touching one would prick his fingers and make him bleed. Regardless, his abuela saved every letter, hoping someday he'd feel ready. He doubted he'd ever feel ready. Nikki might be a model prisoner, but she'd never be a model mom.

The sky rumbled. Rafa glanced up at a flock of black birds crossing the gray sky. He unzipped his hoodie, saddled his bike, and sped toward his sister's elementary school. The after-school lecture from Ms. Cortez had made him late. She knew he was responsible for picking up Brianna, but Ms. Cortez wouldn't be deterred. In a quick second, she called the elementary school and

asked them to watch Brianna Fuentes for an extra twenty minutes. At least his sister would know it was out of his control.

As he turned the corner, he spotted the school office assistant, Ms. Kaplan, and Brianna sitting on the school's steps. Brianna's head of dark, wavy hair was buried deep into a book. She had on her usual black combat boots. No matter the season or temperature, she wore them every day. And although her classmates teased her for wearing them, it didn't stop her. She once told Rafa that wearing them made her feel brave. Rafa understood wanting to feel like that.

He pulled up to the front of the school with a loud screech from braking. "Sorry I'm late, Brie."

"Just in time." She smiled and closed her book. "Thanks, Ms. Kaplan."

The woman waved back at her. In one graceful movement, Brianna bounced up, stashed the book in her book bag, and slung it onto her back. She was tiny for her age, with a mischievous smile that got her into trouble without even saying a word. Although, when she did say a word, it was usually a big one that she'd learned herself.

"I almost finished my book, Rafa. It's so enthralling." She settled on the back of his bike.

When he felt her hands secured on his shoulders, he kicked off.

“It’s about a girl who is possessed by a ghost snake,” she said over his shoulder. “It’s not as scary as the stories you tell though. Yours are much better— Wait! Stop!” Brianna yelled.

Rafa stomped the brakes, causing them to lurch forward. “You forget something?”

“The school billboard!” She pointed at it and giggled. “Clever, right?”

The billboard’s message read:

**REMEMBER: PAWS NOT CLAWS!  
HAVE A SAFE SUMMER, MIGHTY  
JAGUARS!**

“Really? That sign is weak, Brie.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s ingenious. It reminds me of you.”

“What are you talking about?” He restarted down the road.

“You’re like my mama jaguar.”

“Cool,” Rafa said flatly. “My next Halloween costume.” Brianna laughed. “You show your claws when you

have to . . . like when we lived in the shelter, remember?” Brianna’s voice softened. “You were claws back then, but now you’re mostly softy paws.”

Ever since they learned that their mom was coming home early, Brianna had started bringing up their time living with Nikki more. Every time she did, Rafa tensed up and clenched his jaw so hard he couldn’t speak sometimes. He didn’t want to remember being dragged in and out of shelters, living out of the car, or at one of Nikki’s so-called friends’ apartments. He didn’t want to relive the days when he and Brianna used secret-code phrases for when they didn’t feel safe. Somehow, while he only remembered the bad, Brianna only remembered the good. Rafa wondered how she was able to do that—take a horrible memory and pull out just the sweet parts.

“You look mean, but you wouldn’t hurt a fly,” she continued. “And you tell the most gruesome stories, but you always give them happy endings.” She tugged at the dark hair he had pulled into a bun at the back of his head.

“Don’t play around,” Rafa grumbled.

Brianna always did this to him—made him feel sentimental and wonder what the heck he’d ever do without her.

“You fall off this bike and I’ll be in even more trouble.”

“*More* trouble?” Brianna leaned in closer. “Is that why you were at school late?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, slowing his pedaling when he saw a woman standing in the middle of the street with her hands raised toward the darkening sky. Her back was to them and she wore a long burgundy robe. The wind had picked up, and her silvery hair whipped around her shoulders. “What is she doing?”

Brianna peered over Rafa’s shoulder to get a better look. “It’s Ms. Martin.”

“I know, but why is she in the middle of the street?” Rafa asked. “She’s so weird.”

“Not weird,” Brie said. “Eccentric!”

“You and your big words.” Rafa smirked back at her. “I’m gonna check on her.”

“Like I said, all softy paws.”

“Quit it. I’m only doing it because Grandma would want me to.”

“Whatever you say.”

Rafa rode up slowly toward the woman. “Ms. Martin? Is everything okay?” he asked in a gentle voice. “Do you need help getting back to your house?”

She spun around and looked relieved to see them. “Oh, Rafael! And beautiful Brianna! Here you are! I needed to speak to you.”

At her feet, a tan cat with dark rosette markings sat and peered up at them with golden eyes. Around its neck was

a gold, leathery-looking collar with gemstones and a bell that sparkled. It twitched its ears, and the bell around its neck let off a delicate jingle.

“About what?” Rafa asked, studying her closer. Rafa had only met Ms. Martin a few times since he and Brie moved in with their abuelos. In that time, he’d never seen her with her hair unbraided or without her glasses. Most of the time, she appeared elegant and serious, but now she looked frazzled.

“I want to warn you about the blood moon.”

“A blood what?” Rafa asked, confused.

“Look at the sky, mis niños. A blood moon nears,” she said with urgency in her voice. “Your abuela brags about how imaginative your stories are, but you must not to tell any scary stories while the blood moon hangs in the sky.”

Rafa followed her gaze. The only thing he saw in the sky were dark storm clouds.

“It’s just a thunderstorm,” Rafa replied. “It’ll pass, Ms.—”

Suddenly, she lunged forward, grasping Rafa’s shoulders. She leaned in, stopping just inches from his face. “He’s listening. He’s waiting for your story.”

Rafa pulled away. “You have to calm down, Ms. Martin.”

Her grasp was strong—stronger than she looked—but

Rafa saw no threat in her eyes, just desperation. She stepped back immediately. A wave of realization swept over her face.

“You can’t grab kids like that,” Brianna scolded her, gently patting Rafa’s back.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Ms. Martin muttered, wringing her hands so tight, Rafa half expected her to start pulling off her fingers. “But this is important . . . Please, no scary stories tonight.”

Rafa glanced back at Brianna. She looked as baffled as he felt. Was this for real? He took a deep breath. *Inhale. Exhale.* That’s when he saw what was really hidden in Ms. Martin’s eyes. It wasn’t desperation. It was fear. What was frightening her? Who was listening and waiting for his story?

“Fine,” Rafa said with a shrug. “I won’t tell any scary stories tonight. How about tomorrow? Is that okay? Scary stories are sort of my thing this time of year.”

“We always host scary story nights on our porch in the summer,” Brianna added, followed by a nervous giggle. “Grandma makes homemade popcorn and everything.”

“I know all about your scary story nights,” Ms. Martin said. “Tomorrow is better, but you must promise me about tonight.”

Rafa hesitated, and Brianna nudged him gently. “I promise,” he answered.

Brianna also nodded in agreement.

Ms. Martin smiled faintly and turned away. “Very good. No scary stories. Safer this way,” she mumbled, lumbering toward her long gravel driveway.

“What is she saying?” Brie asked.

“Something about being safer this way.”

“We should make sure she gets inside.”

Rafa wanted nothing more to do with Ms. Martin. He still felt her grasp on his shoulders like it was a ghoul shoving him down into a cold grave.

“Rafa?” Brianna pressed. “We’re going to follow her, right?”

“Do we have to?” he grumbled, knowing he would because he always did what Brianna wanted.

He took a deep breath through his nose and released it through his mouth. *Inhale. Exhale.* Keeping a distance, he pedaled up the gravel driveway lined with fully grown evergreen trees. As Ms. Martin tottered up the driveway, her robe dragged against the ground, collecting leaves, dirt, and pebbles. Rafa felt like he was being dragged too. Dragged into some nonsense about a blood moon and forbidden ghost stories.

He braked once she reached the porch, where two life-size bronze jaguar statues stood guard at each end. Rafa thought the statues were cool and appropriate,

considering Ms. Martin lived with a bunch of feral cats. She gave them a slight wave before disappearing into the large house.

Rafa turned the bike around to leave. The cat with the golden stare sat in the middle of the driveway as if daring them to pass.

“That cat is looking at me like I’m its next snack.”

Brianna chuckled. “I bet it’s a guard cat. Get it? Instead of a guard dog, she has a guard cat?”

“Goofball.” Rafa smirked.

Just then, lightning flashed across the sky. Rafa kicked off and pedaled cautiously around the cat and down the driveway. Once he hit the street, he picked up speed. A storm was coming. And Rafa knew better than anyone that bad things happened when the sky went dark.