



## TUG OF MAGIC

*A*t the brink of every summer, something yanks me toward the Hill of Dust. Something like fishing line, spooling out from the heart of the hill, across Mexico and all the way up to Maryland, zipping through cul-de-sacs, searching me out, trailing bits of magic all the way. It doesn't even matter if I'm holed up in our basement rec room, lost in Xbox with my buddies . . . somehow the string finds me and ties itself to a place smack in my center.

Then it reels me back in.

Its pull is strong on the first airplane, even stronger on the second, and stronger still on the bus bumping its way into the mountains. And at the foot of the Hill of Dust, the pull is so strong, my sneakers barely touch the ground, and I'm nearly floating up the dirt path to the very tip-top. Finally, I lurch straight into its heartbeat.

Which is where I am now, sitting on a small wooden chair across from Grandpa Teo in his healing hut. I'm missing Xbox already, but mostly just buzzing from the journey. Mom's right across the muddy courtyard, inside the adobe kitchen, catching up with her great-aunts and great-uncles. You'd think a robotics engineer might feel out of place here, but she always settles right in. After all, this is where she grew up with Grandpa and Grandma before she went to college in Maryland, before she married her American boyfriend, before they had me.

Since Dad has to work, it's usually just me and Mom who come here. Every visit gives me that swooping, soaring feeling, like a Ferris wheel ride. And somehow, this space here—Grandpa's small, old healing room—is the hub.

It's dark, cave-like, and mostly empty except for an altar covered in ancient things like tin-framed saints, and fresh things like white flowers, and glowing-sweet things like candles. It all feels outside of time—the packed dirt floors and clay walls and film of incense smoke coating everything. I bet I could've been sitting here fifty years ago and it would've felt the same.

Grandpa and I stare at each other, which is both weird and not weird. It's like looking into a mirror, seeing myself when I'm old, only subbing an Orioles cap for his palm hat, and a Ravens jersey for his white collared shirt. All my gray-haired relatives say he was my spitting image when he was twelve, especially the crazy-thick eyelashes.

“Mateo,” his voice rumbles, deep as the engine of Dad’s old pickup truck. His eyes widen, like he’s been waiting all year for this moment. “I need your help.”

Whoa. My help? This is new. I just got here and we usually have small talk first. School, soccer, and guitar lessons on my end. Corn harvest, baby goats, and weather on his end. “Sure, anything, Grandpa.”

He takes something from his shirt pocket, raises it in the candle’s glow. It’s some sort of necklace . . . a string of coins. Coins that flash here and there, kind of shimmering like far-off city lights.

I peer closer. The coins are freshly polished but old, the stamped faces worn smooth, the words foreign, nothing like Spanish or English.

He holds the necklace before me, letting it swing back and forth. I wonder if he’s mesmerizing me like one of those old-fashioned hypnotists with pocket watches.

Sure enough, with every sway of the coins, the heartbeat of magic grows stronger, louder, ringing in my ears, booming through my blood. “Um, what’s going on, Grandpa?”

His face beams like a little kid’s, all fresh and new. “It’s a long story,” he says. “A path paved in wonder. A path that stretches to long, long ago.” He speaks Spanish, which I know, thanks to Mom, but his words are so much different from hers. Hers are about car pools and errands, while his are lines that sound snatched right from poems and songs.

He leans closer, the coins shining spots of light onto his face like a field of fireflies. “Mateo, can you believe in the impossible?”

The pulse is growing louder, moving lower, then higher, practically a full-blown melody now. A picture of swirling, silver ribbons pops into my head. Something’s happening, and it’s awesome and crazy . . . but mostly awesome, I think. *Can you believe in the impossible?* I ask myself.

“Open your hand,” he says, and lets the necklace spiral into my palm.

And now my heart’s really thudding because sure, I’ve seen magical stuff here, just more like glimpses from the corner of my eye. But these coins crackling in my hand—well, this is something different. Sparks are jumping into my palm, zooming through my arm like tiny fireworks, and exploding in my chest.

Now sweat’s dripping from my cheeks and an earthquake’s rolling through my bones. I manage not to freak out, just barely, because Grandpa Teo’s voice is comforting, like syrup streaming over pancakes, promising something delicious to come.

“Now turn away from the movie of your own life, Mateo. And look at the movie of mine.”

As he speaks, his words somehow beam light onto an imagined screen, flooding the room with people and places from long, long ago. “*Mijo*, you are about to embark on a journey of marvels. Of impossible fortunes. Of a lost duck, three-legged skunk, and blind goat—all bravely loyal. Of a girl who gathered

power from storms and sang back the dead. Of an enchanted friendship that lifted souls above brutality.”

He pauses, tilts his head. “Perhaps there will even be an intermission or two. But as of yet, there is no end. That, mijo, will be up to you.” He winks, clears his throat, and begins.

“There was once a girl called the Queen of Lightning . . .”

I hang on to the humming, zapping necklace, and just before I slip completely into his movie, I wonder: *Okay, just what kind of help does Grandpa Teo need?*