Dear Reader,

Are you ready to vanish? Across train portals that can take you anywhere in the world—*if you're willing to pay the price?*

When I was a young adult, I read Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* while crisscrossing Europe with a Eurail pass on my first backpacking adventure abroad. I loved his unlikely heroes and gritty underworld beneath the London subway. Then I fell for V. E. Schwab's luscious portal magic in *A Darker Shade of Magic.* Daydreaming on San Francisco's BART trains, I wondered if I, too, could write a novel—crime families ruling clandestine train portals, villains with the power to make trespassers "vanish," and a fierce girl named Ruby Santos who is just trying to scrape by. That is, until her whole world is turned upside down. And I couldn't resist a slow-burn romance with an heir who holds the key to unlocking this new magic.

How can you dream bigger when you're always struggling for enough? My hometown of San Francisco is a glittering city of have and have-nots. I grew up in a biracial White/Filipino American family with the constant worry of staying afloat financially. Ruby's karaoke-loving father lives with his heart split across oceans in the Filipino diaspora. I've always been drawn to stories that test how much you would brave for the ones you love. And boy, did I test Ruby.

Fiction, like my train portals, can teleport you into new worlds and inside the conflicted hearts of characters. I hope my book helps young adults who are struggling with alcoholism running in families, who are stuck in that uncertainty between high school and what comes next, who don't know how to chase their dreams. Readers who are craving *more*.

I hope you enjoy the adventure ahead—and discover where these train tracks lead!

Happy reading,



Ana Ellickson

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This is an advance, uncorrected proof. Not for resale. Please do not quote without comparison with the finished book.

for Mom & Dad
who would have jumped oceans for me

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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PROLOGUE

Montgomery once told me: the trains are always listening. But what about the rusted broken ones, the ones lost in the jungle under vines so thick they could swallow your arm? I don't know if I believed him—and maybe I still don't, even after everything that's happened—but I need to find my way home. So, I start talking, whether the rusted train can hear me or not. *Take me back. Back to Balboa Park. I'll trade my secrets if only you'll let me come home.*

I strain my ears against the buzzing-beating jungle, hoping for a sign, an answer from the twisted metal beneath me. Lush green vines sprawl across the railroad tracks, and a dark tunnel stretches into the forest. Wild ferns cover the steep hillsides, and bricks are overgrown with lichen. This is not a place for passengers to come and go.

Please.

I hear nothing except the slither of a red-striped snake inching closer.

My blood thuds against my throat, and the secrets spill from my lips.

Are you listening?

CHAPTER 1

My scooter can barely make it over Twin Peaks, but I spur her onward like a trusty silver steed. Come on, girl, it's only a hill. A winding hill I've crisscrossed a million times. We got this. As we crest the top, San Francisco's sunset skyline spreads before us, curving and starry-eyed like a Van Gogh painting. Damp eucalyptus leaves fill my senses. I savor a deep foggy breath before charging down the other side. Wind snakes into my honey leather jacket, sending a thrill through my bones that I haven't felt in months. Ever since my mom died, there's a numbness that I can't seem to shake. But tonight is different. Tonight, I push the pedal a little harder than I should as we go shooting down Clarendon Street. There's no way I'm missing Diego's art show. Green lights all the way, baby.

There's a buzzing in my jacket pocket, but I ignore it. It's not safe to text and drive, and if I'm being brutally honest, it's Friday night and I know my dad always stops at the karaoke bar near 16th and Valencia after work. I know he's already downed three San Miguels, and it's only six P.M. Undoubtedly, he's singing Frank Sinatra, because every Filipino man over the age of fifty loves crooning "My Way" at the top of his lungs. Or if he's flirting with a new lady friend, he'll duet Disney's "A Whole New World" because he is the Sap Master. This would all be fine and great if my dad knew when to stop drinking. Otherwise . . .

A phone call from Balboa Santos always means trouble.

And I'm always the one to clean up the mess.

I push my sputtering Stella as fast as her tiny engine can run. We streak past Victorian houses that sparkle like amethyst and jade gems set into San Francisco's hillsides. My threadbare jeans are one wash away from splitting, but I still hug the seat tight between my thighs. I should slow down, but for once, this girl has Friday night plans. Diego Jose Alvarez's art launch—he's soon to be as famous as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, I just know it. It's at an after-hours coffee shop on Divisadero where on Fridays and Sundays he works as an ever-broke and ever-forgetful barista. He even gave me a preview of his paintings—golden agave spikes and flower spires that reach into the sky. Agaves send up their tree-height flower stalks only *once* in a lifetime—talk about bittersweet beauty.

I can't not show up. Even if my dad calls, drunk and begging for a ride.

The phone gives one last kick in my pocket and then goes silent. Good—I don't want to hear the same old excuses.

Besides, I promised to help Diego hang the show's lighting. He insists I have an artist's eye, but he always says that sort of stuff. Diego Jose Alvarez is perfectly unable to keep a compliment to himself. The reality is: I haven't picked up a paintbrush since my mom died. Not once. Painting houses doesn't count—those are for cash to pay off endless hospital bills. Just because I have gallons of white paint splattered on every piece of clothing I own doesn't mean I'm an artist.

Whoa, Stella! I slam my horn at a car aggressively nosing its way into a right turn onto Carl Street. Not today, my friend. I'd like to keep all my limbs, thank you. As my Stella scooter speeds alongside the trolley tracks embedded in Cole Street, pinpricks tingle through my fingertips as if my hands have been asleep this whole time and are just now waking up. Blood

surges into my palms, and I grip the handlebar tighter to keep from veering into the train tracks. Sometimes when I get too close . . . I don't know how to explain it. Something surges inside me.

I wish I could paint the feeling, get it out of my bones and onto paper.

But when would I ever have time to paint?

Divisadero Street is up ahead, almost there. I can't wait for the art show, even if I don't really know whether Diego and I are friends-friends or just coworkers who commiserate about being the hired help. Since I graduated high school a couple months ago, I barely know a soul in this city anymore. Everyone moved on to grander things like college or study abroad or coding bootcamp. I won't know anyone at the party, either, but maybe I can pretend to be a girl of mystery instead of revealing the truth: I'm a girl going exactly *nowhere*.

When I show up, sunlight steeps the sky in a rosy purple hue. I take a deep breath and run my thumb along the crumpled paper in my pocket. I don't need to open it to remember the exact details of my mother's bucket list, written in indigo ink with big looping *M*s and *R*s and everything in between. Her note gives me just enough courage to push past the CLOSED sign and poke my head inside. A bell rings above me.

"Hi . . . hello?" I say.

"Espresso?" Diego yells at me from behind the counter. "Single or double?"

"I want to sleep tonight. So . . . peppermint tea?" I step all the way inside, tiptoeing through the minefield of fairy string lights while trying to untangle my hair from the scooter helmet. I'm so glad to be able to move my jaw again without the helmet strap hooked under my chin. Not that I really know what to say now that I'm here.

"Sleep is for losers." Diego hops over the countertop and pulls me into

a hug, kissing both cheeks before leaning back and yelling, "Make this girl a triple!"

I'm not usually one for physical contact (and any dirtbag who tries to grab me in a crowded bus better watch out), but I can never say no to Diego's hugs. They're epic. Imagine a warm caramel latte full of cinnamon spice. Don't let the skull tattoos on his deep brown forearms fool you—this boy has no idea how to pull off a death glare. I tried to teach him once, and he ended up summoning a boy to flirt with. Definitely not a death glare.

"But I'm so behind on sleep already," I groan.

"I can't have you fall off a ladder. Loretta will kill me if I mess up her coffee shop. And I'm too pretty to die this young."

"I've spent half the day shellacking a ceiling. I think I can handle a few lights and a ladder."

"My point exactly. Don't get me talking about the West Portal house. All those ornate bougie archways. My biceps are still sore. I mean, just look at this." He shows off his gorgeous muscled arms and wiggles his eyebrows. I can't help but laugh. They are rather impressive. I mean, after all the scrubbing and painting and rollering we do for Chen's Painting Service, my one-time chicken arms are now pure lean muscle, too.

I forget how much I miss these moments of "normal," and maybe one day I'll even be able to call Diego a true friend—without the weight of my dad's drunken Friday nights sucking the air out of my lungs, or a cobwebbed house crowded with all the things my mom left behind, a mountain of debt included. I can just be Ruby Santos, girl with a bright future . . . somewhere. The "where" is the tough part.

I pull my eyes away from his muscles and glance around the room. All the small round tables are pushed into a corner, and the floor shines with

fresh beeswax. Diego already has an army of worker bees carrying out his plans. He'd make a spectacular general. He's planned it all: mini agaves in clay pots as giveaways, tip jars and decadent Mexican hot chocolate brewing in the back kitchen. It makes me wonder if I'm needed at all. I fidget with my jean pockets, crumpling and uncrumpling my mother's last note. 623 days and it's still inside my pocket. But I haven't done anything on my mom's list. The guilt sneaks up on me, thick and sticky and here to stay. I clear my throat.

"So, you want all these lights on the ceiling?" I point to the bundles of white string lights scattered on the floor.

"My love ain't cheap, girl. Work your Ruby magic."

When Diego's boyfriend, Victor, floats over with a triple espresso, I gulp it down in two mouthfuls. I'll need my hands free, after all. I want my buzz from the scooter ride to last through the night. I want my fingertips to work magic, weaving the lights above our heads. I want to make something from nothing.

"Brava!" Diego yells at full falsetto, clinking his empty espresso cup with mine.

"I think someone needs to be cut off for the night," I say.

"It's just nerves," Victor chimes in, hooking his fingers into the edge of Diego's shirt as if he can tether him to Earth and keep him from floating off. I wonder what it would be like to have someone who cares for me like that.

"And four, no, no, no *five* espressos," Diego says, scrunching his man bun into a tighter topknot. "And complete strangers are about to come see my art and soul and judge me and tell me I'm brilliant and then I'll have to fight off paparazzi and pretend I don't know you fools. It's going to be an epic night, just wait."

"I see someone has realistic expectations for his first art show."

"Ruby, you need to learn to dream bigger. When's *your* art show?"

"That would require making art. And this girl has nothing to show for herself."

"Little liar. I've seen the murals you've painted for Chen's clients. Go on, get up that ladder! Adelante!"

I stick my tongue out at him and climb up the ladder with a cape of lit fairy lights draped across my arm. My knees jitter as I cling to the ladder's metal steps. My biceps are indeed still sore from painting a ceiling this morning. They'd actually wanted clouds, which was a welcome distraction from the usual flat white, but that meant I'd had to paint layer over layer until the blues and whites looked natural. Let's just say my arms are now the consistency of gummy worms. The triple espresso might have been a mistake, too. I already feel the acid-fire caffeine worming its way through my belly. It's not even my own art show and I'm nervous. Nervous that I'll mess up the lights. Nervous that no one will appreciate the beauty I see in Diego's paintings. Nervous that I'll never be brave enough, like Diego, to show my nonexistent art to anyone.

Nervous that no one will care, anyway.

I check my phone and notice that Balboa Santos did indeed leave a message.

Lovely.

Not tonight, Dad.

Not. Tonight.

I shove the phone back into my pocket without a second glance.

My arms stretch across the bare white ceiling, pinning the lights without thinking, just driving in the hooks wherever it feels right. Pin, hook, string; pin, hook, string. A rhythm builds until everything fades away except for my fingertips and the web of lights emerging from the ceiling.

I startle when Diego gasps down below. Someone has turned off the overhead lights, leaving only my fairy lights and the glowing bulbs hanging over each one of the agave paintings. Diego wraps his arms around my knees and plucks me off the ladder, spinning me around the room and laughing like a complete and utter maniac.

The lights twirl above me like a web of magic. I feel like I can reach my hands up and press through into another world. I've always loved that about string lights. The way they can turn an ordinary room into a starry night or a glowing field of flickering wishes. My breath catches in my throat and my eyes feel too bright. My mom would have loved this, too—she'd done it to our dining room when the chandelier broke and we didn't have enough money to fix it. A dining room I'm no longer allowed in because we had to rent out our house and move into the garage. The renters took down her lights the week they moved in. Heartless fools.

"OK, OK, enough! Put me down before I knee you in the kidney!" I swat his head, long wisps of hair getting caught on my teeth. "Just because I'm small doesn't mean I like being carried."

He sets me down and bows before me on one knee. "Yes, my fairy queen."

"Dramatique." His boyfriend rolls his eyes. "I have to admit it does make the show really come alive." Victor reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of cash, and it immediately snaps me out of the moment. My gut knots. He counts out three crisp twenty-dollar bills and waits for me to hold out my palm to take them.

Right. So . . . I guess I'm the hired help? Was this all a business transaction? I try to tamp down the pride prickling up my spine. The puke-green from those twenties makes my stomach roil.

"Thanks for your help, Ruby. You've got such an eye for light and dark." Victor leans down awkwardly to whisper in my ear, and I wish he would

stumble on his way down. Anything to stop this embarrassment burning in my chest. When he looks at me, does he see only the tattered jeans? The charity case? Is this the only reason I'm here? "Go on, take it. I know you need the cash, and I'm not taking 'no' for an answer."

I don't know what to say. I hate people knowing how much my dad and I are struggling to pay off my mom's cancer bills while still sending money back to family in the Philippines, while also scraping by in one of the most expensive cities in America—especially when my dad can randomly blow through a paycheck if he decides to drive out to the Reno casinos and binge for a whole weekend straight. I told Diego once how much I needed the painting jobs, how it was hard to find a job that paid more than minimum wage with only a high school diploma. Such a stupid mistake. I didn't think about the fact that he would tell his rich boyfriend.

I don't want friends who pity me. Who only want me around if I'm useful. Who tell me to host an art show as if it's the easiest thing in the world, as if I have time for anything more than survival right now. I'm trying, so, so hard. Tiny pinpricks come rushing to the edges of my eyes. Come on, Ruby, keep it together. Just take the money. It makes me feel even more pathetic if I cry over such a small thing. I force a smile and slip the cash into my pocket, before looking anywhere but Victor's eyes.

Diego hears another group of friends knocking on the door, and he rushes over, kissing them on their cheeks, waving them inside from the autumn chill. Their *oohs* and *ahhs* over the paintings echo through the room. I can finally release the breath I've been holding tight inside my chest. I hightail it to the door, slip out, just as more people push inside. Diego must know every living person within a two-mile radius of Golden Gate Park. They strut inside wearing glamorous embroidered jeans and velvet blazers and silk dresses. I'd never be able to pull off something like that. I'm a

ghost in my own city. I glance back once more—soaking in the sight of his gorgeous agave paintings, his dreams lit up from the inside out.

I brace myself against a graffiti wall.

I hit play on the voice mail I've been avoiding all evening as the fog inevitably finds a way to sneak through the cracks in my jacket. A shiver jolts across my skin.

My dad's words are slurred, but it's a message I know all too well.

Help.