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a contemporary ghost story

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Alisa Valdés

New York Times Bestselling Author



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—*San Antonio Express-News*

CRY

by *New York Times*, *USA Today* and Amazon bestselling author

Alisa Valdés



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“Because to take away a man’s freedom of choice, even his freedom to make the wrong choice, is to manipulate him as though he were a puppet and not a person.”

—Madeline L’Engle

Chapter One

Then

I was a part-time cashier at a rare-books store when I died, partly because I fancied myself a wordsmith, but mostly to earn money to get things my dad refused to buy me—like piercings, pink hair dye and drugs. As an added bonus, the shop, called Shadowbound Books, specialized in the occult, and as such, it terrified my shiny and hairsprayed new stepmother, a real estate agent named Candi with an i. The bookshop was forgotten, as the best things often are, off a winding brick path behind an abandoned building full of pigeons. Few people ever shopped there, meaning I could write my screenplays and poems behind the checkout counter while getting paid.

Shadowbound Books smelled like dust and camphor, just like its owner, a tiny one-eyed hunchback named Milagros Palladino, who my stepmother thought was a witch because my stepmother belonged in a century where people still got drawn and quartered. Milagros was a self-proclaimed medium (as in clairvoyant, not shirt size—that would be a small) who was at least 80 years old and made her way around the store by thumping a cane hard against the soft wooden floor. She lugged her half-dead pug, Platero, across the shop's small rear courtyard (her tiny, cluttered apartment was on the other side) to work with

her every day. The dog was named after the donkey who represents innocence in the famous 1914 prose-poem *Platero and Me*, by Juan Ramón Ramírez. The pug's broken black tongue dragged the floor, collecting lint like a damp rag. You could hear Platero breathing and scratching himself no matter where you were in the little store—a small, soft wheezing, a tinkling of too many metal tags. You could also hear Milagros muttering to the ghosts she claimed she could see escaping from certain books from time to time. She had made it her life's work, she told me, to wrestle them back into their pages where they belonged. I felt relatively normal at that bookstore, like, yes, I was living in a Harmony Korine movie but so was everyone else, like something big and weird was always about to happen. It was also cool that I actually got to hold in my hands a first-edition of Anne Sexton's *The Book of Folly*, from 1973. My mom was a lot like Sexton, in the best and worst ways. Both were prize-winning writers who were terrible at life. For what it's worth, even though I died, as did they, I one-hundred-percent did not *kill* myself like those two flipped-out fleabags. I'd never do that to the people who care about me. There aren't many, but they do exist.

When I wasn't working for an accused witch, I could be found at The Sandra Annette Bullock High School for the Performing & Visual Arts. It sounds like a private school on a Hollywood movie lot, but it's not. It's a public charter school for students interested in all aspects of filmmaking, from screenwriting to directing to acting. Our school was named in honor of perhaps the most famous actor and producer from Austin and occupied an old art deco movie theater building. We had no sports teams and did not miss them. The generation before ours had ungratefully begun to call our school Bird Box High, after Sandra Bullock's worst yet most remembered movie, and, like so many other mean-spirited things in Texas, it stuck.

I was a sophomore at Bird Box when I died, sixteen years old. The school wasn't as great as my dad seemed to think it was, but life had already disappointed him so much that I kept its true mediocrity to myself. We students did a lot of sitting in circles and talking about *feelings*. I sucked at feelings, by choice, because feelings were stupid, so I hardly ever spoke. I was not fond of feeling things, because when I did it never ended well. My favorite class that semester was 10th-grade Documentary Filmmaking, not because I was all that interested in docu-dramas or, God forbid, TV news, but because the teacher, an old wizard-looking hippie named Mickey who hated big things (big banking, big pharma, big agribusiness, big chain stores, big brother 'in our wombs' despite his being wombless), was always nice to me, even that time I came back from lunch extremely high and told him to eat a giant bag of dicks. When everyone else laughed, Mickey just told me he was holding me in light and peace, with his arthritic hand over his heart. He would probably have hugged me, except it was now against the law to touch students. Small blessings. He told me he was "holding space" for my "trauma." That was the day Mikaela Hoffmaster, my gum-smacking, perfect-haired, Ibiza-going, loudmouthed influencer nemesis convinced everyone to start calling me Therapy Girl. It was not a nickname I enjoyed, but it *was* accurate, so I did not fight it. Since my mom killed herself, it was safe to say I had been getting sent to therapy by every adult in my life—the way other kids got enrolled in music and dance lessons—with the goal of getting me out of the house, in hopes that one day I'd amount to something entertaining rather than depressing.

Mostly, in the days leading up to my death, I wrote semi-autobiographical fictional short screenplays about numb, rebellious, tattooed kids with pink hair and dead moms, punching girls like Mikaela Hoffmaster in the throat.

In case you're wondering, my mom, famed Tejana true crime novelist Eva del Río, stopped her own heart when I was fourteen with anti-anxiety pills and a pint of tequila. I was the one who found her. She was 35 years old, face-down in the bath in her wedding dress, with the same Lana del Rey song playing on repeat on her phone in the soap dish. "Hope is a Dangerous Thing for a Woman Like Me to Have," is the song. I stood outside the bathroom door, knocking, for a long time, sweating in my yellow polyester turtleneck and orange corduroy blazer with tweed trousers. I'd dressed up like Carl Sagan for the freshman Halloween Dance at Bird Box High, and I needed a ride. I was knocking because she'd said she was going to take me. I thought maybe she just forgot. Turned out she hadn't forgotten about the dance so much as she'd forgotten that I needed a mom, generally. She hadn't bothered to lock the door, or to leave much of a note. She was literally a *novelist* by profession, specializing in stories about girls who flee repressive cults, and yet her suicide note, which smelled like lavender bubble bath, was only two sentences long: *It's for the best. Let me go.*

You might think there's nothing worse than a parent committing suicide, but there is. A notoriously verbose parent being so lazy and selfish they commit suicide without really bothering to tell you what the "this" is that there was no other way out of. No matter how many different child therapists lean forward in their expensive German chairs, fingers steeped in faux concern as they tell you it wasn't your fault, you never believe it, not if you're a kid when someone leaves you, no matter how they go. They could die, or move away, or never claim you in the first place. Doesn't matter. It's always your fault. You start pushing people away after that, snarling at them before they have a chance to leave you, for the same reasons you might avoid playing in traffic or drinking bleach. It's self-

protection. This is why, no matter how many times Candi with an i suggested we go get mani-pedis together, or that I just give the “nice folks” in the youth group at Saint Mary Catholic Cathedral a chance, or whatever else she thought might help us bond, I always pretended not to have heard her, and if she pushed, I stared her straight in her big mascaraed eyes and said, “Nope. Never.”

I should mention that I only talked back to my stenchmom when her son, my stepbrother Jacob Garza, wasn’t around. Jacob scared me. He was my same age, but the size of your average biker bar bouncer, with the intellect of a beanbag, and fiercely protective of his mother. There was nothing other than our age, ethnicity (another Tejano, like most people in Texas) and the fact that our mismatched parents inexplicably married each other when we were fifteen that was similar about me and Jacob in the least, and we almost never interacted at all. He went to a normal public high school, where he was so terrible at academics he needed a private tutor just to pass algebra, but so excellent at football that all the teachers usually passed him as their patriotic Texan duty, even when he should have failed.

I’d like to note here that there was one boy at my school who got through all my Therapy Girl defenses, and one girl. I had precisely two friends, both of them made during freshman orientation, shortly before that Halloween dance I never went to. They’d waited there for me that night, dressed as Noam Chomsky and Stephen Pinker, respectively. The costume theme we’d chosen was “white male intellectuals who probably smell like mothballs.” My boy-space-friend, as opposed to my boyfriend, was Blake Abrams. He was a soft-spoken yet spectacularly witty aspiring cinematographer in my same grade, a self-described “ethnic but not religious Jew” who made me laugh like no one else. He had medium brown hair that he wore long and curly. He had pale skin and healthy pink cheeks and, because of this, his

face reminded me of some sort of fecund anime rabbit. Tall for our age, he was narrow as a pencil and fit from running on his own, which he did while listening to political podcasts or vintage punk rock. The three of us shared a passion for the latter, and as freshman we'd begun playing in our own garage band that practiced in the guest house at Blake's place. I played bass, Blake manned the guitar and Lucía Cabra, my girl-space-friend (as opposed to my girlfriend) played drums and sang at the same time, like Karen Carpenter minus the eating disorder.

I should note here, and not that it matters even a little bit, but I have been attracted equally to boys and girls for as long as I can remember. I mention this only because it is one of many things about me that my stenchmother believes is broken and fixable if I'd just get right with the Pope. She is incorrect about this. In kindergarten, which is the first memory I have of ever developing a crush on anyone, I had two simultaneous crushes—one on Christopher, this little boy with a flopping mop of brown hair and sparkling eyes, and another on Claudette, a clever, laughing girl who amazed us all by being able to leap off a swing at its apogee, always landing on her pretty little feet like a cat. That I was, and am, and would always be bisexual did not, does not, and will never mean, however, that I was, am or will be attracted to all boys and all girls equally, as some people seem to think. I'm attracted to some boys and to some girls. I am discerning, like other human beings, in my attractions, and it just so happens that while I was romantically attracted to Blake, I was not romantically attracted to Lucía in that way.

This does not mean that Lucía was not attractive, she was and is movie-star beautiful. It just means that I did not feel that dangerous combustibility with her that I did with him. I am drawn to people who despise themselves, like my mother. Lucía loves herself a lot, like her old school idol, Jennifer Lopez. For what it's worth, the (lack of) feeling with Lucía was and remains

entirely mutual, because despite her being a bonafide genius actress—we are talking a young Meryl Streep—Lucía was and is inexplicably most attracted to extremely cis-het boys like my stepbrother, boys who chest-bump each other and fart the alphabet, and do not, therefore, go to our school. None of this is a commentary on gender or sexuality or anything grandly political, and I don't want to be celebrated or canceled on the app formerly known as Twitter for any of this, and I don't want to include a trigger warning on my life because I am triggered by trigger warnings. It's just my own personal heart doing the unfathomable and unpredictable gymnastics hearts tend to do all on their own, without any rhyme or reason to it, and I would appreciate it if we all just left it at that.

Lucía's last name, Cabra, means goat. Our garage band was called GOAT because of this, although we liked to come up with really stupid things it could have been an acronym for, like Geriatric Oddballs Adore Twerking, or Green Oblong Alien Tits. That kind of thing. The official acronym we came up with for the band was Grit Over Authority's Domain, but Grumpy Old Aunt Tilly was a personal favorite among the fakes. It's stupid how much we made ourselves laugh with ridiculous things like that. Anyway, Lucía was very fit and conventionally pretty, with olive skin, a delicate nose, long black hair and large deep brown eyes she emphasized with black winged liner and the occasional false eyelashes. She'd been born in the Philippines but moved to Texas with her mom when she was two and did not know much about her dad. Lucía was a talented aspiring actress who read two or three books a week for fun and also spoke three languages. She was the only one of us who ever had formal music lessons and wrote most of GOAT's songs. When she wasn't taking understated selfies or recording herself performing elegant monologues, Lucía spent most of her time beneath headphones with her eyebrows pinched together in this

sort of furious concentration that instantly won my respect. Though she had a significant social following, she was definitely *not* a vapid VSCO girl. More like a younger, half Filipina-American, half-African American version of Aisling Franciosi, intellectual, empathic, and someone who had been unwaveringly supportive and present in my life from the first day I met her.

Blake and Lucía were with me when I died. It happened on a Sunday, the weekend before spring break officially started, which was exactly one week ago today. The three of us went camping together, at McKinney Falls State Park, just southeast of Austin. It's a state park with more than 600 acres of wilderness, and 81 campsites. You can swim there, and hike, and, best of all, get very, very high and commune with nature. We were surprised to find we had the campsite all to ourselves, probably because everyone else had actually checked the weather forecast. I hadn't checked the weather because I'd been too busy sneaking out of the house to go on the trip after my father told me I couldn't. I don't know why Blake and Lucía didn't check the weather. If I had to guess, I'd say it was because Blake was so convinced of his unimportance that he assumed someone else would do it, and Lucía was too busy reciting Georgina's Morning Monologue from "Dream Girl" on a live social media feed. I hated that the last conversation I had with my father before my death was me telling him that the universe screwed up and took the wrong parent. I don't have much to say about that now except that I was terrible, literally a terrible person, and no one should ever say anything like that to their widowed parent, whether they see them again or not.

Anyway. Blake had borrowed his uncle's camper-van. Even though it had a whole tiny kitchen in it, Blake made a fire in the designated pit using dried pine needles for kindling because, he said, we weren't pussies like his uncle, which, now that I say it out loud seems a little ungrateful considering the guy let us use his van. We charred hot dogs on the ends of sticks like cave-

people, then smoked a little weed like cavepeople with cancer. Lucía shared music with us on a speaker. Stravinsky, Sibelius. She taught us about tonics and subtonics in music in her animated and very extra actress way. I stared at the stars that first night, before the storm moved in, and felt small and vast at the same time. She let me put my sleeping bag in the middle of the van mattress that we all shared and had agreed to call The Vattress, her subtle way of encouraging me to act on the secret crush I'd developed on Blake ever since he stopped being awkward and started being graceful. Ever since his braces came off and he wasn't so slobbery. Ever since he stopped toe-walking and grew seven inches taller in one summer. Lucía was the only one who knew about my change of feelings toward him, and she also knew that I was far too much of an insecure dork to ever tell him. As we were falling asleep he pressed his leg against mine. I was pretty sure he did it on purpose. It made me melty and terrified. I held my breath and worried he could hear my heartbeat. For a moment, I remembered what it felt like to be almost happy again. In the morning I woke up big-spooning him. He hadn't moved away yet. I moved myself away from him before he had a chance, and we didn't say anything else about it.

We got up, and everyone peed in the woods, one at a time, and then we ate shrooms with stale granola bars and maybe that's why we weren't all that concerned by the dark approaching clouds. Even when thunder began to echo low and deep in the canyon we just laughed. When it started to rain, and hard, we ran back to the van. While we sat there on the Vattress watching the storm out the open back door I decided it was important for me to run out into the rain, to wrap my arms around a wet tree trunk, the thickest one I could find, convinced that because of its roots it could never leave me like my mother had.

"Love me!" I screamed at the sky. "I'm sixteen and never even been kissed!"

Then, just like that, the universe kissed me. No matter how hard you try, you won't be able to understand exactly how hot it was. Even hotter than big-spooning Blake. A lightning bolt is said to have a temperature of 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit. It hit the top of my tree and instantly entered my body. I don't remember much. Only that for an instant every muscle in me fired at exactly the same time, with a stinging, screaming, horrible ferocity. The pain is impossible to describe, even for a budding wordsmith and the daughter of a dead novelist, though others have tried. They've said its like being stung by 10,000 wasps, all at once, or that it's like your body turning to gravy in your clothes. For me it was as though I had suddenly been turned into a cramped fist made entirely of fire, and in the next moment, my heart stopped.

Just like my mom's.

Chapter Two

I didn't realize I was dead until I was already near the top of the bald cypress tree I'd been hugging. The whole forest had gone white and hot, with a loud booming crack, and then I felt myself shoot out of the top of my sizzling head like the thumbed cork of a champagne bottle. Not that I'd know anything about underage drinking, wink wink. Anyway, in an instant all my pain stopped. I was floating, but it didn't feel exactly like floating because I didn't have any sense of gravity or time. I just popped out and then there I was, in the treetops, looking down.

I saw my body, though "see" isn't quite the right verb. I experienced its presence in sharp detail. There was smoke coming out of the sleeves of my green quilted bomber jacket. This was interesting to me rather than horrifying. I felt no attachment to that body at all. It just looked like any other inanimate object. Like a large pot roast someone had stuffed into some Forever 21 wide-legged jeans and capped with a short, jagged black and pink wig. Like a wooden jointed puppet someone had tossed on the ground, with its elbows and knees bent all wrong. A thing. A not-me thing.

Then I noticed two animated objects moving across the landscape. It took me a second to remember who they were. Lucía and Blake. Lucía and Blake were running toward the lifeless body through the rain. Lucía was barefoot in black leggings and a hot-

pink sports bra with an open plaid fleece oversized jacket. She was screaming like a weirdo, like full-on, bent-at-the-waist, helpless-horror-movie-chick screaming. She had always been a bit “extra” as a personality, but this took her excesses and innate dramatic nature to the next level. Blake, in gray sweatpants, running shoes and a white T-shirt, was silent as he dropped to his knees next to the body, to check for a pulse that wasn’t there, calm and determined as a doctor or a boy scout, one of those. So this, I thought, was death ... and I was still here. Huh.

When my mom was alive, my parents would sometimes take me to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin. The ministers at First Unitarian rarely, if ever, used the word “God” at all. Instead, they talked about The Great Mystery or The Magic, and how those puppeteer phrases pertain to things like the anti-war movement and immigrant rights. They honored all the world’s faiths, but mostly talked about psychology. The closest they came to asking you to pray was when they directed people to the social justice table in the courtyard after services. Our family walked in the pride parade every year with people from our church, with a banner that for sure said “church” on it, but the organization didn’t feel like a church that way most churches in Texas feel like churches. First Unitarian was more like some weird comparative philosophy class for old white people from Vermont who mysteriously got stranded in Austin, polite but dispassionate people who sang hymns about Emma Goldman and the labor movement to break the world’s big ideas into bite-sized chunks. All this is to say, I’d never really known anyone who was truly religious in that vindictive-Sky-Daddy, team-sports, school-spirit kind of way most people in Texas seemed to be religious, so I’d never given any afterlife much thought. Even after my mom died, I’d just thought of death as The Big Nothing, like most secular humanists with Buddhist tendencies.

But once I was actually dead, I was stunned to realize I still existed. And it was a remarkable existence. I sensed the rain in new ways. I could taste it, smell it, feel it landing on the earth, all at once, but there were also so many other sensations. I could curl up inside each and every raindrop, fall with each and every drop at once without losing the sense of each drop as distinct. I could understand raindrops at a molecular level, and it was like living inside fractal geometry. The rain was full of colors, too. Colors I'd never experienced before. Colors that sounded like music and felt like vibrations. Everything was a vibration, everything was music. Colors were visible music. I was music. I was everything and everything was me, and I was overwhelmingly at peace, because I understood how all of it worked and fit together like a puzzle.

Something started pulling me away from my body and my friends and the forest then, toward a swirling tunnel in the sky, with a circle of light at the end of it. It wasn't as cheesy as it sounds. It was wild, like a wormhole had opened up in space-time with my name on it. Then, to my great surprise and delight, there was none other than Mister Carl Sagan standing at the edge of eternity like a Wal-Mart greeter.

As you will recall, I had dressed up as this particular astrophysicist and 1980s PBS icon for Halloween the day my mother killed herself. I knew who Carl Sagan was only because when my equally nerdy friends and I got high, which we did more than we should have, even back then, Blake, Lucía and I liked to watch old *Cosmos* episodes from the 1980s on YouTube. Those old *Cosmos* were way trippier than the pompous newer *Cosmos* with Neil deGrasse Tyson. Anyway, point being, I was extremely happy to see that Mister Carl Sagan still had a full forehead comb over in the afterlife, because, let's just be real here for a minute, heaven would not have been heaven without it.