

Chapter 1

Pancakes? On a weekday?” I said.

Mom smiled. “I got up early,” she said. “Don’t wake up your brother and sister yet. Just sit here with me until I’m finished. I have some news.”

I sat. The kitchen is my favorite place in the house. Mom loves bright colors. So last year Dad and I painted it yellow. The curtains are yellow and pink. The table is orange. Talk about cheerful! No matter how sleepy you are, you wake up fast in the Casillas kitchen.

I could hear the batter sizzling in the frying pan.

“How many pancakes can you eat?” she asked.

“Six,” I said. “No, seven.”

She smiled. Mom’s thirty-five. But she still looks very young. She’s got a lot of energy and the best smile in the world.

She handed me a stack of pancakes and sat down. “Last night,” she said. “Lance asked me to marry him.” Her voice was a little nervous.

I was shocked. “You’re kidding!” I said. “You said no, right?”

“Justin! I said yes,” she said.

“What?” I cried out.

Now she looked concerned. “Honey,” she said. “I want to marry Lance. This is a good thing for everybody. I thought you’d be happy!”

“But, Mom,” I said. “Dad’s only been dead eight months!”

“I know, Justin. And I still miss him. But you’ve always liked Uncle Lance. You know he’s a good man,” she said.

“But not good enough to marry you! Not to take Dad’s place!” I said.

“Nobody can ever replace your father,” she said quietly.

“Nobody but Lance, I guess!” I said. Now Mom was annoyed with me.

“You watch your tone, young man!” she snapped.

“I have to go. I’m going to be late for school,” I said. I pushed my plate away and grabbed my backpack.

“Justin!” she called. But I was already out the door.

I actually got to school early. By the time I locked my bike, it was only five minutes after eight. Usually I’m in a hurry to see my buddies. Today I just hung out in the library. The only person I wanted to see was my girlfriend, Mari.

AP English was my first class. We’d just started reading *Hamlet*, a play by

William Shakespeare. As the story begins, everybody's giving Hamlet a hard time. Since his father died, people keep telling him he's got to get over it. Poor Hamlet. I know how that feels.

My teacher is Mr. Klein. "Today," he said. "We'll read the scene where the ghost speaks to Hamlet. Ms. Gallegos, will you begin, please?" Corrie Gallegos started reading out loud. I felt this weird chill on my neck.

The ghost is Hamlet's father, the guy who'd been the king. Everyone thought he'd died from a snake bite. But he was really murdered. While he was sleeping, Hamlet's uncle had poured poison into his ear. Then the uncle became the king and married Hamlet's mother. Before the ghost left, he told Hamlet to avenge his murder.

By the time Corrie finished reading, I felt like someone had shaken me hard.

After class I hurried over to Mari's locker. As kids swarmed by, she pulled out

of the crowd. We kissed, like we always do.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She can always tell when I’m down.

“I’ll tell you later,” I said. “Can you meet me at the cliffs after soccer?”

“Okay,” she said as she studied my face. “Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

A ghost. That remark made me feel strangely uncomfortable.

The rest of the day was pretty bad. In chemistry, we had a lab. I usually like labs. Today I hardly knew what I was doing.

After school I had baseball practice. I thought I was playing okay when I caught a fly ball. But after that I struck out twice.

Finally practice was over. I rode out to the cliffs. Our town, Seacliff, is about a mile from the Pacific Ocean. Some of the cliffs along the water are one hundred feet high. In a few spots there are some narrow beaches. Mostly there are just tall, jagged rocks below the cliffs.

A few fishing boats were out on the water. I could just make out the name on one of them, the *Sweet Nancy*. That boat had been built here in town. My dad had done some of the welding on it. I'd helped too. Dad had taught me how to use a welding torch when I was eleven.

“Welding’s a good job,” he used to say. “I make a good living. So does your uncle Lance. But you can go further, Justin. You’ve got the smarts.” He always wanted the best for me.

I sat down in the grass. Mari was coming on her bike. I’ve loved that girl since seventh grade. She’s not movie star beautiful, but I love to look at her. She’s got warm brown eyes that snap when she’s excited. Her hair is long and soft and perfectly black. She thinks she’s fat. But really, she’s just right.

Mom keeps saying, “Don’t even think about getting married at your age.” But I know I’m going to marry her. As soon as

I'm out of college and have a good job. It's Mari and me, forever.

Mari parked her bike next to mine. "Hey, you," she said.

"Hey," I answered. I took her hand. We started walking down the path that goes along the cliffs.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"You won't believe this. Mom says she's going to marry Lance!" I said.

Mari shook her head. "You didn't see this coming?" she asked.

"No way!" I said. "I mean, he's been around a lot, but—"

"Justin, every time I've come over, your uncle's been there. Then he gave her that big microwave for her birthday. He bought you baseball cleats—"

"Yeah, I know," I said. "But it doesn't seem right. It's too soon. It hasn't even been a year since Dad died!"

“Maybe your mom doesn’t want to stay single the rest of her life,” Mari said.

“Yeah, but Lance?” I said.

Mari patted my hand. “Don’t tell me you have a problem with the guy. Everybody likes Lance,” she said.

“Right,” I said sarcastically. “Everybody likes Lance. Kids, puppies, old folks, young folks, you, my mom—”

“Come on, Justin!” she said. “That isn’t fair. Lance set up the memorial fund for you kids to go to college. He’s been like a father to you.”

Right, by taking my father’s place. For a moment I was back in class, reading about how Hamlet’s uncle killed his father and married his mother.

Mari looked worried. “Let’s talk about something else,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “Just one more thing. And don’t take this the wrong way, okay? It seems like you can’t accept that your dad’s

gone. I mean, it's normal to miss him. But you have to admit that it really happened.”

Just like Hamlet. I put my arm around her. “Now could we talk about something else?” I asked.

She just gave me a look. It was time to go. Being with Mari usually makes me feel better no matter what mood I'm in. Not today.

Mari was right, though. I hadn't really accepted Dad's death. To me it still seemed impossible that he was gone. That night I found out why.

The evening was busy as usual. Before dinner I helped my brother and sister with their homework. Elena's the older one. She's seven. Manny's five. After dinner I did the dishes. Then I had to wash my baseball uniform and some other clothes. Elena wanted me to read her a story. It was almost ten by the time I got to my homework.

About midnight I crawled into bed and fell asleep immediately. Then I dreamed.