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THE FAMILIAR



Leigh Bardugo

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Chapter 1



If the bread hadn't burned, this would be a very different story. If the cook's son hadn't come home late the night before, if the cook hadn't known he was hanging around that lady playwright, if she hadn't lain awake fretting for his immortal soul and weeping over the future fates of possible grandchildren, if she hadn't been so tired and distracted, then the bread would not have burned and the calamities that followed might have belonged to some other house than Casa Ordoño, on some other street than Calle de Dos Santos.

If, on that morning, Don Marius had bent to kiss his wife's cheek before he went about the day's business, this would be a happier story. If he had called her *my darling, my dove, my beauty*, if he had noted the blue lapis in her ears, or the flowers she had placed in the hall, if Don Marius hadn't ignored his wife so that he could ride out to Hernán Saravia's stables to look over horses he could never afford to buy, maybe Doña Valentina wouldn't have bothered going down to the kitchen, and all of the tragedy that was to follow would have poured out into the gutter and rolled down to the sea instead. Then no one would have had to suffer anything but a bowlful of melancholy clams.

Doña Valentina had been raised by two cold, distracted parents who felt little toward her beyond a vague sense of disappointment in her tepid beauty and the unlikelihood that she would make a

good match. She hadn't. Don Marius Ordoño possessed a dwindling fortune, lands crowded with olive trees that failed to fruit, and a well-proportioned but unassuming house on one of the better streets in Madrid. He was the best that Valentina, with her unremarkable dowry and less remarkable face, could hope for. As for Marius, he'd been married once before to a redheaded heiress, who had stepped in front of a carriage and been trampled to death only days after their wedding, leaving him without children or a single coin of her parents' money.

On Valentina's wedding day, she wore a veil of golden lace and ivory combs in her hair. Don Marius, gazing at their reflection in the watery mirror propped against the wall in the front room of his home, had been surprised by the jolt of lust that overtook him, inspired perhaps by his bride's hopeful eyes, or the sight of himself in his wedding clothes. But it's more likely he was moved by the brandied cherries he'd been eating all morning, tucking them into his cheeks and chewing them slowly rather than making conversation with his new father-in-law. That night he fell upon his bride in a frenzy of passion, whispering poetry into her ears, but he had managed only a few awkward thrusts before vertigo overcame him and he vomited the plump half-chewed bodies of brandied cherries all over the nuptial linen that Valentina had embroidered with her own hands over a period of many weeks.

In the months and years to come, Valentina would look back almost wistfully on that night, as Marius's cherry-fueled ardor was the only sign of passion or even interest in her that he had ever shown. And while it was true that she'd simply gone from one loveless home to another, that didn't mean she didn't feel the absence of love. Doña Valentina had no acceptable name for the longing she felt, and no idea how to soothe it, so she filled her days irritating their few servants with constant correction and existing in a state of relentless dissatisfaction.

That was why she went down to the kitchen that morning—not once, but twice.

The cook had grown increasingly erratic as her son's obsession with the playwright Quiteria Escárcega became known, so Doña Valentina made sure to check on her every morning. That day, as she came down the stairs, feeling the heat rise around her, she was greeted by the unmistakable odor of burning bread and nearly swooned with the pleasure of something tangible to complain about.

But the cook wasn't there.

Valentina intended to remain, sweating in the heat from the fireplace, her anger rising to a furious boil, refining a long rant against wastefulness, negligence, and the cook's general character. But a knock at the door echoed above, and Valentina knew it might be someone who wished to speak to her husband about his olives. It might even be an invitation—unlikely, but just the hope was enough to make her move. There was no one else to answer the door at Casa Ordoño. Her husband had made it clear they could afford no additional servants and that she was lucky to have a cook and a scullion to help her around the house. There was nothing to do but set aside her rage and stomp back up the steps, dabbing at her moist face with her sleeve.

When she marched down the stairs again, a letter from her father stuffed unread into her sleeve, she heard the cook nattering about something to the squat lump of a scullion girl who smelled of damp and who was always stumbling about the house with her eyes on her graceless feet.

“Águeda,” Valentina said as she burst into the kitchen, voice vibrating with the righteousness of a good scold, “can you tell me why you see fit to waste my husband's fortune and my time by once again burning the bread?”

The cook looked at her dully, sullen eyes red from crying over her foolish son, then turned her gaze to the table at the center of the kitchen, where the bread waited in its black pan.

Even before Valentina looked, she felt her body flush, the likelihood of her own humiliation coming on like a sudden storm. The

bread sat, a little golden cushion in its iron bed, its top high, glossy, and golden brown, perfectly risen, perfectly baked.

Doña Valentina wanted to examine the bread, poke it with her finger, and declare it a liar. She had seen that same bread only minutes ago, blackened and ruined, its dome of crust collapsed by heat. And she knew, she *knew* it was not another loaf drawn from the fire to replace the first because she recognized that iron pan with its slightly dented corner.

It wasn't possible. She had been gone only a few minutes. They're playing a trick, Valentina thought, the stupid cook and the stupid kitchen girl are trying to goad me, to get a reaction and make me look a fool. She would not give them the satisfaction.

"You have burned the bread before," she said lightly, "and I have no doubt you will do it again. See to it that our midday meal is not late to table."

"Will Don Marius be home to dine, señora?"

Valentina considered slapping the cook's smug face. "I don't believe so," she said brightly. "But I will have two friends joining me. What are you preparing?"

"The pork, señora. Just as you asked."

"No," Valentina corrected. "It was the quail I requested. The pork is for tomorrow, of course."

Again the cook stared at her, her eyes hard as stubs of coal. "Of course, señora."

Valentina knew very well that she had requested the pork. She had planned the meals for the household a week prior as she always did. But let the cook remember that this was her home and she was never to be the butt of the joke.

After Doña Valentina left, Luzia plucked the quail and listened to the cook mutter angrily as she set aside the stewed pork, pots and pans clattering. She was making a fuss, but the pork could be kept for tomorrow with little trouble. It was Doña Valentina's

manner that had further soured Águeda's miserable mood. Luzia was almost grateful. An angry Águeda was better company than a moping Águeda.

Still Doña Valentina's unhappiness bled into everything, and each time she came to the kitchen Luzia worried her bitterness might turn the milk or cause the vegetables to spoil. Her aunt had warned her long ago that some people brought misery with them like weather, and she'd told the story of Marta de San Carlos, who, jilted by her lover, had gone for a walk along the leafy paths by the Alcázar and wept so long and so hard the birds had joined in. For years after, anyone who entered the gardens and heard the birds sing was overcome by sadness. Or so Luzia's aunt said.

When Luzia had seen the burnt bread, she hadn't thought much about passing her hand over it and singing the words her aunt had taught her, "Aboltar kazal, aboltar mazal." *A change of scene, a change of fortune*. She sang them very softly. They were not quite Spanish, just as Luzia was not quite Spanish. But Doña Valentina would never have her in this house, even in the dark, hot, windowless kitchen, if she detected a whiff of Jew.

Luzia knew that she should be careful, but it was difficult not to do something the easy way when everything else was so hard. She slept every night on the cellar floor, on a roll of rags she'd sewn together, a sack of flour for her pillow. She woke before dawn and went out into the cold alley to relieve herself, then returned and stoked the fire before walking to the Plaza del Arrabal to fetch water from the fountain, where she saw other scullions and washerwomen and wives, said her good mornings, then filled her buckets and balanced them on her shoulders to make the trip back to Calle de Dos Santos. She set the water to boil, picked the bugs out of the millet, and began the day's bread if Águeda hadn't yet seen to it.

It was the cook's job to visit the market, but since her son had fallen in love with that dashing lady playwright, it was Luzia who took the little pouch of money and walked the stalls, trying to find

the best price for lamb and heads of garlic and hazelnuts. She was bad at haggling, so sometimes on the way back to Casa Ordoño, if she found herself alone on an empty street, she would give her basket a shake and sing, “Onde iras, amigos toparas”—*wherever you go, may you find friends*—and where there had been six eggs, there would be a dozen.

When she was still alive, Luzia’s mother had warned her that she wanted too much, and she claimed it was because Luzia had been born at the death of the king’s third wife. When the queen died her courtiers threw themselves against the palace walls and their wailing was heard throughout the city. One was not supposed to mourn the dead; it was said to deny the miracle of resurrection. But the death of a queen was different. The city was meant to grieve her passing, and her funeral procession was a spectacle rivaled only by her stepson Carlos’s death earlier that year. Luzia’s first cries as she entered the world were mixed with the weeping of every madrileño for their lost queen. “It confused you,” Blanca told her. “You thought they were crying for you, and it has given you too much ambition.”

Once, though her aunt had warned against such things, Luzia had tried the same little song of friendship with the coins themselves. The pouch had jangled merrily, but when she reached inside, something bit her. Twelve copper spiders spilled out and skittered away. She’d had to sing over the cheese, the cabbage, and the almonds to make up for the lost money, and Águeda had still called her stupid and useless when she’d seen the meager contents of the shopping basket. That was where ambition got you.

Aunt Hualit had only laughed when Luzia told her. “If a little bit of magic could make us rich, your mother would have died in a palace full of books, and I wouldn’t have had to fuck my way to this beautiful house. You’re lucky all you got was a spider bite.”

Her aunt had taught her the words, pulled from letters written in countries far across the sea, but the tune was always Luzia’s. The songs just came into her head, the notes making a pleasant buzz

on her tongue—to double the sugar when there was no money for more, to start the fire when the embers had gone cold, to fix the bread when the top had burned so badly. Small ways to avert small disasters, to make the long days of work a little more bearable.

She had no way of knowing that Doña Valentina had already visited the kitchen that morning, or that she had seen the burnt bread in its pan. Because while Luzia had been born with certain talents, far-seeing was not one of them. She wasn't prone to visions or trances. She saw no futures in the patterns of spilled salt. If she had, she would have known to leave the bread untouched, and that it was far better to endure the discomfort of Doña Valentina's anger than the peril of her interest.

Chapter 2



Valentina had no handmaid, so it was left to the scullion to help her undress every night, to douse the candles, wipe down the windows and seal them tight, and set the chamber pots beneath the beds. Usually Valentina was able to ignore the girl. She was a good enough worker, appropriately drab in her linen and wool, not the type to attract notice. It was one of the reasons Valentina had hired her, though truth be told, she'd not had much choice. The wages she could afford to offer were low, and with so few hands to help, the work was hard.

But this night, as the girl unhooked the back of Valentina's gown and brushed it down to remove any dust, Valentina asked, "What's your name?" She must have known the scullion's name at some point, but had used it too rarely to commit it to memory.

"Luzia, señora," the girl said without looking up from her work.

"And do you have a suitor?"

Luzia shook her head. "No, señora."

"A shame."

Valentina expected a mumbled *yes, señora*. Instead, Luzia, folding the dress into its trunk, said, "There are worse things for a woman than being alone."

I was happier in my mother's house. The thought came unbidden to Valentina, the grief sudden and overwhelming. But of course there was no greater shame than an unmarried daughter, nothing

more useless than a woman without husband and children. Was this girl happy? Valentina wondered, the question forming on her tongue. She clicked her teeth, biting back the words. What did it matter if a servant was happy as long as she did her job?

“You and the cook thought you’d have a laugh at my expense today, didn’t you?”

“No, señora.”

“I know what I saw, Luzia.”

Now the girl looked up, and Valentina was startled to see her eyes were deep brown, nearly black.

“What did you see, señora?” she asked, her dark gaze like a slick river rock. Valentina had the uneasy sense of the two of them alone in this room, of the silence of the house, of her own weakness. She felt as if she’d opened up a cupboard and found a wolf.

“Nothing,” Valentina managed, embarrassed by the catch in her voice. “I saw nothing.” She stood and crossed the room, sense returning as she put distance between herself and the scullion. “Your gaze is very bold.”

“Apologies, señora,” Luzia said, eyes on the floor once again.

“Go,” said Valentina with what she hoped was a careless wave.

But when Luzia had departed, Valentina bolted the door behind her.

Luzia didn’t sleep that night and she took no chances the next day. She waited for the water to boil without singing a word to hasten it. She fetched wood for the fire without speaking a syllable to lighten it. She didn’t breathe properly until she was hurrying down the street to San Ginés. Doña Valentina had been watching her closely since the incident with the bread. She wasn’t looking for magic; Valentina thought Luzia and the cook were out to get her with some petty prank.

But on the streets, Valentina couldn’t follow. No woman of her station could leave the house without her husband or father

or priest to accompany her. Luzia had heard of rich ladies who broke bones toppling from their houses, and one who had even died when she had leaned out too far, trying to get a glimpse of something new. She sometimes played a game with herself when she was tired or her back was aching: Would she prefer to sit on a cushion and embroider all day but only see life bound by a case-ment? Or would she prefer to take another walk to the well? When the buckets were empty the answer was easy. Not so much when they were full.

As she passed in front of the house, she felt Doña Valentina's eyes on her from her high window, but Luzia refused to look up, and walked as fast as she could to San Ginés, the twists and turns of the dusty streets familiar, the mile vanishing beneath her feet.

Luzia's aunt had told her she must be seen at church every day. But when she entered the dark nave, it was her mother who she thought of, buried somewhere beneath her feet. Someone was always being buried at San Ginés, the stones lifted, resettled, and dislodged again, the bodies rearranged to make more space.

Blanca Cotado had died in a pauper's hospital, her corpse paraded through the streets with the other dead so the parish clergy could collect alms to put toward masses said for the departed. Luzia had been ten years old and she'd remembered her mother's words of instruction, of the true prayers she was meant to recite, a secret echo in her head. It was a game she and her mother had played, saying one thing and thinking another, the bits and pieces of Hebrew handed down like chipped plates. Luzia didn't know if God heard her when she prayed in the cool shadows of San Ginés or if He understood the language she spoke. Sometimes that worried her, but today she had other concerns.

She strolled out through the church's eastern door and into the neighboring garden with the statue of the Blessed Virgin nursing. *She might be Ruth*, her father had said, *she might be Esther*. But her mother came from a long line of learned men, and she whispered, *These statues aren't for us*. Luzia's feet carried her down a winding

side street that led to Plaza de Las Descalzas and then on to a brick house with a grapevine carved over the door. Luzia visited every few weeks, though she would have come every day if she could. She always carried fresh linen in her market basket so she could pretend she was bringing it to one of Hualit's servants if for some reason she was questioned. But she never was. Luzia knew how to be invisible.

Once she had seen Hualit's patron, Víctor de Paredes, leaving her aunt's house. He'd worn black velvet and climbed into an even blacker coach, as if he were vanishing into a well of shadow, a piece of night that refused to budge in the afternoon sun. To avoid questions for her aunt, she had continued walking past Hualit's door, pretending she was on her way somewhere, but she hadn't been able to resist a peek inside the coach. She only glimpsed De Paredes's boots, and opposite him, bundled into the corner, a slender, sickly young man, his skin smooth and gleaming, his hair the cool white of a dove's breast, his eyes glittering like oyster shells. When she'd met his pale gaze, she'd had the odd sensation she was lifting out of her shoes, and she'd hurried on, only looping back when she could be certain the coach had gone. It was still winter, and she'd been surprised to see that the almond trees peeking over the walls on her aunt's street had burst into bloom, their branches thick with tufts of trembling white flowers.

Today there were no almond flowers, no inkblot coach sitting in front of the house, and Aunt Hualit opened the door herself, herding her inside with a smile.

Stiff lace and black velvet were the fashion now and Hualit wore them whenever she left the house, when she became Catalina de Castro de Oro, mistress to Víctor de Paredes. But at home, in the elegant courtyard with its burbling fountain, she wore robes of colored silk, her thick black hair snaking around her shoulders in waves scented with bee balm.

Luzia knew it was all for effect. A man like Víctor de Paredes had a taste for the exotic, and Hualit was even more exciting than