

Blizzard Besties

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Chapter One

Disaster Magnet

Despite her record, Vanesa Campos was determined not to ruin her family's vacation. Not this special one. Since getting off the airplane, nothing major had happened, but a whole week stretched out ahead that could turn into disaster. She could feel a catastrophe sneaking up on her.

She was wearing a million layers, but goose bumps covered her arms. Her ears popped. Maybe they did because the minibus was going full speed down a mountain road across Parley's Canyon. They were headed toward Park City, Utah—and, hopefully, the world's greatest ski vacation. Vanesa had her eyes shut so she wouldn't get carsick. She twisted her new friendship bracelet between her fingers. It was the ugliest shade of brown in the world. Amber had promised Vanesa that after the break she could have a golden bracelet—if she became an official Sunshine Darling.

The shuttle came to a sudden stop, and the driver exclaimed, “Welcome to Pinecloud Lodge!”

Right on cue, Vanesa’s phone vibrated in her pocket, announcing the arrival of an avalanche of messages.

She sneaked her phone out carefully and peeked at the screen. Seeing that her notifications were in the double digits, she whispered, “Finally!” She also added a silent prayer of thanks to the internet fairies. The *PinecloudGuests* Wi-Fi had three solid bars, which guaranteed uninterrupted connection to her friends. If she broke her perfect message streak with the group, her chance for permanent membership in the Darlings would vanish—she was already on probation.

She had to reply to all her messages, but that would have to wait a little longer. She slipped her phone back into her pocket.

From the seat beside her, Mami pressed Vanesa’s free hand affectionately and smiled.

“Finally!” she echoed.

Vanesa pressed her mom’s hand back. In the seat ahead, Papi looked over his shoulder and gave them a thumbs-up,

grinning like a little kid. Vanesa knew that her parents had been saving up for a long time for this *real* vacation—one that wasn't just visiting family.

Hunter, her little brother, who sat next to Papi, turned around, his head popping over the seat. He spoke in a whisper that for sure carried to all the passengers. "Remember," he said to Vanesa, "let's not ruin this vacation. And when I say *let's*, I mean *don't*. I've never been on a real vacation before, and I'm seven-and-three-quarters years old already!"

Papi, Mami, and Vanesa cringed, but Hunter was too cute to tell off. Besides, he was only voicing everyone's biggest concern. Luckily, Papi urged him to turn around again, shooting Vanesa an apologetic smile that didn't make her feel any better.

Vanesa *did* have a reputation for ruining family outings. Unintentionally, of course, but still . . .

Last year, Vanesa had gotten sick with the stomach flu on the way to Christmas Eve dinner at Tío Pablo's in Pasadena. Papi had to turn the car around half an hour before they reached their destination. By the time they arrived back home in Las Flores, all four members of the Campos family

were hurling. It hadn't technically been Vanesa's fault, but she'd been the one to start the Great Winter Plague that lasted for weeks. Also, if she'd listened to her gut carefully (and literally), she could've told Mami that the growling didn't mean good news. But she'd kept quiet.

The year before that, when she was only ten, Vanesa tripped on her cousin's enormous dress in her eagerness to pull a ribbon from the quinceañera cake. Seconds before the cake-pocalypse, a little voice in the back of Vanesa's mind had told her to wait patiently, but she wanted to get the ring hidden in the cake. She hadn't listened and ended up covered in meringue and dulce de leche. Her cousin *eventually* forgave her, but it would be a while before Vanesa, her parents, and Hunter were invited back to join the family in Miami for any kind of party.

The worst memory of all, though, was of that unforgettable, unforgivable, unmentionable day on her twelfth birthday last fall when her mistake had almost cost her a friend *and* hurt her little brother. She always shivered when she thought of that afternoon.

The day after that disaster, Abuela Bea had sat down next to Vanesa and told her that next time she had a feeling, she should listen to it. Sometimes the feeling was one's wiser inner self, or an angel, sending a warning.

But Vanesa didn't believe in immaterial things like warnings from angels. She could never really trust herself again after so many mistakes! Right then and there, she promised she wouldn't—she couldn't—let her little brother, Hunter, out of her sight that way again.

Hunter needed all the help he could get to stay out of trouble.

Vanesa watched Hunter spring to his feet when the shuttle driver, who looked like Santa Claus with a coonskin hat, gave the passengers the go-ahead to disembark. Hunter rushed down the bus steps ahead of everyone else.

“Hunter, put your jacket on!” Mami exclaimed. “You're going to get a cold!” She ran after Hunter, shaking his bright yellow jacket in her hand. With his asthma, even a little cough was bad news. Here in Park City, the sun shone brightly, but Vanesa remembered her phone had said the

temperatures were barely in the two-digit range. When it came to Hunter's health, they couldn't take any chances.

From her seat next to the window, Vanesa saw her little brother make a beeline for the main entrance to the lodge, his curly brown hair like a bird's nest after the flight from California and the drive from the airport. Mami smashed the nestlike hair with a multicolored hat. Hunter pulled it off, and Mami gently ushered him toward the wood-and-glass doors of Pinecloud Lodge. A green flag with the logo—the outline of a cabin with a big dog guarding it—flapped in the wind.

Vanesa was pleasantly surprised at how fancy Pinecloud Lodge looked. She'd have plenty of photo ops to wow Amber and the Darlings. The main building was an enormous, brand-new log cabin. Tucked behind it, the much-smaller original cabin, built back in the 1800s or something, was now the headquarters for the kids' club—or so the website advertised. Out of all the fun winter activities at the lodge, Vanesa couldn't wait to impress her family with her skiing skills. She'd only skied once before (when she was seven), but she'd been so good, she was sure

this time she'd be exceptional. And after skiing all day, she'd drink hot chocolate topped with butterscotch marshmallows. At night, she'd watch the blinking stars from the fluffiest bed in the world.

Judging by his excitement, Hunter couldn't wait, either. As he got closer to the doors, he nearly ran into a fashionable blond girl not much older than Vanesa. The girl kept walking, a gigantic glittery makeup case in one hand and a book in the other. Her long bright-pink coat fluttered behind her like a cape. Vanesa thought she recognized her from somewhere. Maybe an online tutorial? A YouTube show? She couldn't tell from so far away. The girl had a glamorous glow. A lot of famous people came to Park City for vacation. Maybe Vanesa would make friends with a celebrity.

A teenage boy with a green plaid vest like the bus driver's was sprinkling salt on the icy sidewalk. He hurried to help the incoming passengers down the bus steps and slipped on the ice himself, barely keeping his balance by swinging his arms like a windmill. The glamorous girl didn't even seem to notice. Vanesa chuckled.

The bus was mostly empty by now, and Papi called to her from near the front of the bus. “Let’s go, Vane.” He pronounced her nickname the Spanish way: *VAH-neh*. “Ready to have a blast?”

Vanesa smiled at him briefly, but she’d just received a request via text from the Darlings.

Be a Darling, send a picture of the lodge.

This was message number thirteen, and she *had* to respond. Amber, Rory, and Peyton were at Amber’s aunt’s house in Florida for break. Pinecloud wasn’t sunny Miami, but it was still pretty to Vanesa. She snapped a picture of the white-covered mountains and buildings against the turquoise sky. She captioned it *Winter wonderland* and sent it.

Her heart pounded as she waited for a reply.

“Do you guys come to Utah to ski often?” the driver asked. When he turned sideways to make room for passengers to slip by him on their way off the bus, Vanesa read his name tag: ZACHARIAH.

Papi laughed. “We’re not exactly winter people, but Vanesa here loves to ski.”