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*Para mi mamá, María: mi primer amor*

*Y para Emo y Fer: ser su hermana mayor  
es lo más bonito que me dio la vida*

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*Tegucigalpa de noche y día*  
*Como me dueles toda*  
—Juana Pavón



*When does a war end? When can I say your name*  
*and have it mean only your name and not*  
*what you left behind?*  
—Ocean Vuong



# PROLOGUE

FEBRUARY 2017

**“This fucking city,”** Camila rolled her eyes that way she did and sighed, fast and loud—like this fucking city.

She shifted, trying to turn to look behind us. The end of her spine dug into my thigh at a painful angle. “Sorry, Libertad,” she said, squeezing my wrist. I could taste the vanilla in her perfume, sweet but sharp in my mouth.

I followed her line of vision. We watched the cop walk back to the police car, Miguel’s student ID in hand. There was something measured in the way he moved his body. An evident relishing in the flow of his stroll.

My older brother, Maynor, often said Tegucigalpa was best understood by a single rule: *la ley del más fuerte*, *the law of the strongest*. The refrain came to him often while driving—when it was clear that stoplights and traffic regulations were not the dominant language in the streets of la capital. Rather, it was the driver with the biggest car—or least scared of a wreck—who set the pace.

In the driver’s seat, Miguel also turned his whole body around

to look at Carla and Valeria in the back seat. Valeria was trying her best to keep it together—lips pursed and long, thoughtful blinks, like she was finding a way out of this behind her eyes. Her parents, like my mother, would kill her if we ended up having to call them.

“Well.” Miguel shrugged, defeated. “I told y’all I didn’t have a license.”

The streetlight caught only the upper half of his face, emphasizing the sharp bridge of his nose.

“Why don’t you just call your dad and put him on speaker? He can tell the cop he let you borrow the car. And that you turn eighteen in, like, three weeks,” Carla suggested. The mascara she had applied minutes before brought out the desperation in her eyes.

“I’m driving at night without a license, in a car not registered to my name, with four underage girls. *And* just look at y’all.” Miguel ran his fingers through his still-damp hair. His eyes swept the car. “I can’t even tell him we’re driving home. We clearly look ready for pijín. Oh, and Camila’s sitting on Libertad’s lap in the passenger’s seat—neither of them wearing a seat belt. That’s, like, at least four violations.”

“Okay, okay,” Valeria said, turning around to look at the police car. The cop stood next to la patrulla, leaning against the driver’s door, plugging Miguel’s student ID into some system in his car. “Just give him what he wants.”

“I don’t have that much money on me.” Miguel sighed. “So unless all of you help me come up with at least two thousand Lempiras—we’re fucked.”

“Fine.” Valeria shoved at the boxes pressed against her hip. She and



Carla barely fit in the back seat around all the junk, hence the seating arrangement with Cami in my lap. “It’s better than the alternative.”

El chepo strolled back to the car and knocked on Miguel’s window. Miguel rolled it down so quick the squeaking of the handle barely registered. The breeze of the night hit Camila’s bare thighs. She rubbed her arms—up and down. Behind the cop, the city lights of Tegucigalpa blinked its hundred eyes.

“Bueno,” the officer said, handing Miguel his student ID. “You’re not supposed to be driving without a license, and I don’t believe you’re eighteen. I don’t believe *any* of you are. Also, what these two señoritas are doing”—he gestured toward Cami and me in the passenger’s seat—“is dangerous. I’ll need to impound the vehicle and detain all of you until your legal guardians can claim you.”

Miguel took a deep breath. I wondered, then, if he wished there was another guy in the car—someone who might help him do the talking. The police officer’s eyes moved between us girls, a glint of hunger in his gaze. Miguel swallowed.

“I understand, Officer Ortiz,” he said, glancing at the silver name tag clipped to his left pectoral. “But that’s a lot of paperwork for you. And we’re just kids, you know?” Miguel stopped for a second to scratch the back of his neck. “We’re not up to nada malo. The girls and I were talking, and maybe we can fix this another way. We know how poorly the government pays hard-working police officers . . .”

Ortiz’s eyes lit up. Bingo.

“¿Qué proponen?” Ortiz leaned in, pressing his left arm against the top of the window frame. His breath reeked of stale cigarette smoke and onions.

Miguel pulled back a little. “How about . . . two thousand Lempiras, for your trouble? And I promise I’ll get my license sorted out soon. We’re not going far. My friend here”—he gestured to Camila—“just didn’t fit in the back. But it won’t happen again.”

Ortiz stared into the car for what felt like a minute but couldn’t have been more than a few seconds. He licked his lips. There was a frogginess to his features.

I dug my nails into my palm. If he didn’t go for it, we were screwed. Add attempted bribery to the list.

Ortiz heaved a sigh and pulled away from the car. “Bueno,” he said, throwing his hands up in surrender. “If that’s what you can offer . . . I’ll take it.”

There was a defeated annoyance to his tone, like we had swindled him, made him waste his time.

I wondered what Maynor would say about the law of the strongest right now. Was money the exception to the rule? Or did money determine who the strongest was, who held all the power in any given situation?

Miguel reached for the wallet in his back pocket. He had to lift his body from the seat to get it, bending his head to avoid hitting the roof.

“Come on.” He turned to the rest of us. “It’s four hundred each.”

My shoulders dropped. Yes, this left me with less than a hundred crumpled Lempiras for the rest of the night—but still, better than the alternative. The four of us handed Miguel the purple and yellow bills, wrinkled from being shoved in pockets or pressed against waistbands.

The cop grabbed the cash and shoved it into his front pocket, not bothering to count any of it.

“Buenas noches,” he said, slapping the roof of the car twice before turning back. Miguel started the engine. As he moved away from the curb, Camila turned the radio’s volume back up. Reggaeton filled the car, pierced by Carla’s and Valeria’s exploding laughter. Warmth rushed through my veins.

“This fucking city,” Cami repeated, laughing this time.

“Guess I’m not drinking tonight,” I said. “Cause that was all my money.”

“Same,” Valeria echoed.

“We’ll figure something out.” Carla shrugged. “Ademas . . . una ose sta es mas divertida si huele a peligro, right?” She loved quoting that Romeo Santos song.

Maybe it was the tamarind Quetzalteca shot we all had before getting in Miguel’s car. Or Camila’s weight and exposed skin on mine. Or Carla’s laughter soaring out the windows. I found myself saying, “Right. Ahuevos, maje.”

We rolled all the windows down. The night felt like a hot blanket over us. Miguel drove up Lomas del Guijarro, right hand on the wheel, left elbow resting on the window’s ledge. Cool night breeze on our faces, strands of hair stuck to our lip-glossed mouths.

I’d heard Tegus described as a hole my whole life. Climbing up Las Lomas, the dentation was visible. Mountains devoured the horizon in all directions, and at their feet began the snaking roads and concrete bridges, which had multiplied by a dozen in the past few years. Gray had overtaken much of the green—but still, trees’

canopies stuck out between structures. Fuchsia bougainvillea burst over walls. Air plants grew on cables. Cables: some were everywhere. Looped from post to post, around houses, between trees, and sometimes clumped together in a black winding ball that weighed down whatever it clung to.

At the base of Las Lomas was el Bulevar Morazán. The black pavement glimmered from afar. The stretch was lined with gas stations and pharmacies and American chain restaurants: TGI Fridays, Popeyes, KFC, Wendy's, Pizza Hut, Burger King. Cars and motorcycles moved through it like zooming lights.

I caught Camila's reflection in the sideview mirror. The yellow streetlights made her light brown skin glow. We locked eyes and the corner of her mouth pulled to a smirk. It was only a second, almost missable, and then she looked out again.

Outside, it smelled like nightlife: fried food and gasoline. The car's cheap stereo system threatened to collapse under the beat of a Bad Bunny song, and the speaker right by my calf tickled with its vibration.

I adjusted to move away from it, and Camila shifted with me. Something about our synchronized motion made my whole body throb, a pressure between my legs. I felt hyperaware of everything, like the weight of the car resettling from one end to the other as we went up and down the hills. No such thing as a straight road in Tegucigalpa—it's all winding curves and sharp turns. As we reached the top of the final climb in Las Lomas, the whole city came into view.

The mountains that enclosed Tegucigalpa shimmered white and yellow lights. The blinking eyes had grown exponentially in the past

few years, as people from all over the country moved to the capital in hopes of jobs and opportunities that didn't exist. Makeshift houses of aluminum sheet roofs, walls of wood and adobe, doors of empty space amassed in the outskirts, stacked on top of each other. On the north end stood el Cristo del Picacho, a concrete, thirty-foot tall sculpture of the Messiah, illuminated by lights at its base. Christ looked over the city with his arms stretched out; it was unclear whether he was trying to hold or contain it.

Carla lit a cigarette, blowing smoke out the window.

"My parents better not be able to smell that." Miguel glared at her in in the rearview mirror.

"Relax." Carla rolled her eyes. The smoke didn't mix well with the sugary perfumes circling the car, nor Miguel's citrusy cologne. But it wasn't more than a few minutes before we reached La Esquina.

A short but fast-moving line stretched from the bar's front gate. As its name implies, La Esquina is on a corner. It had once been a house, repurposed a few years ago into a two-story bar. It still almost looked like a house—brick walls painted white, small black-iron gate entrance crowned with a modest wooden sign that read *la esquina* in bold, black letters. But the second floor was now a big wraparound wooden balcony with high tables and chairs. From outside, I could see the people smoking and drinking up there. I could even catch loose scraps of conversations underneath the loud salsa music.

Miguel found street parking at the end of the block, and all four of us girls were waved in without being asked for our IDs, per usual. Miguel knew he had to hand the bouncer a hundred-Lempira bill for

the lack of his. Fifteen minutes later, we sat at one of the tall wooden tables set against the rail of the balcony with a kamikaze fishbowl in the middle to share. Carla's older brother was close friends with the owner of La Esquina, who was always at the bar. He gave her the pitcher on the house. The blue liquid splashed around the container as we moved the table with our bouncing knees and shifting bodies. Sour green gummies glinted at the bottom and four straws bobbed on top. Miguel got himself a Coke and rum that he downed too quickly for a designated driver.

Under the table, Camila's knee bumped mine.

"Who else is coming?" Valeria asked without looking up from her phone.

"Aura says she just left her house," Miguel responded, also on his phone. "I think Andrea and Lia are with her."

"Is Pablo coming?" Carla asked, her tone too transparent in its attempt to pass off as casual, like we might not notice who did the asking if she's quick enough.

"Why?" Miguel teased, grinning. "Do you want him to? Should we call him?"

Carla blushed and reached for a cigarette. "I was just asking."

"Did you hear about Daniel and that girl from San Pedro?" Camila interrupted.

"Eso es paja." Miguel shook his head. "He told me she made all that shit up p

'cause she got embarrassed."

"Of course he'd say that." Valeria's tone was even, but her body stilled.

“Wait, what happened?” I asked, pulling my gaze away from the street below.

Just then, Cami put her hand on my thigh under the table. Her hand was warm, hot even. I put mine over hers and squeezed her fingers, softly. Warmth rushed up my stomach, through my chest, and all the way up to my throat. I leaned forward to sip more of the blue drink, careful not to move my body too much, or rather, careful not to risk disturbing in any way the parts of us that touched.

“There was this party last weekend at someone’s house, I think some guy from another school. Anyways, Daniel hooked up with a girl from San Pedro. Who has a boyfriend. Who was *also* at the party. This girl was very, very drunk, right, and she goes and tells her boyfriend that Daniel basically forced her. So *he* goes to beat the shit out Daniel . . .”

An hour passed us like this: Carla got another fishbowl, which we pooled our remaining money to pay for, and Miguel got another drink for himself. Several people from school arrived and hovered around the table for a few minutes to say hi and chat. Valeria and I counted the rest of our money to see if we could get a round of tequila shots. We couldn’t. Then the music switched abruptly from an old bachata to reggaeton.

Someone whistled. Around us, people got up to dance, moving toward the roofed section of the second floor. The four of us followed, pulling Miguel along.

“There’s *way* too many people in here,” Miguel shouted over the music. Never a big dancer, his shoulders and hips went stiff whenever he was put in this situation.

“¿Qué?” Carla yelled back.

It was hard to do any actual dancing without bumping into someone’s extremities or stepping on feet. The first song hadn’t ended, and sweat had already pooled under my shirt and down the back of my neck. Heat radiated from the bodies and steamed the air—perfumed tangy sweet. The floor was a mix of adhesive and wet. Moving my body now, I could feel the alcohol ripping away my senses.

My friends held a dance circle for a few songs, until Pablo appeared behind Carla. He wore tight jeans and a polo shirt, like Miguel. Like most guys. His hair was slicked to the side, and he must’ve come to find her as soon as he got here, because he wasn’t as sweaty as everyone else. He whispered something in Carla’s ear—she nodded and followed him without a word.

Miguel pulled Valeria to him, and they paired off, dancing on their own. Camila and I stayed next to them, close to each other but not quite touching. It was a Maluma song about a girl who drank too much to remember him from the night before. The beat, the alcohol, the heat, the smoke. I drew sweaty strands of hair away from my face and then time turned liquid. The seconds spilled fast, but a lifetime contained in each one.

Two men approached us. They looked older, patchy facial hair and the wet, shiny look of people who have been drinking for hours. I thought I recognized one of them but couldn’t place how. Maybe one of Maynor’s friends?

“Do you want a drink?” the taller one asked Cami.

She shook her head and mouthed *gracias*.



“What about you?” the other one yelled my way.

I wondered how they made this decision—who talked to whom and why. I declined by shaking my finger, my throat already sore from trying to talk over music the entire night. My hand gesture felt harsh, for some reason, so I smiled at him to make up for it. He smiled back. They asked for our names, leaning in for a response. They got close to us the way boys and men do. One or both of them carried the overpowering scent of cheap colognes. An overly sweet synthetic fragrance that failed to blend seamlessly with the smoke and alcohol on their breath. The dull weight of a headache welled at the back of my head.

“I’m Edgar,” the taller one yelled, stretching his hand. The way he moved his body allowed me to place where I’d seen him before. He had gone to the same school as us, many years ago. He must’ve been a senior when we were in sixth or seventh grade. I shook his hand. His palm was moist and warm. The other guy said his name, but it was too loud to make out and I didn’t ask again. They danced next to us, gradually moving closer, thrusting their hips in our direction.

Something rolled in my stomach. Where had Miguel and Valeria gone? I was about to ask Camila when I felt her hand on my arm, her mouth by my ear.

“Come with me to the bathroom.” Her breath was warm against my neck.

I nodded. We excused ourselves to the men. They leaned in for a kiss on the cheek, pulled out their phones to ask for our Snapchats. Camila pulled away, yelled that we’d be right back; this wasn’t

goodbye. I felt grateful for the easy lie, for her clear thinking. I took her hand and let her guide me to the bathroom.

There are two bathrooms in La Esquina. The one upstairs had a line that didn't seem to be moving. "What's going on?" I asked the girl in front of me, pointing to the bathroom door with my lips.

"Some guy and a girl locked themselves inside," she said, crossing her arms. "They won't come out."

"Let's try downstairs," I said to Camila over my shoulder.

Getting down the stairs was difficult—it seemed like everyone on the first floor was trying to go upstairs at the same time. We squeezed by a group of men laughing and yelling about a missing watch. A girl whose mascara had smeared from crying slid between me and the wall, tipping to the side as she stumbled up the steps.

I had always hated these stairs. Wooden planks with absurd, unkind gaps between them. Falling through felt like a real possibility.

Downstairs, we elbowed our way around the people trying to order around the bar. There wasn't a line for this bathroom, tucked around a dark corner as it was. Before I could knock, Cami turned the doorknob. It was empty. We hurried inside, locking the door behind us. I flicked the light switch. Nothing happened. I tried a couple more times. Camila turned on her phone flashlight. I copied her. Torn, wet toilet paper fragments spread over the black vinyl floor. The *untz-untz-untz* of the music outside shook the room rhythmically.

Cami kicked the toilet seat down with her foot, and sat, which I found bizarre. Usually, she tried to hover over public toilet seats.

How drunk was she? We'd drunk the same amount, so at least as drunk as I was, right?

I set my phone face-up on the sink. The movement of my reflection startled me. I'd forgotten there was a mirror.

My hair looked wet, patted down around my temples. My face was red. My mascara wasn't quite smeared, but small flicks of it dotted the corners of my eyes. Before I could begin to come up with a solution for any of it, Camila's reflection behind me pulled my attention. Her pee stream hit the toilet bowl. She scrolled through her phone, flashlight still on, pointing to the floor in front of her. I opened the faucet. My hands felt sticky and moist after shaking Edgar's and friend's hands.

"I'm gonna text Valeria and see where they went," she said.

I nodded. "I think Carla ditched us for Pablo."

Cami snorted. "I don't know what she sees in him." She stood and pulled her skirt up. I tried to keep my eyes on my hands and the stream of water but couldn't.

For a second, I peeked. Then I forced my eyes back as I pressed down on the liquid-soap dispenser. The scent of grapes swamped the bathroom. Something about it summoned a wave of nausea. Camila tried to flush the toilet. It expelled water but stopped short of flushing. She tried again—nothing. She shrugged and slapped the lid back down with her foot.

I flicked my hands in the air to dry, a few drops sprinkling my face. There wasn't a towel, and even if there had been, I wouldn't have touched it. I settled for wiping my hands off on my pants. Then I moved aside so Camila could wash her hands. I checked the time

on my phone. It was a quarter after eleven. The phone's screen was wet from the sink or my hands, and I rubbed it against my shirt. The music was getting louder.

I checked the time again before remembering I had just a second ago: eleven-something. I wanted to text Valeria or Carla, but when I found their chats, it turned out I'd already texted them a moment before. Camila was still washing her hands—had she been washing her hands a long time?

I was drunk. I was very, very drunk.

I looked at Cami looking at herself in the mirror. She'd also placed her phone face-up on the sink, the flashlight bouncing off the ceiling and onto the mirror. She pulled her hair up with one hand and used the other to fan air onto her exposed neck. She was wearing a nude lipstick that matched her skin tone. I couldn't remember noticing that before.

My friend. *Best* friend. With the sharp cheekbones and curled eyelashes. My best friend that I didn't really treat like any of my other friends. And none of my other friends treated me like she did. But aren't all friendships different? Many girls who're friends must be exactly like me and her. They *must* hold hands under tables and stay on their phones with each other until they fall asleep each night and plan hangouts for just the two of them without calling them that, and, and, and.

All the thinking made me dizzy. Time was moving slower. I leaned my forehead against the door and closed my eyes. I heard Camila shut off the faucet, and waited for her to nudge me aside, to tell me it was time to round up our friends.

I waited. And waited. Had it been three seconds or five minutes? I was about to turn around when I felt her hand on my shoulder. A *what's up* was on the tip of my tongue, but I stopped short of saying it. Somehow, I knew. Knew to turn around slowly to face her. Knew to draw my face close to hers. To let our foreheads touch. Our mouths found each other. And we kissed.

We kissed. She tasted like everything—toothpaste and spit and tamarind and the blue color of the fishbowl. She dropped her phone. The noise was startling, but we didn't stop. Not immediately. Then her mouth was on my neck and I could feel my heartbeat in my ears, louder than the music even, and—

*BANG. BANG. BANG.*

My heartbeat was louder than the music because the music had stopped. Time hit play, and everything that had spun in slow motion a second ago rushed back to regular speed around us.

*BANG. BANG.* The knock shook my backbone. Why had the music stopped?

“Fuck,” Camila mumbled, grabbing her phone from the floor.

I turned, opened the door. The light outside was blinding. I was too drunk on my best friend's mouth to process that the overhead lights of La Esquina shouldn't have been on. But I was just sober enough to recognize the person in front of me.

“Maynor?”

“Let's go.” My brother's mouth was tight. “The police are here. We gotta go. *Now.*”

“What—why?”

For a second, I wondered if what he was saying and what I had

just done was related. I felt dizzy, disoriented. I knew Camila was right behind me and I wanted to turn back around to see her face but couldn't. Wouldn't.

“What do you mean why? You're both underage. Hurry the fuck up.”

Maynor had always been good at in-the-moment reactions. He knew how to keep moving, how to propel everyone around him toward safety. I was always more the paralyzed-by-fear type.

I remember getting out. I remember the sirens and the red and blue lights and feeling cold and getting in a car with Maynor and Camila and somehow there was Valeria too, but no Miguel and Carla. And there was someone else I didn't recognize, but I couldn't make my eyes focus.

I remember making stops to drop people off. A house I didn't know and then Carla's, where Valeria and Camila were spending the night. I remember all of this in flashes—a still image of a memory here and there, but all of it disembodied, no time in between to glue the pieces together. Random, floating moments with no clear sequence.

“Whose car is this?” I asked. I'd been in the back seat at some point, but now was in the passenger's. I pressed my face against the window—the glass was cool. It felt good.

“A friend's,” Maynor said. “I'll drop you off at home and then go to hers. To return the car.”

“How are you getting home then?”

My voice sounded thin, young. I thought maybe I'd spoken in my head, because he didn't reply. I was just about to say it again, but he cut me off.

“The cops were hungry tonight,” he said. “Bunch of places got shut down.”

“Is that . . . normal?” I was the kind of drunk that makes it hard to say what’s normal and what isn’t.

Maynor took a minute to respond, again. “No,” he said. “It’s not. They were looking.”

I still didn’t understand. But I also didn’t feel like trying that hard.

“I didn’t know you were coming to La Esquina,” I said. I hadn’t seen him at all. How long had he been there?

“I wasn’t. But my friend . . . she got a message about the cops shutting places down. I figured you and your friends would be there.”

“Oh,” I heard myself said. “Thank you.”

He didn’t say anything. I turned to look at him—it felt like I was still missing something.

Maynor’s eyes were on the road. He was dressed as always—jeans and some soccer jersey. His hair looked the way it does when he’s been putting his fingers through it.

Was he upset with me? That didn’t seem possible. Maynor was never upset with me, not really.

“What’s that thing you always say?” I said, making a futile attempt to stop each of my words from sliding into the next. “Tegucigalpa es . . . la ley del . . . más fuerte?”

The corner of Maynor’s mouth ticked up, but his expression remained stern. “Yeah,” he said. “La ley del más fuerte.”

“Yeah,” I repeated.

Why was he so quiet? We were almost home. I couldn’t wait to

fall asleep. To stop pretending that I had any understanding of what was going on.

“That’s a nice shade,” Maynor said.

I looked out onto the road, trying to figure out what he meant.

“Camila’s lipstick.” His eyes slid to mine, and he nodded his head in the direction of my neck, pointing with his lips.

My hand shot up to my neck instinctively. When I brought it back down, there it was—a nude smear across my fingertips. The streetlights were just bright enough to make out the contrast between her skin tone and mine.



# ONE

## SIX MONTHS LATER

**Mami honks for the third time, and I know it's not going to be** a good day. Her right hand stays, pressed down on the steering wheel for a prolonged, unbearable beat. A buzz lingers in my ears even after she stops.

“*Putá,*” Mami curses. “Every single morning with you three. Where is your brother? I’m going to be late again.”

I want to point out there’s only one person missing, so technically, it’s not “us three”: Alberto and I have been sitting in the car for the past fifteen minutes, enduring this. But silence is the only move with our mother at six a.m.

Also, I’m all for ditching Maynor. He’s made us late every single day for the last two weeks.

“*Putá, puta, puta.* I’m leaving him. Every morning, the same fight con este cipote.”

But she doesn’t start the car. Her hand drops from the steering wheel, and she reaches for her phone, tucked in the cup holder

with centavos and hair clips. She dials Maynor for what must be the fourth time now.

As the back tone beeps, Mami does her eyeliner in the rearview mirror with her left hand. From the back seat I see the frame of her dark eyes and full eyebrows. It takes her less than a few seconds to draw the line from below the inside of her eye to the outside. She does it all in one swift motion—no halts, no second guesses.

I've always been fascinated by my mom's hands. She can drive while doing her makeup and answering a call at the same time. When I was a child, her hands seemed eternal to me. There was always one more thing she could pick up, even with everything else.

Like the three calls before, Maynor doesn't answer. Mami hangs up before it goes to voicemail. She holds my eyes for a second in the mirror, then honks again.

"I'm gonna get fired. Is that what you all want? If it was one of his stupid soccer games, he would be the first one in the car. Pero como mi trabajo a nadie le importa. Libertad, go look for your brother. Incredible, a grown-ass man who can't get ready on time."

I sigh getting out of the car, careful not to slam the door. If Mami thinks que estamos siendo malcriados, her anger spills over. Hot.

I walk up the stairs past Abuela's room to Maynor's, hoping he's, at least, dressed.

He sits shirtless on the edge of his unmade bed. His black hair is wet and water droplets run down his neck and back, tiny mirrors all over his skin. But the room doesn't smell like shampoo or deodorant—none of those ready-for-the-day scents. It's

the seamless merging of dirty laundry and sunlessness hanging around him. He's not even on his phone or putting on shoes, just staring at his hands.

"Maynor, the fuck? You want Mami to kill us all?"

For a second, it's like he didn't hear me. Like he's watching a movie play out on the back of his hands. He looks up at me confused, eyebrows scrunched together, eyes void of recognition.

I feel like I pulled him out of a dream. But before I can say anything, his face breaks into a smile.

"Tranquila, Libi. You know how she gets. I'm coming."

His last sentence is drowned out by another ten-second honk. I swear the whole block hates us.

As he looks for a shirt in the pile of clothes on his bed, I'm taken aback by how skinny he is. I don't think I've looked at him recently. Not with enough care to notice.

The bones in his back are delineable. His jeans would fall to his knees if it wasn't for the belt buckled around his waist so tightly the denim folds on itself near the zipper. A few bruises spread over his lower back and left arm, near his bumpy half-moon elbow mole—shapeless purple spots ringed with yellow and green.

This isn't uncommon for Maynor. Nor for any good goalie, really. He's been beaten up by a soccer ball ever since I can remember—a sign that not much gets past him. Growing up, I believed him when he said he would go pro. Everyone did.

He finally picks a shirt and puts it on. Of course, it's a soccer jersey. Today's is actually my favorite—a vintage Olimpia, the current champion of the national soccer league. Red and blue stripes with

a white lion's head embroidered on the heart. I remember Maynor begging Mami to buy it for him years ago.

Another honk.

“Apúrate, maje,” I say. “No time for you to comb your hair, just wear a hat or something.”

A couple minutes and honks later, Maynor climbs in the back seat next to Alberto, leaving me with no option but the passenger's. Maynor usually calls shotgun (older sibling right and all), but I have a feeling he doesn't want to be too close to Mami right now. She starts speeding away before I can close the door.

“How is it that your twelve-year-old brother and seventeen-year-old sister can wake up early and be ready on time, but you, a twenty-five-year-old man, can't?”

Maynor stays quiet, which is what I would do too. Daddy Yankee's new song plays on the radio. Just as Alberto starts to hum along, Mami cuts the volume.

“I'm asking you a question, Maynor José. What are you gonna do when you have your own patients, huh? Show up late to your appointments? What if there's an emergency? Let them die?”

“I'm——no, of course not, Mami. I just overslept. I had to stay up until three, reading like five hundred pages for my radiology class,” he says.

This placates Mami for a minute. He's good at that, using the career Abuela and Mami are forcing him into—*medicina*—as an excuse. *Los sueños no pagan las cuentas*, Abuela said when Maynor insisted he had what it took to be a professional soccer player.

Of course, Mami must not have heard him sneaking in at two

a.m. And come to think of it, I've never seen him study for anything. Which isn't surprising, really. He hates the career they've chosen for him.

“Bueno, hijo. But this can't keep happening—if you're late tomorrow, I'm leaving you. None of you care about my job. I'm up on time to take all of you to school *every day* but you can't do the same for me. I've been taking you to soccer practices for fifteen years, Maynor, and not once have you been late. Not once! You wouldn't do this to your abuela, would you? Malagradecido.”

Again, it's not *all* of us. But when Maynor screws up, we all go down.

I catch Maynor's gaze in the sun visor's mirror I'm using to put mascara on. He winks at me. I shake my head, which is a big mistake, because my hands are nowhere near as steady as my mother's.

It doesn't help that there's more potholes than paved concrete in this city. I lick my finger and try to rub off the black mascara smeared under my eye. The sun visor's mirror is too dirty and speckled to tell if the hint of black I can still see is from my own eyebags or actual dye. I reach for my phone to use the front-facing camera instead, but of course, there's nothing in my pocket.

*Fuck.* That's right—I need to remind Mami to pick up my phone at Texicell, the place where they'll keep resurrecting your phone even though it's clearly time to get a new one.

My phone, otherwise known as the biggest piece of crap in the world, otherwise known as my whole world, has been in and out of Texicell ever since Maynor handed it down to me. And even though its visit to the doctor this time is sort of my fault, Maynor

had already made it nearly unusable before passing it on. But I know Mami won't buy me a new one until the self-taught technicians from Texicell declare it irreparably dead.

Reminding Mami about my phone right after her rant about us being ungrateful is tricky. Usually, though, our forty-minute drive through the city allows for as many changes in mood as songs. Mami turns up the volume again and switches stations—she can't stand reggaeton this early.

Hardly 6:30 a.m. and the streets are already living. Sun is all out, and I swear I can feel the heat radiating from the pavement. Cars honk, and when that's not enough, people yell at each other: *Cabrón ¿No sabes manejar, pendejo?*

We reach a stoplight and the honking crescendos, even though there's literally no way anyone can go. Newspaper vendors trek from car to car, pressing the front page to the drivers' windows. Today's headlines, in big, bolded black and red letters, are about this weekend's protests and the murder of three protestors by the military police: **AL MENOS TRES OSE ST EN TEGUCIGALPA TRAS EL DESPLIEGUE DEL EJÉRCITO POR LA OLEADA DE PROTESTAS.**

Peddlers come up to our windows, trying to sell us everything and anything: mosquito zapper rackets, bags of sliced mango verde watered in vinegar and lime juice, pirated movies. Two children that seem to have claimed this stoplight as their permanent location knock on Mami's window. They're not selling anything—they just want money. Some days, the older one of the two does a few balancing tricks with a stick and a ball while the younger one goes

around collecting tips. Not today, though. Today they carry a piece of a cardboard box with the words *temenos hambre* written in black marker. Mami shakes her finger at them and mouths *hoy no tengo*. They move on to the next car.

A few men try to wipe the car's windshield, pero Mami honks and shakes her finger at them too. They're reluctant to step away—already drenched in sweat, foreheads glistening and shirt turning translucent around their armpits. For a second, they just stare in before moving on, willing her to change her mind.

Stoplights make Mom nervous ever since she was held at gunpoint for her purse and phone at one near here couple months ago. So now we keep the windows up, which sucks, because even in the morning, the coolest time of day, Tegus is warm and sweaty. The car's AC hasn't worked in years, and we won't be getting that fixed any time soon.

As the light turns to green, the voices of the hosts from *Despierta Tegus* fill the car. They hardly cover any news, just four dudes shooting the shit. But we listen to them every morning on our way to school.

I don't understand how they haven't run out of things to say. Today's topic is movie titles with terrible Spanish translations that are nothing like the original English. One of them says *Jaws*, called *Tiburón* in Spanish—*Shark*. The host with the low, raspy voice whose name I can never remember brings up *Pulp Fiction*, dubbed *Violent Times*. Javier, my favorite of the three, points out *Brokeback Mountain*, which in Spanish is *Secreto en la Montaña*.

“They should've kept that movie a secret buried in some

mountain,” Mami mutters, cutting someone off. They honk and yell something at her, but I can’t make it out.

“What secret?” Alberto says.

Maynor locks eyes with me again. I close the sun visor a little too hard.

“Nada, Beto. Forget it,” she says.

“Why?”

“Hay no, Mamá, don’t say things like that. Aren’t all your wedding designer friends—you know?” Maynor says.

“Bueno, sí, pero eso doesn’t mean that I think it’s—“

“It’s just so ignorant,” Maynor counters.

“Ignorant? Mira, Maynor, I don’t know *everything* in the world, but I’ve been alive longer than—“

“Mami—“ I cut in, coming off a little more desperate than I meant to. “I know you’re super busy today, but is there any way you can pick up my phone from Txicell? I called yesterday and they said it’s ready. Please?”

Mami sucks her teeth—a reflex she’s tried to correct in the three of us for as long as we’ve existed. “Pucha. I don’t know, Libertad. Can’t you ask you’re abuela?”

“You know she can’t, Mami. She came home at ten last night. She’s too busy with the costumes for some school play, or the parade.”

“I have things too, you know?” Her voice rises again. “I have two menu tastings for this weekend’s wedding. But evosei mamá thinks her work is more important than my job. I have to make time for everyone else’s—“



“Ma. Porfa. It’s been a month,” I beg, turning to her, softening my voice. “I really, really need it. I had stuff for a school project on it.”

Partially true. Not a school project, but a project nonetheless. At this point, I’d say anything to convince her.

Mami throws her hands up. “Fine. I’ll try to pick it up during my lunch break.”

“Gracias, Ma. Enserio.” I breathe out a small sigh of relief, partly for my phone but also for the successful derail of the *Brokeback Mountain* conversation.

On the radio, the men have moved on to talking about the protests. This, too, they discuss in their signature comedic tone. I pray Maynor doesn’t say anything else that puts Mami in a worse mood. When I turn to look over my shoulder, his eyes are closed, his head resting against the window.

Twenty minutes later, we drop him off at la UNAH, the National Autonomous University of Honduras. The campus is huge—hundreds of people walk in all directions, with purses and backpacks slung over their shoulders. Some are dressed in suits and formal skirts with dress shirts. Others wear T-shirts or soccer jerseys with ripped jeans. The wall next to us is covered in graffiti: a bunch of blue spray-painted *fuera joh* and *chepos asesinos*—a call for the president to step down, and “killer cops,” respectively.

Soon I’ll be a student here too, just about ten more months of high school to go.

Maynor mumbles something that sounds like “see you later” and slams the door. I half expect Mami to get out right then and yell at

him in front of everyone, but she really is late today. She spits out *mico malcriado* and speeds away.

Mami is the wedding planner at a local hotel, which sounds a lot fancier than it is—it's not her dream job or anything. Her official hours are from nine to five, but she usually makes it home at around nine at night, except on weekends, when she's there past midnight. Another underpaid job in this jobless city.

Her salary is crap. But she makes it work with Abuela, who's ran a small sewing workshop for the past thirty years. Mostly school play costumes, ballet show outfits, and quick patchwork jobs.

"Here," Mami says as we pull up to school, handing Alberto and me seventy Lempiras each. "I didn't have time to make you anything for lunch, Alberto. But I'll ask Miss Lezama if you spend it all on Chilly Willys and candy. Get a pizza or a baleada, at least."

"Ay, Mami." Alberto rolls his eyes.

"Libertad, make sure he makes it to the classroom. I love you both. I'll see you tonight."

"Te amo, Mami." Alberto's already out of the car.

"Byose stanamamos. Don't forget my phone," I remind her.

"See, at least two of my children love me. Tell your brother when you see him that I'm not waiting for him tomorrow—either he's on time or he can walk. I just don't understand this . . . this *person* he's turned into. Always late, malcriado, all sensitive, calling me ignorant over a movie."

I can't tell if she heard me about my phone. I close the door gently, careful not to make Maynor's mistake.

# TWO

**I walk Alberto to his fifth-grade classroom. The door is** decorated with different national symbols for the upcoming festivities—poorly drawn pine trees and macaws with hand-written explanations of national symbolism. Alberto runs inside without saying good bye, his Real Madrid backpack bouncing with every step. There's nothing inside except his FIFA World Cup album and lunch money, all of which he'll spend on stickers of whatever soccer players he's missing.

His teacher isn't here yet, but there are enough of his classmates nearby that I don't feel the need to wait around. Plus he's already talking about some soccer player's injury with a few boys.

It's still twenty minutes before classes start. I walk down to the concrete soccer field where most of the senior boys play before school every morning. They stay sweaty for the rest of the day, but it's the best time to play, weather-wise.

A match is well underway—about ten boys with their pants rolled up halfway to their knees pass and fight for the ball. One of

the goalkeepers yells something to a player, waving his arm to the right. His words get lost in the wind.

I spot my friends sitting at our chosen plastic picnic table to the side of the court. Usually, they're all gelled-back hair in place and sleepy eyes, but today they seem caught in a heated argument. I can't make out what they're saying yet, but Valeria punctuates every word she says by tapping the table with her index finger.

Ever since my phone died before the beginning of the school year, I get this small panic attack that something huge will happen between three p.m. and seven a.m. the next day. Something everyone will know and be talking about, but I'll have no idea what's going on because no phone means not knowing shit.

Chisme is life.

I walk to the side of the table Valeria and Carla are sitting on. Across from them are Miguel and Pablo. I stand to the side waiting for the girls to scoot over—Carla is copying someone's homework, so it takes her a second to look up and see me.

"That's what I heard from Vicky. But you know that girl will say anything." Miguel shrugs.

"I mean——" Pablo begins, then stops to take a drink from his Coca-Cola. "That doesn't make sense. Why would Vicky keep her nudes on her camera roll and not on some app with a password lock? And then just let him—or anyone really—scroll through her pictures? It sounds like she wanted him to see them."

"Doesn't matter." Valeria's finger stays pressed to the table. "He shouldn't have sent them to himself. She didn't even know he did that, pobrecita."

“I’m just saying that maybe he doesn’t deserve to be, you know, expelled.”

Pablo follows the last word with a swig from his bottle of Coca-Cola. His fingers leave prints in the condensation covering the plastic bottle. He’s always drinking Coke, even at seven a.m.

“Except he’s not getting expelled for sending the pictures to himself. He sold and spread them throughout the whole freaking school.” Carla glares at Pablo, pen hovering over her notebook, frozen midair. “Maybe the city.”

Pablo rolls his eyes. “Don’t be dramatic. I’m telling you, she *wanted* him to see those pictures. Just, think about it, okay? Why would you keep naked pictures of yourself and then let someone see all of your camera roll, *unless—*”

Carla leans forward, cutting him off. “What if she forgot she had taken those pictures? Huh? And you know what? That’s not even the point. Selling someone’s nudes is like, illegal. Not to mention child pornography. Vicky is seventeen.”

Pablo slouches back with a loud exhale. “All right, okay.”

“Also.” Valeria continues where Carla left off. “It’s not like he’s getting expelled just because of *that*. My mom told me that Mrs. Gomez told her that it’s officially going down as an accumulation of suspensions and detentions. This was just the last straw. La gota que rebalsó el vaso.”

“I heard that too.” Miguel nods.

This is some old chisme. The debate has been going on for the last week, ever since Vicky’s nudes spread throughout the school, courtesy of Daniel Ramirez. Both Vicky and Daniel are in our class.

Pablo showed us all five of Vicky's pictures and a video. He sent them to our group chat, saying they'd been sent to the boys' soccer team's group chat, of which he's captain.

Honestly, I looked. Pablo didn't give us any warning—he just sent it all out of the blue.

I mean, I tried to not *look* look, as in spend too many seconds actually staring at any of the pictures, but I did look for a second there. Felt sick during and after. But I figured if everyone else had already seen them, what did it matter if I did too? Besides, it was Pablo who showed them around. I wouldn't put it past him buying them directly from Daniel.

"Would you do the same to Camila?" Carla asks Pablo, snapping her notebook shut and sitting up straight.

I shift uncomfortably on the bench. There it is. The reason why we let Pablo hang with us: Cami.

Top reason I need my phone too.

"That's different." Pablo's tone turns defensive. "Camila's my girlfriend. She would never do that. Vicky and Daniel were just . . . fuck buddies or something. Camila and Vicky don't have a thing in common." He caps his empty Coca-Cola bottle, squeezing the plastic hard enough that it crinkles.

"Speaking of, where is Cami?" I ask. Valeria darts a glance my way.

"Late. Her bus got stuck behind some car accident or something." Pablo glances down at his phone.

I dislike Pablo for many reasons. He goes hard with the nice-guy act, then gets away with saying some of the most sexist, ignorant

shit. And his voice is too loud, especially at seven a.m. But the top reason? A guy like him with a girl like Cami is just . . . off.

Exactly one week after my phone died, they started dating officially. Though they had been talking for a while, I guess. I didn't even hear about it from Camila. It was just a random Monday morning at this very table—Pablo's self-satisfied smile was unbearable as he retold every detail of how his grand gesture (taking Camila out for dinner) had come to him weeks before, and he just *knew* that was the perfect way to ask her to be his girlfriend.

My stomach hurt the whole day.

Pablo's phone chimes. "Her bus is pulling up. I'm gonna go meet her." He smirks at us before jogging off toward the stairs that lead to the school entrance.

I miss when he would just play soccer in the mornings, before he took an interest in Camila.

"Move to the other side." Valeria nudges me. "It's three of us on one side and only Miguel on the other."

I grab my bag and sit next to Miguel. He's on his phone playing Fortnite.

Without meaning to, I keep glancing up the stairs. Moments like this, I *really* wish I had my phone. Something to do with my hands.

"Do you think Vicky will come to school today?" Miguel says without looking up.

"I doubt it. I mean, would you? I'd change schools or something. Beg my parents to homeschool me." Carla shrugs, but she still seems flustered from the argument with Pablo.

"She's already missed, like, a week and a half, hasn't she?" I ask.

“Maybe she’s keeping up with homework or something.” Valeria drums her fingers on the table.

“She’s been totally silent online since it happened. Except for the weird Snapchat story she posted last night,” Carla adds.

“What Snapchat story?”

“You don’t know?” Carla sounds surprised.

“Uhm, no phone, remember?”

She grimaces. “Right . . . So she posted this like, all-black screen snap and wrote over it with something about moving on or letting go and finding yourself.”

“It was: ‘When you let go you will lose many things from the past, but you will find yourself.’ I saved it,” Valeria adds, holding up her phone.

The sunlight hits us square in the eyes, so I can barely make out Valeria’s phone screen without squinting. I swipe at the sweat beading on my forehead.

Miguel snickers. I feel bad for Vicky, but it’s hard to get away with cheesy Tumblr-adjacent quotes on black-background Snap stories without someone making fun of you.

Cami and Pablo appear at the top of the stairs. They don’t hold hands, but their arms brush against each other with every step, and he’s telling her something that requires a lot of hand motions. I shield my eyes from the sun to be able to look at them. I follow their bodies’ movements.

We still wear those buttoned-down, white- short-sleeved shirts with the school’s logo monogrammed over the front left pocket, despite most schools having moved on to polos. Plus, our pants are



an ugly pale green that fit baggy on everyone. But on Cami, it's like the uniform was made with her in mind.

"Good morning," I say when they reach us.

Valeria side-eyes me. Carla's gone back to transcribing whoever's homework, and Miguel doesn't even glance up from his phone.

"Hey," Cami says, sitting next to me. Pablo slides next to her.

"So what happened?" I ask, turning my head to look at her for a second.

"Some huge accident—at least three cars and a motorcycle. The police took forever to get there. Like, forty-five minutes. There was a body on the side of the road, that's when I stopped looking," she says, scrunching up her face and shaking her head.

"Probably the motorcycle person." Valeria purses her lips.

"Be right back." Pablo stands up and squeezes Cami's shoulder. He lopes toward the small food store on the side of the court, probably to get another Coke, then turns around. "Want anything?"

"I'm good," Cami responds with a quick smile. "Thank you."

"Cute," Carla adds.

I can't tell if she's being sarcastic. Camila doesn't meet her eyes. A second of tension moves through the table, as it does whenever Carla acknowledges Pablo and Cami's relationship.

"Hey, when are you getting your phone back? It's been, like, what, a whole month?" Cami asks. She doesn't look up from her phone.

"Today, I think," I say. I wish I had my own phone right now to scroll through instead of having to find anywhere to look at that is not her.

“Finally,” she says, looking up. For the first time today, our eyes meet.

It hadn’t occurred to me once that maybe she wants me to have my phone back.

Or maybe she just means it’s been a minute.

I hold her eyes. In the sun, there’s a mellow gold-green to them. “Yeah. Finally.”

“We need to head in,” Carla says, glancing at the time on her phone. She reaches for her backpack and slides the notebooks in. Pablo appears behind Camila with another soda, put his hand on her shoulder. We look away from each other.

The soccer match has ended. The boys on the court are changing shirts, pulling them over their sweaty heads and grabbing clean ones from their bags. It’s already too warm to sit outside comfortably. I can feel the bench under my pants heating up.

“Fuck. I didn’t even get time to finish calc,” Cami groans.

I, too, feel robbed of time. I’m annoyed at the bus, the route, the police, and Maynor, even if he isn’t the reason Cami is late.

Mostly, I’m annoyed at my mom. For the phone and the honking. For not seeing that her son isn’t sensitive about a movie, not really.

# THREE

**“Make sure your parents read the permission form all the way through. This year isn’t like any other, muchachos,”** Mrs. Garcia says. “The school wants to make sure we’re doing everything in our power to keep you safe.” She splits us into groups according to our roles en el desfile, the upcoming parade. Las palillonas discuss the final details of their outfits, then head out to practice.

Palillonas are the girls that march and dance in beat with the marching band, all while twirling a baton. They dress up in what looks like a cross between a cheerleader’s and a soldier’s uniform. It’s a big deal to be a palillona, both here and in Nicaragua. Some of them even get awards and scholarships, for their patriotic spirit and shit.

While the marching-band people head over to the auditorium, the rest of us pick up where we left off with our hand-painted banners and flags last week. Of course, the boys on banner duty will spend most of the class period playing Fortnite on their phones or

showing each other videos: Sometimes it's soccer, sometimes it's porn.

September 15 is one week away—and with it the big Independence Day parade, and my eighteenth birthday. Honduras was independented from Spain on September 15, 1821. And I was independented from my mother's uterus on September 15, 1999.

Independencia didn't ring right to my mother (thank god), so instead she called me Libertad. Not that Mami is particularly patriotic, but I like to picture her in the hospital bed watching the parades and feeling moved enough that it seemed right to name me after the occasion.

It also adds intrigue to my narrative, since my last name is Morazán, like Francisco Morazán, the guy over-credited for doing some of the work behind the battle for independence. No relationship though.

I'm in the flag and banner group. We're arguing over the last few hand-painted details: The bottom blue feathers of a guacamaya, our national bird, or the pale-green leaves of an orchid, our national flower? Civics with Mrs. Garcia is the class period devoted to these life-or-death questions.

Schools from all over the capital participate in the parade. The rest of the school year we'll focus on Honduran law and history, but las fiestas patrias is what this class is really about.

I'm grateful for a hands-on project. It's way better than learning about the Honduran Family Code, which inevitably means an in-class debate about why same-sex marriage can never be recognized in the eyes of God and thus our law. A debate we've been having

since eighth grade. A debate that is strictly one-sided. Although this year, us being seniors and all, we'll probably use the rest of the school year to do stuff like college applications or résumés.

Carla reaches for the red watercolor paint next to me. "So—Friday. Big one-eight. What are we doing?" she asks.

"Hmm. I don't know yet. I mean—who knows if anyone will be able to, you know, do anything. I'm not even sure the parade's gonna to happen . . ."

"Yeahhh. If anything goes down with the protests, I don't think my parents will let me go anywhere after," Valeria adds.

Mrs. Garcia is right: This year is not like other years. It's an election year, and for the first time in Honduran history, a president—the current president—is trying to reelect himself, against every constitutional law. If Juan Orlando wins, again, that'd be four more years under his presidency, eight overall. The right wing party has ruled the country since the 2009 coup.

It doesn't help that he's been tied to drug cartels. Or that his first candidacy was financed with social-security money, which resulted in over three thousand deaths because of missing funds for medicine and medical equipment. Some people were even given pills made out of flour—or worse, road-marking paint. On top of all that, Juan Orlando appointed his sister, Hilda Hernández, as director of strategy for his presidential campaign, and now she still holds a major position in the government.

Protests from the opposition have exploded all over Honduras ever since Hernández announced he was once again the candidate for the national right-wing party. No one expects a fair

election—and the September 15 parade is the perfect opportunity for a big uprising. Maynor said that the National Police is planning to have thousands of agents on the streets of Tegus that day.

“Do we have any yellow paint?” Carla asks. She’s working on the crown of our national shield, which currently looks oddly like one of those old-timey judge wigs.

I wish Cami was here. She can really paint. But Camila is a palillona, currently practicing synched-up marching and fancy baton twirling on the soccer field.

“We used all of it.” The tip of Valeria’s tongue pokes out the side of her mouth as she paints white spots of a sickly-looking deer.

Carla sighs. “I’ll ask Mrs. Garcia for more.” Her chair scrapes the floor as she gets up.

I finish painting the last blue star on our flag, right in the middle. My fingers are stained blue, and I think about asking Mrs. Garcia if I can go to the bathroom to wash them off. There’s a big window on the way to the bathroom with a perfect view of the soccer field: I imagine las palillonas there—including Camila—the sun hitting them at full force. Even inside, cool drops of sweat keep sliding down my neck.

“Do you think Juan Orlando will actually win?” Valeria interrupts my thoughts.

My body stills reflexively. I look up at her. She’s holding her long black hair with one hand and fanning air onto her neck with the other. I go to offer her the ponytail holder on my wrist before realizing I don’t have one.

Truth is, I don’t know what I think. Juan Orlando and the

nationalist party have gotten away with a lot. Like, *a lot* a lot. Why would this election be any different?

“If he does,” I begin to say, slowly, “it probably won’t be fair. I think everyone hates him. He’s, you know . . . cost us a lot of lives.”

“The UNAH shooting was just a few months ago.” Valeria cracks her knuckles. “People can’t forget that fast.”

My chest tightens. Months ago, Juan Orlando Hernández ordered the military police—the MP—to take to the streets in major cities like Tegus and San Pedro to “mantener el control.” When I still had my phone, I saw videos all over Twitter and Instagram of the MP beating protestors, firing tear gas and rubber bullets.

And the worst—the one that still pops into my head when it gets too quiet—of four MP walking into the National Autonomous University, la UNAH, and shooting into a crowd of students. Real bullets. The video was recorded from a phone. It’s all blurry and pixelated, but you can hear the high-pitched screams of two women in the background, and the *fuck, puta, Diosose stan estan matando*, of the person recording it, followed by the drumbeats of the soles of his shoes hitting asphalt as he runs away.

Maynor wasn’t there that day. The university had been on strike for months—no classes held, and whole buildings blocked off by student fronts.

I didn’t really understand what the strike was about. I still don’t, not really. Maynor said it had to do with students not being allowed to participate in the democratic structure of the university’s academic guidelines, and then being denied the right to pacific protests.

I do remember hearing that one of the student leader’s dads was

killed outside his home the day after he'd done several interviews in support of his son and the cause.

The night of the shooting, I sat in front of Mami's TV, switching between news channels, waiting for someone—anyone—to say something about the shooting. Maynor kept walking from one end of the bedroom to the other, cupping his face with his hands. We waited for the names of the dead students. Why the MP shot them in the first place. Nothing came.

Instead, a thirty-minute special about the first Walmart to open in Tegucigalpa in a couple of months was aired. There was a small note about it buried in the newspaper the next day, with no names or specifics. Just “enfrentamiento en la UNAH.” It was almost as if nothing had happened, except for the video and the three corpses. And the Instagram stories reposting the video. And my poems. Or rather, the poems of @InsurreccionPoeticaHN.

I started the account the very same night of the university shooting. After many *no puede ser* and *this country* and Maynor brushing his scruffy beard with his fingers over and over and biting his nails, we went to bed.

I tried to fall asleep. My chest felt heavy, like someone was sitting on it, or pushing me down into the bed. I kept turning and turning, but there was no relief from the images of my brother running through the halls of la UNAH, screaming with no sound coming out of his mouth or the cameraman's footsteps as he escaped, y mi mami with a gun to her face at that traffic light months ago.

I sat up and opened my phone's notes app, typing out eight uneven-rhyming lines about the president, and the students, y la



corrupción and no change. I read them over a dozen times, enough to memorize them. And then I knew I had to say them to someone.

But Cami was asleep by then, and things between us were already weird. I'd heard the creak of Maynor's window as he snuck out. I would never post it to my personal account. I'm not stupid—I've seen and heard what happens to people who speak out against the government. And I guess a part of me felt embarrassed, or maybe nervous, about being perceived as too intense or virtue signaling or something.

A few years ago, Valeria made the mistake of pushing back on Mrs. Garcia's views during our Family Code same-sex marriage debacle. It was a small thing—she said something like *why should we care about who other people are attracted to?* Mrs. Garcia was appalled, of course. But the worst was the way our classmates reacted to it: The boys would not stop teasing her, calling her *la defensora de los pobres* and over-the-top and abogada. It was a quick lesson about how uncool it was to care too much about anything. And that was just the people in our class. I can't imagine what people on the Internat would have to say.

So I created another account. I didn't even have to think of the username—it seemed to have lived in my head for a while. Then I took a screenshot of the poem, posted it with a bunch of hashtags related to the shooting and the president, and went to bed.

The next day, the post had more likes than any of my personal account photos, and over a hundred shares. People from school—from my own senior class—reposted it with GIFs and stickers and their own words. It was exciting but weird. Somehow, I knew that if

they knew the identity of the person writing the poems (regardless of who it was), they wouldn't have been as willing to share. Something about the anonymity made it okay to care. To be "intense."

I couldn't resist telling Maynor about it. He was almost giddy with excitement as he climbed into bed next to me, reading the poem out loud a couple of times. It felt good to see him happy and proud, instead of the storm of grief he had been the night before.

"I had to go all the way to the first floor for more paint." Carla sits down next to us with a huff, dissolving my tangle of thoughts. "So," she says, turning to me, "did you decide about your birthday?"

"Not really," I say, shrugging. It's not that I don't like birthdays—I actually love them. It just feels pointless to plan for a day that will probably almost certainly most likely be a mess.

"I say we just wait and see. Make a small plan, like, dinner somewhere and drinks at La Esquina?" Valeria comes to my rescue. "And if anything goes down, then we move it to the next week or something."

"Sure. That sounds great." I smile at her.

"Okay, who do you want to invite?" Valeria asks.

"Um, you two, obviously. Miguel and Cami . . ."

"If you invite Camila, you have to invite Pablo too, you know," Carla chips in.

". . . and Pablo." It takes a lot of willpower not to roll my eyes.

"Ok, so the parade is at eleven and will probably go until three or something. If you give everyone time to shower and stuff, I'd say dinner at like, eight, and then La Esquina."

Again, planning my birthday the same day as an anticipated

uprising feels like planning an extremely fantastical thing. I hold out hope though. It'd be the first in a year full of firsts: My first time getting into La Esquina with my real ID. My first time voting in November. My first time drinking (legally).

“Chicas, ¿cómo vamos?” Mrs. Garcia singsongs from behind me, looking over our flora and fauna banner—we finally compromised on feathers *and* leaves.

“I think we just need to draw a couple more orchids and animals and it should be good,” Carla decides.

“Yes, and the flag?”

“All done,” I say, pointing to the center star, which has already dried.

“Perfecto, chicas. Please make sure to go over the form with your parents. It's pretty straightforward: The school buses will take you downtown. The parade should be around two hours long. You need to bring your own water bottles, but you can buy food at the stadium. Then we'll bus you back to the school. The school reserves the right to make changes to this plan if needed, or to cancel our participation in the parade if we think it might endanger the lives of our students in any way. Okay?”

We nod. Her words sound rehearsed—she must have given this same explanation a dozen times today. She's the Civics and History of Honduras teacher for grades 9-12. As she stops to examine our drawings a little longer, I notice that her usual super-tight-and-slick bun has loosened, a few graying black hairs curling around her ears and neck. She looks flushed, her blinking just a little slower and longer than normal.

She must be exhausted. I can't imagine planning el desfile del 15 this year, never mind the last twenty-five.

I take a deep breath, and then turn to look at her. "Mrs. Garcia . . . Do you think there will be a parade?"

She releases a shaky exhale, then pastes on a smile that looks like it hurts her face.

"I don't know, girls. I think we're in for a historic 15 de Septiembre."

# FOUR

**Camila leans against the side of my bus, scrolling through her phone.** Her hair, which was down this morning, is now up in a bun. Sweat licks baby hairs to her forehead and temples. Her cheeks are sunburnt from being under the afternoon sun for the past hour. The light brown of her skin and its yellow undertones with the reddish glow of the sun makes me think of a sunset, sort of. I cringe at how cheesy that sounds, even in my head.

The end of the school day is usually the only time I got to see Cami alone—Pablo is off at soccer practice. Everyone else either stays in some after-school club or their parents pick them up. But Cami lives too far from the city for any of that, and Mami y Abuela could never leave work to pick Alberto and me up.

Camila used to wait for me outside my bus every day, but she hasn't in a long time. Not since February. I've concluded that she must speed-walk from her last period to the bus and hustle inside before I can even spot her.

But not today. I tell Alberto to get on our bus without me, that I'll

be there in a few. He ignores me, of course, and runs straight to Cami.

They hug, and she asks him about his day. He makes a big deal of explaining a goal he scored during recess, even re-creating the kick with an imaginary ball. He beams when she congratulates him and sends him off with a forehead kiss.

“Listen to your sister,” she says, “go grab your seats.”

Alberto blushes and hurries off.

At what age do you learn to have some chill about a crush?

“Hold on—” Cami touches my arm before I can follow Alberto, then pulls out her phone and finishes typing whatever message she’d started before. I wonder what it is that can’t wait, but she has to make *me* wait for.

Yet another moment where I miss my phone, when it feels like my hands aren’t meant to be empty. I stay and wait in silence, staring awkwardly at my shoes. It just feels good that she wants me to stick around: Like maybe things are slowly going back to normal. To before.

She finally puts her phone in her pocket and looks up at me. Her eyes are somewhere between green and brown, depending on the light. Our bus partially blocks the sunlight from hitting us directly, so her eyes are closer to brown right now. Her eyebrows rise with her mouth as she smirks. “So. . . . If you’re getting your phone back today, can we expect a new poem soon?”

She’s the only other person aside from Maynor who knows that *the* poem is *my* poem. Because, well . . . I’ve told Cami pretty much everything since forever. Even though shit was super awkward between us, texts far and apart, it felt so good to tell her about the

poem—to have something else to focus on besides the sticky tension between us.

“Maybe,” I say, “September fifteenth is probably a good occasion for it.”

“Who knew your birthday was such a big deal?” Cami’s smirk softens into a smile.

“You did.” I smile back at her. “How are my gifts coming along?”

This is one of our things too—elaborate birthday presents, extra points if handmade. Camila is an amazing painter, so this year I gave her three handmade painting canvases made of linen. Abuela helped me find the perfect fabric for them, and the stretching bars too. We built them together at her sewing workshop, all three in different, special sizes that you wouldn’t find in a store. Abuela even wrapped them up herself with the wide pink ribbons she usually uses for ballerinas’ buns.

Luckily, Camila’s birthday was in January. I don’t know what I would’ve done if it had been *after* we kissed. Come to think of it, maybe she wasn’t planning on getting me anything.

I open my mouth to say *just kidding* but she cuts me off.

“Vos tranquila y yo nerviosa. I’m doing something a little different this year. Eighteen is a big birthday.”

She smiles. We smile at each other.

“Can’t wait,” I say, feeling warm, but then I add, “I mean—if there even is a birthday, you know.”

“Yeah,” she sighs, then leans her back against the bus. “We’ll see. I heard my mom on the phone last night saying the MP’s locking down, like, ten blocks, including the hospital.”

Camila's mom is a nurse at the downtown hospital. When I used to spend the night or she drove us somewhere, she'd tell us the most messed-up stories. Not what you'd expect, not grotesque injury stories. More like whispered accounts of doctors and nurses getting forced into cars by mareros, taken somewhere to treat a wounded member of the gang.

The deal was simple: If the wounded guy survived, the doctor or nurse got to leave—and live.

“I don't even know why they're holding a parade this year, with everything that's been going on,” I say, leaning my back against the bus next to her. Our shoulders and arms touch. Her skin is soft and sun-warm.

“Because of that,” she says. “To make it seem like it's all normal, like this could be any other year, any other election.”

I scratch my neck. “Yeah. You're right.”

That's when I notice that my hands are still covered in blue paint. I tug at the dried blue tendrils, and they come off like thin pieces of skin. I stop, though, when Cami reaches for one of my hands and starts peeling away the paint herself.

Her hands are steadier, more careful, her fingers long and soft. The pieces she pulls come off easily, in whole sections. I feel dizzy again, and the hand she's holding begins to sweat.

“Better to have blue hands than a sunburn,” she jokes, pointing to her face.

“All for independence.” I roll my eyes.

“Mhmm.”

After a couple minutes there's barely any paint left, but she still



brings my hands up to her eyes, as if checking for any missed spots. The driver turns on the bus and our backs shudder with the motor. Cami gently drops my hands.

“Text me when you get your phone back,” she says, turning to walk to her bus, which is just two spots away.

“I will,” I say.

I watch her walk away. I stay watching her as she goes up the three steps, finds her seat all the way in the back, and pulls out her earbuds.

Before Cami and I kissed, we would text all day and call each other for hours, even after having been together for most of the school day. After the kiss, we started talking less: The more days that passed, the more and more awkward it felt to bring up what happened at La Esquina. Then it was summer break, and we only saw each other a handful of times at parties and group hangouts.

When school started again, I hoped enough time had passed for things to go back to the way they were before. But then my phone died. And she started dating Pablo. And now we’re here.

It’s like, I think I can still tell Camila anything, except this big important thing that she should already know. That of course she knows. Because it’s happening to both of us.

Right?