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## **Juntas: Toget(Her)**

Karina Flores

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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JUNTAS/TOGET(HER)

A Thesis

by

KARINA FLORES

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

July 2020

Major Subject: Creative Writing



JUNTAS/ TOGET(HER)

A Thesis  
by  
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July 2020



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## ABSTRACT

Flores, Karina, Juntas/Toget(her) Master of Fine Arts (MFA), July 2020, 163pp., references, 7 titles.

Juntas/Toget(her) is a novella that follows the journey of Pilar Nieto and Vanessa Delgado, two young girls on the precipice of discovering themselves amid trying times in their lives. Pilar's family is a traditional Mexican family with traditional values. Vanessa's only family is her brother Frankie—who takes it upon himself to raise her with the same values he was brought up with before the sudden death of their parents. When Vanessa moves to Eagle Pass, she meets Pilar, and what starts out as a friendship slowly grows into something neither one of them could anticipate happening. Upon discovery of their relationship they will encounter trials that will threaten their bond and force them to decide between adhering to familial Latinx standards or staying true to their individuality. Vanessa and Pilar, juntas, will unfold difficult truths that force them to choose between themselves and their family.



## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the LGBTQIA community and all the amazing people I've met that are a part of it. Thank you for always treating me like family. I also dedicate this work to one of the most brilliant women I've ever had the pleasure of meeting, Joanna Nandin. Miss you, friend.



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CHAPTER I  
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

**Identifying Intersectionality Within the Latinx/LGBTQ YA Genre:**

**A Critical Analysis of “*Juntas: Toget(her)*”**

Visibility of Latinx culture within the LGBTQ genre of YA literature is important for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which are acceptance and awareness. *Juntas: Toget(her)* is a story that encompasses universal themes such as family, loss, love, sexuality—all while framing it within a Latinx/LGBTQ lens. A lens that is all too often marginalized. Though there’s been tremendous growth within LGBTQ YA literature, stories that share the queer Latinx experience are sometimes given little to no regard. The protagonists in *Juntas*, Pilar Nieto, and Vanessa Delgado, are two young Latinx women who are simultaneously learning about themselves, each other, and their culture. By having my characters learn about their own identities and truth by coming together, it illustrates the concept of reconciling varying identity markers that make a person whole within oneself. Intersectionality recognizes these varying parts of identity markers that make up a person. My goal with *Juntas* is to share a coming of age story that depicts the LGBTQ/Latinx experience.

LGBTQ literature has grown in popularity— we’re seeing more characters and stories that include LGBTQ themes in many forms of media. Stories like *Simon and the Homosapien Agenda*, or even television shows like *Supergirl* or *Never Have I Ever* which have included

characters with a LGBTQ storyline. However, there are few LGBTQ storylines that centralize these characters— they are instead reduced to supporting roles with a plot line that isn't the main focus. This is problematic because it can unintentionally convey a message of dismissiveness, othering queer stories when they in fact have a rightful place in the limelight.

Not centering Latinx/LGBTQ characters sets a sort of harmful precedence that insinuates that LGBTQ/Latinx stories aren't worthy of being the main focus. When reflecting on Latinx characters in media, Latinx characters, much like LGBTQ characters, will oftentimes get thrown in as side characters—written into subplots that are often included for the sake of diversity. Checking a box that implies '*See, we included you*' rather than taking careful consideration into what it actually means to include Latinx/LGBTQ stories. Because what it should mean is that these stories are worthy and must be amplified. Fortunately, there is a growing number of POC authors that continue to write about the Latinx/LGBTQ experience who share their works. Adding to the extensive library that already exists but doesn't get nearly enough credit. One book that does mix the Chicana/queer experience well is Gloria Anzaldúa's semi-autobiographical book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In this book, Anzaldúa's poetic style mixes in Spanish and English, infusing her lived experience as a queer Chicana living on the U.S. – Mexico border. One way that Anzaldúa incorporates her Chicana voice is by using code-switching. This allows Anzaldúa to maintain an authentic Chicana voice, not allowing herself to cater for a white gaze. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa writes a piece entitled *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* in which she talks about her self-autonomy with code-switching, "Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. I will no longer be made to

feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue - my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence” (Anzaldúa, 75). Books like Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* have enabled other POC writers to confidently share their stories in a way that accesses their lived experiences, allowing their language to fluidly switch between languages. Taking cues from Latinx/Chicanx writers such as Anzaldúa, I’ve included code-switching in *Juntas* as well because I feel that it is important to portray the Latinx voice in the same vein that I’ve seen and experienced myself. In my code-switches, I have chosen not to italicize the words because I felt it is important that the Spanish words carry as much weight as their English counterparts. Code-switching allows the narrative to simultaneously intersect two parts of a whole identity, which goes back to my point about addressing intersectionality in YA literature. By implementing code-switching in *Juntas*, I show how these two languages can coexist within the same margins of a page. Much like how many facets of identity can exist simultaneously within one person.

Along with including the language that conveys Latinx essence, it is important to portray strong female Latinx characters. Latinx stories, such as *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sanchez and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo provided me with inspiration to want to write about young Latinx female characters, like Pilar and Vanessa, that are growing and learning about their identity— paving the way for a new model of the Latinx woman. One of my main protagonists, Pilar, shares similarities with Julia (the protagonist in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*) and Xiomara (the protagonist in *The Poet X*). All these young women are Latinx writers who use their writing to find their voice— to express things that are difficult. In the case of *Juntas*, Pilar surprises herself by revealing her attraction to Vanessa through her poems. Her writing voice comes easy to her, it is second nature. It’s unsurprising that Pilar’s

writing voice is what helps her to realize a truth about her identity that she hadn't thought of before. Along with exploring her sexuality, Pilar also uses her writing to express her discomfort with her own body and the gender role that is imposed on her. Much like the main protagonist in Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, Gabi, and Pilar challenge the patriarchal imposed gender role that their mothers have placed on them. Pilar "reject(s) and contest(s) cultural patriarchal, and heteronormative gender roles..." (Herrera, 21). Pilar does this by actively seeking independence and wanting to study writing in New York instead of seeking a man to maintain her.

It is no coincidence that Pilar is a writer, and a determined writer no less. She is using her writing voice to communicate freely, openly. An opportunity often not afforded to young Latinx girls. As Adrianna Santos mentions in her essay *Broken Open*, "I argue that while the visibility of Mexican American girlhood is important in and of itself, there is a particular need to tell authentic stories of Chicanx/Latinx teenagers as *writers* because of the specific social conditions that silence their narratives" (Santos, 45). By bridging female Latinx/LGTBQ voices into the YA canon, we can highlight the cracks within the infrastructure of YA literature and allow these narratives to shine through.

### **What is Intersectionality?**

There are varying identity markers that culminate the entire makeup of an individual. Of which include race, class, gender. The term intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 paper, *Demarginalizing The Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. The term intersectionality helped give a name to the connection between these identity makers and

understand the role that each of them play in either disparaging or lifting certain lived human experiences.

Intersectionality is a term that can help to identify entities that seek to oppress. The term has broadened in meaning as well, “While many who championed intersectionality early on were African American women, the theory has proven necessary to understanding a wide range of differences, including individuals’ sexual orientation, age, class, disability, and more” (Aléman). Sexual orientation is a part of identity that many oppressors may use as a means to keep an individual from openly expressing their voice. However, by continuously sharing or creating stories that highlight marginalized individuals and challenge the status quo, this will enable people, like people who are part of the LGBTQ/Latinx community, to share their stories.

When creating *Juntas*, it was important for me to write a story that not only harnessed the beauty of what it means to be queer, but also Latino/a. Pilar and Vanessa are helping each other learn about and find themselves. Both Vanessa and Pilar are young, middle class, Latinx women who are queer. This identity brings with it a multitude of challenges when it comes to navigating the space around them because not everyone is tolerant of LGBTQ people. Some might even argue that it is especially difficult to navigate being queer in a Hispanic, religious household.

Eagle Pass, a border town near Piedras Negras, México, is Pilar’s home. It is the place from which her voice began to find develop. Her race, gender, and class indicate that she is part of a community that experiences inequities and is often not given equal opportunities to express their voice. It is important to portray these issues, humanize them so that they aren’t just statistics, “Chicana feminists must address those issues that have particular impact on Chicano communities, such as poverty, limited opportunities for higher education, high school dropouts, health care, bilingual education, immigration reform, prison reform, welfare...” (Garcia, p. 233).

Throughout her journey she envisions herself doing more, breaking the trend of settling and assimilating into a small-town life. Pilar is limited in what she can access from her experiences having only lived in Eagle Pass and visiting Mexico. It isn't until she meets Vanessa that her world begins to widen, and she begins to see more of what it has to offer. Pilar has some difficulty accepting some of the pieces that make up her identity, namely her gender and her race. We see her struggle with the role of her gender in the way that she interacts with her body. To her, there is a slight disconnect between the body that she's in and the mind that inhabits her. Later in the novella, Vanessa unknowingly helps Pilar become more comfortable in her skin and find a sort of femininity that she didn't know she was capable of.

Vanessa and Pilar's identity makeup are very similar, they are kindred in the way that their journeys align. They share Latinx roots, are both female, middle-class, queer. By writing a story of two Latinx women who are so closely intertwined in terms of what they share in their identities, this allows this human experience to be recognized in the YA genre.

### **LGBTQ/Latinx Literature, A Discourse: Religión, Familia, Death**

YA literature is a popular genre that draws in a diverse audience. It is only fair that the stories/characters resemble that of the diverse readership that the genre attracts. Many authors have used the Young Adult literature platform to address important topics that can be challenging to bring forth. Topics such as the need for individuals to maintain agency when deciding on a religion to follow—if they so choose to follow any religious doctrine at all, that is— and being met with some opposition. This may especially be the case when the family is predominately Catholic, and it is assumed that all members of the family will follow the laws according to the Catholic religion. Other topics include familial relationships, death, and queerness. The YA genre is great for reaching an audience that is finding themselves having to

talk/learn about these topics. However, when painted and catered for a white gaze, it becomes problematic because no longer are Latinx readers seeing themselves in the characters they are reading. Representation, an *exact* representation, is all too important and vital in the stories we choose to publish and share with audiences because, “Kids in every minority need to see people like themselves in books; that’s an acknowledgement of their existence on this planet and in this society” (Leitch Smith, 175). It is important to lift these stories up and get them into the hands of audiences who wish to see themselves.

It’s difficult to discuss YA literature without addressing the publishing industry and the varying issues that lie within that machine. Unfortunately, it is difficult to publish Latinx stories through traditional publishing houses. It can also be difficult to publish LGBTQ stories. Now, imagine if both LGBTQ and Latinx intersections met? This is why it’s so important to address *exact* representation. Of course, there has been an uproar from communities such as *Dignidad Literaria* who have called out publishing industries for their inherent bias towards publishing books written by POC. Regardless of the difficulty Latinx/LGBTQ stories face when trying to get published, the fact remains that those stories do exist and have always existed. As Valdes-Rodriguez points out in José Quiroga and Melanie López *Cultural Production of Knowledge on Latina/o Sexualities*, “These writers have always been there...it’s just that the industry wasn’t ready to publish them” (Quiroga, López Frank, 145). The industry is only now starting to pay attention to these stories because noise has been made. It is important to contribute to a historically marginalized subgenre of literature because, I believe, it will help to increase visibility and awareness. It will also help to foster an inclusive narrative that disrupts the heteronormative white one that audiences are too accustomed to.

I am a second-generation Mexican American woman who grew up in a region that is predominately populated by minorities. For me, it somehow never sunk in that the stories I was reading weren't a true reflection of my own lived experience. It wasn't until I picked up Erika L. Sanchez's book, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* that I read about a character that was much like myself. Who shared those same insecurities and feelings of self-doubt all while simultaneously painting a picture of the Latinx experience. I thought to myself, *are there more books like this one? I need more.* Later I discovered *The Poet X*, written by Elizabeth Acevedo, which is a story about a young Dominican girl who uses slam poetry to come into her own. As well as Benjamin Alire Saenz's book *The Inexplicable Logic of my Life* which tells the story of Sal, who is adopted into a Latino family and learns to embrace the culture as if it were his own. In *The Inexplicable Logic of my Life*, Saenz also features a queer Hispanic teen character who faces homelessness and finds refuge with the main protagonist in the book, Sal. I celebrate these books and only hope to see more of them. What these books share in common is depicting the Latinx experience in a way that doesn't adhere to stereotypes but instead allows the complexity and richness of these characters to flow through. Both Acevedo and Saenz include queer stories in their novels and do so in a way that observes the tension that can often be found when an individual is both Latinx and queer.

Discussing topics such as religion and death are sometimes difficult to address. In the case of Vanessa, she has doubts about Catholicism and is also reeling from her parent's sudden passing. In one scene, she looks up at the crucifix above her parents caskets and expresses her doubt. She copes by resorting to drugs to try and "slow time down." Vanessa has a difficult time grounding herself in reality. Throughout the novella, the only focus that Vanessa has is numbing her emotions, not allowing herself to go through them. This experience is one that many queer

teens may resonate with, “Queer teens, as well as those questioning their sexual orientation, are at higher risks for depression, drug use, suicide, and school difficulties” (Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks (Children's Literature Association Series) (p. 149). University Press of Mississippi. Kindle Edition.” Vanessa has difficulty staying in school because she is not interested in education, she is in constant denial of her parent’s passing and copes by numbing her herself so that she doesn’t have to feel the pain. Her relationship with her brother is strained and difficult because he starts to assume the parental role, and Vanessa outwardly rejects his assumed role. In Frankie’s eyes, he sees his sister mirroring many of the behaviors that he once took part in. A high school dropout, Frankie sees how Vanessa rejects institutions and authority.

Pilar also isn’t too keen on religion, her mother practices Catholicism but Pilar’s beliefs don’t exactly align with that of her family. When the story reaches the climactic scene of Pilar’s sister Cecilia sharing Pilar’s journal with their mother, Ximena chastens Pilar’s thoughts and tells her that what she is thinking is a sin and that she must ask for forgiveness. Pilar doesn’t agree, she is still learning about her sexual identity and the only mirror she has is that of her cousin Marcos, as Robertson explains about sexuality, “...sexual subjectivity was formed largely within the family, church, and school” (Robertson, 96). Pilar doesn’t have anyone who understands exactly what she is thinking or going through. Marcos is the closest person she has. His experience is helping her piece together her sexual subjectivity. Religion deems what she is feeling/thinking as wrong, and she disagrees— rejecting a long tradition of assimilation into Catholicism because her family tells her that she must.

Pilar Nieto is an immigrant from Coahuila, Mexico. Although she was born in Mexico, she doesn’t feel a strong connection with her country. It is a place she knows of only by name. This part of Pilar’s identity that she doesn’t connect with is something that Ximena, Pilar’s

mother, unknowingly did. Whenever Pilar would try to question her mother about where she came from, she was met with hostility. I felt it was important to incorporate that disassociation both as a symbol of Pilar's 'Americanization' and her longing to connect with her roots and being met with resentment. You can see Pilar's longing to connect by the way she wishes to dance just like her family members and feeling like an outsider in her own family. The aspirations that Pilar has are predicated on the American ideal, the dream of being whoever you want to be. It isn't till Pilar begins to connect with Vanessa that she also begins to connect with the Latinx part of herself.

*Juntas* addresses a few universal themes that include grief, trauma, coming of age, self-acceptance. When looking for the ending, I wasn't sure where it was that my characters were going to lead me. But it became clear from the beginning that the two protagonists would not end up together. Their lives were headed in different directions. One thing that these two characters have in common is their need to leave what they know— both these girls are searching for something outside of the restricting environment that they are currently in.

Pilar begins to imagine a life with Vanessa, but Vanessa chooses to enlist in the military. The reason I decided on this was because I felt that Vanessa feels a sense of duty to uphold the legacy of her father. She is trying to find her own way, and this is the clearest path that she sees for herself. And when Vanessa reveals this news to Pilar, it breaks her. Pilar feels betrayed because she assumes that Vanessa will follow her wherever she goes.

I think it was important that Vanessa stand by her decision, she wants to find her independence— be her own person, and she is determined to do that regardless of what stands in her way.

When Vanessa asks for Pilar to write her, she is trying to hold on to that bit of hope that their lives will remain connected despite their physical separation. Again, it was important for me to set this story at a time when connection wasn't so readily available. Of course, it would be easier now to pick up a phone and text each other or look each other up on Facebook. But I wanted to emphasize that communication is difficult and there are hurdles to overcome, effort that must be put in.

YA literature explores themes of religion, death, family and how these entities play into identity. As I've mentioned, it is important to write about Latinx/LGBTQ characters because they makeup part of the audience that the YA genre attracts. Although the themes are universal, depicting these themes through a Latinx/LGBTQ lens will allow these individuals to see themselves represented.

### **YA Literature and The Importance of Discussing Sexuality**

Discussing sexuality among young adults may seem a taboo topic, one that many adults shy away from having with adolescents because it is deemed an uncomfortable conversation to have. However, it is precisely at that age when adults need to have these kinds of conversations with adolescents. But if young adults don't have anyone to turn to, what do they turn to? One possible option, books.

Sexuality is a topic that can be difficult to navigate for young adults. They are discovering things about themselves, learning about themselves and their bodies. In my novella, Pilar has a scene in which she is looking at herself in the mirror and observing the 'mounds' that have developed on her chest. Her body doesn't feel like her own, she feels disconnected from the skin that she is in. She is also uncomfortable with the gender role that is imposed on her. She

doesn't connect with the Latina female role that she has often heard about from her mother Ximena. There is a scene in which Pilar is dancing with her mother and, even then, she has difficulty being comfortable with being touched. Partly because it's her mother touching her, partly because she doesn't feel at home in her own body.

It isn't until she is with Vanessa that she starts to become comfortable in her skin. It feels natural for her to be with Vanessa. The crux of Pilar's character is accepting her skin, accepting the body that she is in. When she finally lets herself be with Vanessa, she is tearing down that wall and letting herself be vulnerable. Much in the same way that Vanessa is allowing herself to be mentally vulnerable with Pilar. Sexuality is the mental and physical coming together— a union of sorts that allows the mind and body to relinquish inhibitions and be in the moment. By showing Vanessa release her grief and Pilar allowing herself to be touched, we show these two characters are learning and accepting their sexuality.

It was important to me to be as tasteful as possible when creating the first intimate scene with Pilar and Vanessa. This scene was meant to illustrate both the accepting of sexuality and the acceptance of oneself. This depiction of intimacy is meant to be a symbolic moment for both of these young women. Vanessa has allowed herself to be emotionally vulnerable, she is coming face to face with the wall of grief she's tried so hard to avoid. Pilar provides a safe space for Vanessa to break down and feel her pain. Meanwhile, Pilar is finally realizing how she feels about Vanessa. She's finally connected her thoughts with her emotions and in that moment, she feels as though she would do anything for Vanessa.

I chose to set *Juntas* in 1994 because I wanted a time where communication wasn't as easily available as it is now in the modern age of technology. My intention being to metaphorically show the struggle of a queer kid seeking community or information when they

aren't quite sure what it is that they are looking for. I wanted to encapsulate, so to speak, the importance of communication by setting my story at a time where communication wasn't as easily accessible. The internet age is fascinating and wonderful for accessing information, as Mary Robertson describes, "the internet and its access to global queer community and alternative culture is probably the most significant fact in shifting norms around same-sex desire and LGBTQ culture for young people of this generation" (Robertson, 93). That shift in norms is something that was still transitioning within 1994's America. Though 1994 was long after the Stonewall riots, there is still a period of time in between 1969 and 1994, and even now, where the gay community struggles to be treated as equal as their heteronormative counterparts. That sense of community is something that young LGBTQ folks seek in order to find solidarity/understanding. Although Pilar doesn't have access to Google to learn about her newly discovered sexuality, she does have access to someone's experience—her cousin, Marcos. Pilar extends a connection with her cousin Marcos, who is similarly going through what she is discovering about herself in terms of sexuality. Marcos' and Pilar's story share a similar journey throughout the course of *Juntas*. Although she never explicitly states to Marcos her own revelation about her sexual identity, she is vicariously learning about her emotions through him. By seeing her experience mirrored through her cousin, she gets a glimpse inside the LGBTQ experience.

Depicting sexuality so intimately should never be used as a novelty. In *Juntas*, that very intimate moment between Vanessa and Pilar is a breakthrough of sorts. It's a revelation for Pilar, and an emotional breakthrough for Vanessa. When young readers pose those difficult questions and come across scenes that talk about sexuality, they can perhaps begin to have some

understanding. Sexuality, especially with LGBTQ texts, is a topic that should be used purposefully written.

### **Chicana/o Feminism Lens in *Juntas***

In my Novella, Pilar and Vanessa meet at a transient moment in their lives. They are on the precipice of becoming young women— learning what it means to own your body, identifying their sexuality, find independence. All whilst also navigating social dynamics. With the Chicana/Latina Feminist lens, it is important to emphasize the nuances of interactions within society that include language, music, family dynamics and religion and how both gender and ethnicity come into play.

Before delving into how *Juntas* utilizes the Chicana/o lens, it is important to look at some of the history associated with the Chicano/a movement. According to research done by scholar Alma Garcia, “The Chicano movement focused on a wide range of issues: social injustice, equality, educational reforms, and political and economic self-determination for Chicano communities in the United States” (Garcia, 218). Along with the Chicano movement shedding light onto disparities found within society, Chicana feminists recognized the importance of addressing issues specific to Chicana women.

Both my characters are Latinas, but don’t exactly embody the Latina experience. They don’t speak the language, aren’t familiar with or disown the customs. They are learning about their culture alongside with the reader. As Latinas, they’ve each inherited racial biases just because of who they are.

The story opens up with Pilar observing her family at a traditional quinceañera. The music, the dresses, the dancing. Everything around her is the epitome of traditional Mexican

customs— and yet, she feels entirely disconnected from it all. Her mother and sister know how to dance along to the music. Pilar wants to, but she feels that her body will not allow her to make the intricate movements that the music calls for.

It isn't until Vanessa teaches Pilar how to dance a bit of salsa that Pilar begins to feel a connection with her culture. There are moments in both character's stories that we see traces of their Latinx identity begin to bind and evolve within them. In the case of Vanessa, she has a difficult time speaking/writing Spanish. She understands the words, but she can't seem to use the language how she would like. Her mother, Imelda, was the only connection she had to that side of herself. She'd never been given the opportunity to explore that side of herself. Pilar, conversely, also doesn't fully connect with her Latinx roots. When the girls finally begin to bond, there's a simultaneous parallel that shows that the girls are also bonding with their roots. When the novella begins, Pilar feels disconnected to her family because she can't move and dance like her sister and cousins. But when Vanessa helps her to learn some dance moves, Pilar not only begins to feel comfortable in her body, but she also begins to feel a visceral connection with her roots through music and dance. Music is such an important part of Latinx culture, and I use it at many points of the story to convey plot points throughout the novella. At the beginning when we are first introduced to Pilar, she is carefully listening to the words of Selena's *Amor Prohibido*. The song about two people who are in love despite their separation of classes speaks to Pilar, it foreshadows future events in a sense because it talks about 'forbidden love' or love that isn't wholly accepted. It isn't till Pilar meets Vanessa that she begins to fully understand the force of love that Selena is talking about— acknowledging that society may think that this sort of love is wrong, but in our eyes, we know that it isn't.

Both my protagonists are independent thinkers. Although Pilar is still learning about her identity, both young women resist the gender roles from societal expectations— especially as Latinx young women who are expected to take on a submissive role.

Patriarchy assumes that female voices will remain silenced, assimilating into an assumed submissive role. But, of course, stories about strong-willed, independent female thinkers who freely express themselves challenge this notion. Pilar, although timid and insecure at first, learns how to hone in on her voice and utilize it in a way that is empowering. Though this is not without some conflict. In *Juntas* there is a parallel between Pilar and her father Cristobal, they both have a gift for words. They both know how to string words together and create something from them. Pilar, after learning about her father's gift, is conflicted about her gift. Her father, an abusive man who reeks of toxic *machismo* masculinity, has used the gift of words to impose his dominance on Ximena, Pilar's mother. Pilar sees this and begins to wonder if she should practice something that has been used to manipulate her mother. But, by Pilar not letting the knowledge of her and father's shared gift inhibit her from practicing her own writing, she is taking power into her own hands and not abiding by the assumed silence that is expected from her.

Pilar has an especially difficult time accepting her changing body. She is late in puberty and her breasts develop even more on the onset of her senior year of high school. Pilar has issues with facing herself in the mirror. She avoids looking at her reflection. This, I believe, is something that many young girls can perhaps identify with. Pilar, at the beginning, has a difficult time accepting her body for what it is. She has difficulty accepting herself as a woman, having to come out into society to fulfill a role that is bestowed upon her— a role that she didn't ask for. Pilar, by aspiring to leave for New York and become a writer, is setting out to break away from the expectations that are placed upon her. Pilar exemplifies the feminist ideal. She is an

independent thinker and challenges the expectations that are placed upon her. She imagines more for herself, her dream to write and leave her hometown shows how she rejects the social construct that is imposed on her.

Vanessa is reeling from the sudden loss of both her parents. Particularly, her mother whom she had a strong bond with. Her family never settled into one place, she moved around from country to country and never had a place to call home. When she gets to Eagle Pass and meets Pilar, she feels grounded. She feels like she has a safe place where she can finally let go of the grief that she's been holding onto. Her character is in a transitional point, she is learning to live with the loss and the new reality that she has been transplanted in. Vanessa constantly challenges her brother Frankie; she is ferocious and embodies a sort of *chingona* essence that models feminist ideals.

By creating two female protagonists that carry the story, it shows that their stories hold value of which to be told. All too often stories about Latinx women are ignored and get brushed aside. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* is a great example of that shift. It is important to show females as intellectual, strong, independent individuals— to not do so would continue to feed into the toxic narrative that says women are to fit into a submissive role. Both Pilar Nieto and Vanessa Delgado do not allow the people around them to deeply influence their decisions. If anything, their feelings of independence are validated once they begin to bond over their shared experiences. Vanessa confides in Pilar that she seeks independence. Likewise, Pilar also seeks out to pave her own path.

These two young women, along with helping each other learn about their identities, reinforce each other's beliefs— they lift each other up and genuinely believe that the other is capable of greatness.

## Conclusion

Although there are still many strides that must be made in order to include stories of all sorts of demographics, by acknowledging this need for more media created by POC, and lifting voices of POC who have already created this content, LGBTQ/Latinx literature stands a chance to be seen by audiences who may have otherwise overlooked texts about this topic.

*Juntas*, though a fictional piece, is inspired by true events and influenced by other Chicana/Latinx writers who came before it. It is important to acknowledge influences, lift those voices and make it known that these stories are waiting to be read/heard

## CHAPTER II

July 23, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

### ***Amor Prohibido, forbidden love.***

Pilar Nieto wondered what Selena Quintanilla really knew about forbidden love. She pondered this as music thumped from the speakers at her cousin Renee's Quinceañera. Pilar wore the same dress she wore for every special occasion, a navy-blue long dress with silver embroidered flowers all along the edges and bottom. Her normally long stringy, brown hair was pulled up into an extravagant updo, even though she begged her mother to let her wear it down and loose. She could barely feel her scalp, everything was pulled back so tight to the point of numbing. She scratched the back of her head then adjusted her wire framed glasses that sit on the bridge of her nose. Pilar wondered, as she tapped her foot to the beat, what kind of love Selena was talking about. She couldn't imagine it for herself. She listened to the lyrics and thought about what they meant. *It doesn't matter what they think of us, it doesn't matter if I'm poor. I love you.* A love that defies expectations, a love that transcends the test of time and burdening hopes that others have placed upon you. Though she was familiar with the concept- it still seemed a foreign thought. Still, though. Selena really can sing.

Pilar looked around the dance hall, watching many of her family members dance cumbia like it was second nature to them. Their hips perfectly swaying, their hands entangled in strategic knots that they would do then undo with ease as they slipped them across their backs or over their heads. Back and forth, back, and forth. Perfectly in sync to the beat of the drums. Pilar

watched, mesmerized, wishing she could dance like her Tías, Tíos, and cousins. She'd never really tried, but in her imagination- she was a pretty good dancer. She scanned over to find her cousin Renee in an over-sized bubble gum pink gown that enveloped her small frame. Renee had confessed to Pilar that she didn't even want a quince. She was only doing it to appease her mother, Pilar's Tia Sofia. Which is very common in the Nieto family. Pilar's mother, Ximena, and Tia Sofia were the most stubborn women that Pilar knew. One time, Pilar tried asking her mother to let her go to a birthday party that everyone in her school was going to. She begged for weeks but Ximena didn't budge once. Ximena was the epitome of stubborn. And Pilar resented her for it.

The DJ slowly turned down the music and everyone's attention turned to the middle of the dance floor. The crowd began to clear as soon as they saw Renee and her chamberlains and damas lined up by the DJ booth. The DJ tapped the mic, the sound reverberating through the hall. He cleared his throat and made the announcement, "Ladies and gentlemen, please help me in introducing Renee Salazar to the stage." Everyone in the dance hall roared with gritos and applause. Renee timidly smiled as she waved at everyone, her arm inside her chamberlain's as they made their way to the middle of the dance floor. The lights change, focusing on them. The DJ stumbled through his CDs and finds the one he needs. *Tiempo De Vals* by Chayanne begins to play. Everyone's hushed and admiring Renee, until, suddenly, she stumbles on her dress—causing her to flail her arms and almost topple over. Her chamberlain reaches over and catches her just as the song starts getting louder.

Pilar involuntary lets out a snicker. Her mother, Ximena, elbows Pilar to quiet down. The group continues to clumsily go through the choreography. It's clear that no one in Renee's court knows how to really dance. With the exception of Cecilia, Pilar's sister. Cecilia expertly moves

through the motions with their cousin Marcos. Pilar observers carefully. It appears to her that Cecilia is counting out loud. *She must be helping keep time*, Pilar thinks. Pilar was very grateful that her mother didn't force her to be in Renee's Quinceañera. She could only imagine the embarrassment. Pilar was the kind of person that would obsess over something for weeks-retracing every moment incessantly trying to figure out where it all went wrong. She let out a sigh of relief at the thought of not having to be out on the dance floor. Especially side by side with her more skillfully, more attractive sister. Even though Cecilia was only fourteen years old, she carried herself in a way that was deceptively mature. Deceptive because Pilar knew that when you really get to know Cecilia Nieto that you begin to see how truly naïve she is about the world.

As the song finishes, everyone in the dance hall begins to clap. Renee looks flushed, and disappointed. Renee tried to go sit down but the photographer stopped her in her tracks, insisting on taking pictures of her with the group. Pilar could read the whine all over Renee's face.

The music started up again. Everyone rushed over to the dance floor, except Pilar. She sat back down exactly where she'd been sitting the entire night. "Pilar," Ximena calls out. Pilar looks over to her mother, who looks much younger than she really is. Her hair was also up in an extravagant updo, except there were less pins and hairspray in hers. Ximena wore a silver dress with a matching shawl that was draped around her shoulders. Pilar tilts her head without saying a word, letting her mother know that she heard. "Pilar, you don't want to dance?" Pilar shakes her head no. She would rather die than go out on the dance floor, she thinks. "Aye, hija. Don't be that way. Come on." Ximena drops the shawl onto her chair as she stands, she puts one hand out towards Pilar, "Get up." Pilar's face is petrified, one because she'd never seen her mom actually enjoy herself at one of these things. Two, because she dreaded the thought of having to dance in

front of anyone- even if the attention wasn't on her. "Vamos, hija." Ximena grabs her daughter's hand and they make their way to the dance floor. The music is upbeat, the familiar accordion and drum *dum-tasss dum-tasss* blast through the speakers, causing the floor to vibrate. Ximena puts her hand on Pilar's waist, guiding her to move side to side to the beat. Side, side, turn. Side, side, turn. Pilar was so stiff, she felt strange in her mother's grasp. She couldn't remember the last time that her mother gave her a hug, even.

Pilar tried to relax, but she just couldn't brush off the thoughts. The idea that everyone was watching her. It felt like ice water was running through her veins, her knees were locked up and wooden. But her mother. No, Ximena was a natural. It must be a Nieto thing, but maybe it skips a generation. Cecilia definitely inherited the dancing gene. Pilar was able to see out of the corner of her eye, Cecilia and Marcos zooming through the dance floor like expert ballroom dancers.

Marcos was the same age as Pilar, seventeen. Both went to Liberty High and were getting ready to start their senior year. Marcos and Pilar actually didn't have very much in common. Marcos was artistic, he loved to paint, dance, sing, act. And Pilar was so shy it hurt. She was better with a pen, paper, and words. But Marcos was able to bring out a side of Pilar she wished she could show everyone. He knew her best— growing up with Marcos was sometimes a pain in the ass, but she appreciated the fact that she had someone she could be her most authentic self with. *It's almost over*, Pilar told herself as she continued to dance with her mother. Just then, Ximena began to sing aloud to the music, causing Pilar to shudder and cringe. Ximena looks over to Pilar, as if to say *get over yourself*. Ximena exaggeratedly turns Pilar, knowing that her daughter needed some help to loosen up. And even though Ximena meant well, Pilar couldn't bring herself to relax in her mother's arms.

The song finishes and Pilar is grateful to go back to her chair. As Pilar reaches her table, she sees her cousin Renee who looks so miserable. Renee's overdrawn lips in a frown so visible she resembled a triste payaso, a sad clown. "Renee looks so pretty, verdad?" Ximena says to Pilar. "Um, yeah. Sure." Pilar replies dryly.

Pilar felt grateful in that moment that she didn't have one of these over the top quinceañeras. Having to be the center of attention as everyone gawks at you and forces you to take pictures with them. She hated being the center of attention. The idea of putting on an entire production for people she barely knew irked her. Coming out into society and now being recognized as a 'woman'? Pilar didn't like the idea of being a woman. Of having to step into a role that meant she'd have to dote on her husband, take care of children, overwork herself cleaning and cooking. The idea of it sounded so exhausting. No, Pilar had other dreams. She wanted to be a writer. She wanted to see New York, maybe even live there some day. She knew her mother wouldn't understand, but she had to leave Eagle Pass. If she didn't, she'd never be okay with herself. She'd feel as if she settled, and she couldn't have that. She'd leave Eagle Pass, even if it meant she'd do it without her mother's support.

"Pilar, you okay?" Ximena asked Pilar. Pilar broke from her daydream to look at her mother, whose face read of worry. Pilar wished that her mother wouldn't worry so much. She could see the concern on her mother's face and wondered why she always treated her as if she were still a child.

Pilar, realizing she had been quiet for a while, responded, "Yeah, I'm fine." Pilar felt as though her mother could read her thoughts. As if Ximena was eavesdropping inside Pilar's noisy brain. The thought of that terrified her.

Ximena sighed deeply, “Aye hija, I worry about you.”

Pilar took offense to her mother’s comment. Though she knew her mother meant well- she wished that she weren’t so pervasive in her approach, “Mami, I’m fine. There’s nothing to worry about.” Pilar says to her mother.

“Ta Bueno, it’s just I see your face so low—” Just as the song changes and heart patterns beam across the dance floor, there’s a loud commotion heard on the right side of the dance hall, interrupting Ximena. Pilar jolts up and rapidly turns to try and see what’s happening. The yelling overpowers the music, the crowd becomes chaotic and jumbled. Cecilia’s scream pierces through the noise and she runs towards Pilar and Ximena. “Ceci, what’s going on?” Pilar asks as Cecilia gets closer to the table. The color from Cecilia’s normally healthy pink hue was drained. Her eyes were widened with panic as she yells, “Marcos, they have Marcos.”

“Who has Mar—” Pilar asks when the crowd opens wide enough for Pilar to catch a glimpse. Marcos is already on the ground, motionless.

Two big guys are above him. She can barely make out what they are yelling at him as they continue to kick Marcos’ motionless body, “Faggot, fucking queer!”

“You deserve to burn in hell, faggot!” The other one yells.

Guttural sounds come from Marcos, blood spews from his mouth as the bigger assailant kicks the back of his head. Pilar tries to make out who they were, they look familiar to her. She’d seen them somewhere, where had she seen them? Without thinking, Pilar rushes over amidst the chaos, “Pilar! No. Quédate aquí!” Ximena’s voice quavering as she called out to her daughter to come back, “Por favor hija, No te acerques! Don’t get close.” Pilar doesn’t listen.

Marcos needed help, no one was trying to stop these guys. They kept kicking and kicking as Marcos lay helpless. His left eye already swollen shut, blood dripping from his nose.

“Stop! Stop, please!” Pilar yells to the attackers as she runs over and grabs one of their arms to try and peel the attacker away. But it does nothing. Instead, the attacker uses his arm to slam her to the ground. Pilar feels a sudden surge of pain on her side. She winces as she instinctively places her left hand on her right side. The attacker huffs and moves closer to where Marcos is. Pilar tries to see if Marcos is conscious, but his head is facing away from her, so she isn’t able to make out if he is. She tries to get up, but the pain takes the wind out of her, she’s barely able to breathe through it. Pilar’s Uncles Tavo and Mike push through the crowd. Tavo takes the attacker that threw Pilar to the ground by his shirt collar and gives him a solid right hook to his mouth, spit glistening through the disco lights with a mixture of blood as it ejects from his mouth. Mike grabs the other attacker standing above Marcos, and front kicks him- causing him to fly across the dance hall. The crowd widens, kids crying and mothers desperately trying to hold their children close. Pilar lays eyes on the first assailant that Tavo has gripped tightly in a headlock, she’s seen them before. She goes to school with them at Liberty High. The room falls almost completely silent, with the exception of the crying children. As Pilar’s uncles drag out the attackers, sirens could be heard in the background. Pilar rushes to Marcos’s side, he’s barely breathing. Both his eyes are swollen shut. His lips busted open. Pilar lifted his head and placed it on her lap. “Help, somebody help,” Pilar yells out, “Marcos, Marcos. You’re gonna be okay, you hear me?” She says, trying to convince herself.

### CHAPTER III

July 23, 1994. San Diego, California.

Vanessa had no real grasp on the reality around her. She'd lost track of time wandering around the funeral home, she'd been careful to go far from the building to smoke the last bit of weed she had hidden in her coat pocket. As she walked back into the building, she stood idly in the lobby of Roberts Funeral Home. A weightless, detached sensation tingled all over. This was exactly the sensation Vanessa wanted, hoping there was enough weed in her body to slow time. She wondered if the funeral home's gaudy bowls of potpourri might be an attempt to mask the smell of formaldehyde that embalmed the bodies. At the very least, she hoped the scent emitting from them would be strong enough to mask the musty, earthy smell from her weed. Vanessa had only been to two other funerals, and they were her grandparents whom she barely spoke to—only because she didn't speak Spanish. Near the entrance of the funeral home was a sign-in sheet and an oversized framed picture of Francisco and Imelda Delgado on their wedding day. Vanessa liked to imagine she was there, even though her mother was pregnant with her brother Frankie at the time. She stared at her mother in the black and white photo- Imelda had a timeless beauty about her. Imelda looked soft, radiated elegance. Her father, Francisco, adorned with various stripes and a war medals from his time in the Army when he served in the Vietnam War, looked stoic. Though he didn't talk often to Vanessa about his time in the war, the little she did hear gave her the impression that he was a dangerous man. She wouldn't know, she'd only known him as a goofball who told awful jokes.

The more Vanessa stared at the photo, the more it seemed to come to life. She could almost hear their voices. She swore she could see color begin to seep into the black and white photo. *Vani, muñeca, are you just going to stand there? Come on, we're expecting you.* Her mother said. *Vanessa, what's that smell?* Her father asked.

“Vanessa.”

Startled, Vanessa looked around to see who was calling her, “They’re about to start the rosary.” It was Frankie. His voice was unusually hushed, somber. He looked lethargic. *He’s probably drugged up too,* Vanessa thought. She had been avoiding walking inside the funeral home. She didn’t want to see them. Not like that. Not with their faces so pale that they instead looked like wax figurines. Not with their hands so stiffly crossed upon their chests. If she didn’t see them, then it wasn’t real. Vanessa looked back at the photo. The color, gone. It was back to black and white. But their faces, their faces in the photo were still so full of life, and she wanted to remember them that way.

“Vanessa, come on.” Vanessa looked back at Frankie. She didn’t have to say it. He could sense her hesitation. But everyone was waiting for them and they couldn’t get started without them. “The sooner we sit down, the sooner this will all be over.” He told her. Vanessa wanted to believe him. But she knew this was something she’d have to live with for the rest of her life. “Give me a minute Frankie. I need to freshen up, I think.” She says, hoping to buy herself more time.

Vanessa stumbles into the restroom and heads straight to one of the empty sinks. More of the pungent potpourri scent overwhelms the tiny restroom, it begins to make her dizzy. She could feel her mouth dry up, she looked up at her reflection- her eyes were bloodshot. *Everyone will*

*just think I've been crying.* She thinks to herself. She opens the faucet and only cold water comes out even though she has both Hot and Cold knobs turned on. She cups her hands underneath the faucet and gathers water between them. She braces herself, splashes her face to try and help her gain some alertness. Her eyes feel sore, the jolt of cold water helps to numb the sensation behind her eye sockets. She still hadn't cried up until now. It still felt so surreal to her. Using her thumb and index fingers she rubs her eyes. She felt her head pulsate behind them. She lets out a heavy breath and catches her reflection. Her unruly, long curly hair was draped along her shoulders. Vanessa looked closer at her reflection, Imelda's eyes looking right back at her- light brown with specks of gold. *Vani, muñeca, que haces?*

Vanessa shakes her head trying to fight off the hallucination. She was slipping into an eerie in between reality and could swear that the spirit of her mother was hovering near her.

Loud knocking at the door disrupts her thoughts and she slips back into the realm of reality she is familiar with. The sound of running water becomes amplified and Vanessa realizes she hasn't closed it. As she does so, she calls out, "Yes?"

"Vanessa, they're waiting for you." Frankie says from the other side of the door.

"I'm going." She runs her damp fingers through her hair. She takes the deepest breath she's taken all day, waiting a moment to see if her mother will say anything more.

Nothing.

Vanessa follows Frankie into the funeral home, voices quietly buzzing as she walks past her family. There were so many arrangements, so many flowers. Both caskets were placed side by side across from each other, in the middle was a prayer bench. Above them on the wall was a crucifix with Jesus overlooking. Vanessa wasn't sure how she felt about God. At this very

moment, she felt too numb to believe anything. As she reached the front pew, Vanessa met her Aunt Lola who then handed her some rosary beads. Lola, though much older than Imelda, resembled her sister. Vanessa had a hard time looking at Lola straight in the eye because the resemblance was so close. Those same light brown eyes with gold flecks.

The priest began to recite a prayer, “Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed in the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

Vanessa could barely focus on what was happening. She could feel the high lifting away and reality set in. She looked over to her brother Frankie, who kept his eyes closed and head bowed down. He held the rosary tight to his chest, gripping it as if it were helping him anchor to the earth. His lips began to move, “Holy Mary,” and she realized everyone in the room was reciting, “Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now at the hour of our death. Amen.” They move on to the next bead. She could see the synchronization of hands as everyone carefully held the beads between their fingers, gripping the beads as a careful reminder of their place in prayer.

“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now at the hour of our death, Amen.”

Next bead.

As the prayer continued, Vanessa felt her eyes begin to vibrate in her skull, the room felt as if it were spinning. She blinked hard to try and make it stop. She focused on her shoes, on her black and red tennis shoes.

“Are you sure those are the ones you want, muñeca?” Imelda asked her daughter as they stood in the middle of the shoe store. Frustrated customers stood behind Imelda and Vanessa as they blocked the only available mirror in the store. “Yes, these,” Vanessa responded, “I like the black and red. And they’re bouncy.”

“But what about these nice dress shoes? You wouldn’t want these?” Imelda held the shiny black dress shoes up, they glistened with the help of the fluorescent lights that lit the department store.

“I like these, ma.”

“Vani, you have so many tennis shoes. You need a pair of dress shoes.” Imelda said, exasperated.

“But I don’t want them.” Vanessa really hated having to dress up. She only had one dress in her closet that was used for every special occasion.

Francisco, having just come back from a food stand with Frankie, looks at his wife and tells her, “She doesn’t want them, Imelda. Just buy her the shoes and let’s get going. We wanted to see the sunset, remember?” He gives his wife a big grin and kisses her head. Imelda rolls her eyes at her husband, Francisco. She reluctantly gives in, walking up to the register to purchase Vanessa’s new shoes.

The beach was only about a half mile walk down from where they lived, military housing in the middle of San Diego. This week in particular was special because it was the first time in a long while that Francisco was home for more than a week. To celebrate, they’d decided on carne asada while they waited for the sunset on the beach. Cumbia music played on the radio.

Francisco turned the meat on the grill while his wife sat on a beaten-up lawn chair. Frankie was

out swimming in the ocean and Vanessa stood at the edge of the shoreline. She was careful not to get in and instead decided to just walk barefoot along the shore as the water met her ankles. She looked over to her parents, her dad focused on the grill and her mom lay back on the beaten-up beach chair. Suddenly Vanessa felt herself being tackled, she toppled over and inhaled saltwater through her nostrils. She gasped for air and weakly propped herself up on all fours. She hears Frankie burst into laughter. “Asshole.” She calls out to him. “I hate you.”

“You’re such a baby, Vani.” Frankie teases. “I didn’t even do anything.”

“Asshole, I could’ve drowned.”

“In two inches of water?” Frankie begins to laugh. And Vanessa shoves Frankie, barely causing him to lose his balance.

“Frankie, I saw that cabrón.” Francisco calls out as he gathers the meat inside a giant bowl and places it on the table. He yells out to his family, “Meat is ready.” There was a small picnic area near the beach where the family had set up. The table had the bowl filled with meat and some Tupperware containers filled with sides.

Vanessa loved when her dad made carne asada, especially since he was rarely home. Every morsel was a savory delicacy, the fajita was always so tender and perfectly seasoned. The pollo had a nice balance of crisped skin and soft, juicy meat. Vanessa got her plate together and piled on the fajita, along with arroz y frijoles that her mother had made. There was a Tupperware of pico de gallo, Vanessa helped herself to a big wallop on top of her chicken. Francisco sat down across from Vanessa. She could smell the unmistakable pungent scent of alcohol from her dad’s breath. As he opens another can, Vanessa can tell that her dad’s already very drunk. Imelda

makes a plate and sets it down in front of Francisco, “Don’t you think you’ve had enough for tonight?” Imelda says to her husband.

This was something she always said, and he always ignored.

“Imelda, ya. I just want to relax.” Francisco says to Imelda. Vanessa could see the pained expression on her mother’s face. For all she tried, Francisco would never listen to Imelda.

Frankie didn’t seem to notice. He’d already scarfed down his plate in less than three bites and was already reaching for seconds. Vanessa was too distracted by her parents. She wished that her dad would listen, but she knew what would happen if her mother insisted.

Francisco had a hot temper, and it’d show itself whenever he didn’t get his way. His voice would boom, and he’d often take it out on Imelda. But Imelda was firm, unwavering. She wasn’t intimidated by her husband’s ferocious yells. She’d often let him scream it out and not say a word. Waiting for him to realize what a fool he was making of himself. Mr. Delgado was a smart man, and he’d often catch on. But he couldn’t help himself.

It was the only way Francisco knew how to communicate- through thunderous yells. A storm bellowing its power over the sky. The sky lets the storm have its way for a time. But in the end, its stillness always reemerges— unyielding.

Imelda sits down next to her husband and begins to eat some of the chicken. Francisco continues to drink his beer. Vanessa saw how her parents loved each other. She knew how difficult a man her father was, and how much patience her mother had with him. *I don’t know how you do it, ma.* Vanessa would think.

Vanessa started with the fajita, though she could barely eat now. Francisco finished taking his last sip of beer and called the attention of his daughter, “Vani, look at the sky.” Vanessa turns around, the sun was setting and was reflected along the ocean. She looked around and noticed other beach goers had stopped what they were doing to admire the same sunset. *It’s gorgeous*, Vanessa thought.

“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst thou amongst women, and blessed is thy fruit of the womb, Jesus.”

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now at the hour of our death. Amen.”

Next bead.

Vanessa slowly opened her eyes. She’d kept her grip on the same bead all throughout the prayer.

**August 6, 1994. San Diego, California. Two Weeks Later.**

Vanessa lay flat on her back, her feet hanging off her bed. Bent far enough so that her feet could touch the ground. Both hands rested on her ribcage as she sipped in air. Her eyes scanning her bedroom that was decorated with various rock band posters and a giant map of places she had lived. Germany, Spain, England. Her dad was stationed in those countries. And she lived in all of them. They moved to San Diego when she was twelve. She stared at the map, wondering how she was able to travel so far without ever really feeling any of the trips. Vanessa didn’t make very many friends— language was always a huge barrier. Except for England, but

even then, she couldn't relate to the people. They were so different from her, and she didn't care to try and get to know them.

When her family finally did move to San Diego, Vanessa began to feel some sense of normalcy. At first, she struggled to make friends, but over time people at her school were able to help her open up. Especially this one girl, Jazmin. She was a Venezuelan girl who spoke broken English. Jazmin noticed Vanessa would sit alone during lunch hour, and one day she asked Vanessa if she could sit with her. Vanessa, hesitant and suspicious, allowed Jazmin to sit across from her. Jazmin, with her exuberant, joyful demeanor was able to get Vanessa to laugh.

As Vanessa let her mind reminisce, she straightened up, uncoiling her hands from her ribcage. She walked over to her desk and sifted through the clutter to find her middle school yearbook. When she opened it, the first thing she saw was Jazmin's note to her.

*“Vanessa! Te quiero mucho, loca. Espero que no te me vayas tan lejos el ano que viene. ¡Te veo pronto! Desfruta tu verano. -Jazmin”*

Vanessa looked at the message, she remembered having to ask her mother to help her translate what it meant. She studied the words carefully. Jazmin's family ended up moving right after middle school. Vanessa never heard from Jazmin again, she wasn't sure how she would ever be able to reach out to Jazmin if she wanted to. She'd thought about writing a letter, but she wouldn't know where to send it. She wished she had found a way to keep in touch with Jazmin.

As she looked more closely at the message, she realized that if it were not for her mother's help, she would never be able to understand Jazmin's message. Vanessa dragged the hand-me-down office chair that she had stolen from Frankie and pulled it up to her desk. She sat

down, the chair creaking as she did so. She had to be careful to not lean too far back or she might fall since some of the screws were coming loose. She searched through her mess, found the closest pen. And began to carefully write the translation to Jazmin's message underneath.

*“Vanessa! I love you crazy chick. I hope you don't move too far from me next year. I'll see you soon. Enjoy your summer...”*

Imelda had attempted to teach Vanessa Spanish, but it never stuck. Partly because everything Vanessa learned in school was taught to her in English. And she never practiced it at home. Whenever Imelda would call out to her daughter in Spanish, she would always reply back in English. Though Vanessa could understand, her tongue struggled to make the sounds. This frustrated Vanessa, and she eventually gave up because she was embarrassed to try. Vanessa looked at the etched letters that Jazmin had written and wished she had given more attention to her mother. She retraced her own letters carefully, as if she were trying to internalize their meaning. The slow movement of her hand following the lines of her own letters entranced her, she was lost in the careful etching of each letter.

“Vani,” Frankie called from the middle of the hallway, breaking her trance. Vanessa could hear his heavy boots as he made his way to her room. Frankie stood in the middle of her doorway, waiting to be invited in. His face was dusty, his short brown waves, disheveled. She observed that his nails were grimy with car oil. Probably because he had just come back from the mechanic shop where he currently worked. Vanessa nodded and waved her hand— giving Frankie permission to enter her room. He stomped in, leaving trails of dark oil on her carpet, Vanessa groaned at the sight of it. He sat at the edge of her bed and cleared his throat, “Vani, Lola called.”

“And? What’d she want?” Vanessa didn’t mean for so much intensity to come out in her tone, but she couldn’t help but be annoyed at the fact that he had just left a trail of car oil on her recently vacuumed carpet. Normally their Mom would’ve said something to Frankie at this point. Frankie cleared his throat, “She offered to let us move in with her.”

“In Eagle Pass?” Vanessa asked.

“Yeah.”

Vanessa closed her yearbook and set her pen down beside it. She kept her head hung low, “Why?” She asked Frankie. Frankie knew his sister would try to protest, but he didn’t want to have to argue. “Because we can’t stay here Vani, you know that. This is military housing and since Dad is…” Frankie couldn’t bring himself to finish his sentence. There was a knot in his throat. He coughed. Trying to suppress his emotions as much as he could to try and finish what he was saying, “Dad isn’t around. We can’t stay in this place.”

“Why can’t we stay in San Diego at least?” Vanessa asked.

“Vani, I can’t afford rent around here. You know how expensive it is.”

“I can get a job, I’ll work.” She pleaded, trying to make him see that they didn’t have to leave.

“No, you need to focus on school.”

“But you dropped out.”

Frankie flinched, yes it was true he was a high school drop-out. *But that was different*, he thought. Frankie was failing almost everything. He couldn’t stand sitting in a classroom for so

many hours at a time. To Frankie, school felt like a waste. Especially since he wasn't doing well. "That doesn't matter." Frankie told Vanessa.

"But I don't get it. What does it matter if I go to school? Why can't I just get a job like you? I don't care about going to college anyway. I want to stay here Frankie. I want to stay in San Diego."

"I already told Lola we were going."

"Tell her you changed your mind."

Frankie was visibly frustrated. His sister was getting increasingly anxious and loud. Frankie and Vanessa had a few things in common, and stubbornness was one of them. But he knew that even if Vanessa were able to somehow find a place to work, they couldn't make it in San Diego. And he didn't know how to explain to her that he desperately wanted to leave. Frankie didn't want to stay in the same city where his parents had died. He didn't want to be reminded. He clenched his fist, and slammed it on the bed, startling Vanessa, "We're leaving Vani. You have two weeks to pack your things."

Frankie stood up, looming over Vanessa. Vanessa could see the confliction behind his eyes that he was trying to conceal. He kept his eyes lowered—teeth clenched. His jawline protruded, making him look like a soldier at attention. Frankie let out a heavy sigh.

Vanessa tried to think of something else to say to Frankie. She couldn't formulate words fast enough. She let out a defeated breath. She couldn't think of the right thing to say to convince Frankie to stay.

Frankie walked out of her room, finalizing that he had had the last word. He turned the corner, Vanessa following him with her eyes. Once he cleared her sight line, she looked around the room, her eyes landing at the doorway across the hall from hers.

Her parents' bedroom.

She realized that both her and Frankie hadn't entered the room since the day of their parents' funeral. The door remained shut, lights off.

She remembered that usually at this point of the day her mom was making arroz con frijoles and whatever main dish she felt like cooking. Francisco would join them at dinner on occasion, whenever he was on his weekly breaks. Two weeks on, two weeks off. Vanessa would always count down the days when her Dad would be home. By this point Vanessa was expected to set the table and help Imelda, her beautiful mother, in the kitchen with last minute preparations. Her Dad would always open a can of beer and drink while he ate. Everyone would talk about their day- Frankie about his frustrations at the shop, Imelda about the latest plot twist in the telenovelas she was watching, and Vanessa about whatever was happening at her school. And when dinner was done, Francisco would turn on the radio in his bedroom that was usually tuned to a classics Spanish radio station that played Vicente Fernandez or Jose Jose. Vanessa remembered one time when her parents' door was slightly opened, and she glimpsed to see her parents slow dancing to *Una Mujer Como Tu*. Her parents weren't usually very affectionate, but they had their moments. It made her smile knowing that her parents were still very much in love.

Vanessa continued to look at the doorway, she could almost see them dancing and hear the music.

## CHAPTER IV

August 6, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

The day was sweltering, Pilar could see the heat waves bounce from the pavement as she walked to her cousin's house. She wiped the sweat from her forehead before it reached her brow, balancing a warm plate of mole and potato salad on her other hand. Ximena would always send some food whenever she made too much, she didn't like it to go to waste. Pilar wiped her hand on the side of her shorts then placed it on the other side of the plate so that both hands held it in front of her. She could hear kids on the street playing basketball, their hoop was old and rusty. The net was wrapped around the hoop and was completely tattered with years of wear. Pilar always saw the same kids playing, two young boys. One was hunched over the other, trying to block him from making a shot. He tried to make a swift move but tripped and dropped the ball. The ball bounced to the other side of the street where Pilar was, landing near her feet. She looked over to the boys. They recognized each other but had never actually met. Pilar smiled shyly, set the plate down near some nearby grass, grabbed the ball and made eye contact with the boy who fell. He picked himself up, dusted himself off and lifted his hands to let her know he was ready to catch the ball. Pilar clumsily tossed. She wasn't built for sports in any capacity. The boy laughed and lifted his hand, "Thanks!" Pilar had never noticed how handsome the boy was, he had bouncy straight hair and tan skin. It was clear that he was outside pretty often considering the tan. "You're welcome." She yelled back, she bent to grab the plate and her gaze lingered to look at the boys resuming their game.

She finally made it to her Tia Sofia's house, ringing the bell. Their annoying chihuahua Chequita barked and barked. Pilar wasn't too fond of Chequita, especially since one time she tried to bite her nose. Pilar could hear Renee on the other side of the door, "Shh, Chequita, shh." Renee opened the door, but the screen door was still locked. Renee looked at Pilar through the screen door, then down at the plate in her hand, "Yes?" Renee said in a snarky tone.

"Mami made mole." Pilar replied.

"We already ate." Renee said smugly.

"Just take the plate, Renee."

Renee reluctantly unlocked the screen door, Chequita began incessantly barking at Pilar. Her little Chihuahua body shaking with every bark and growl. Renee picked Chequita up, "Ya, Chequita, ya." Pilar was slightly afraid of the puny chihuahua because even though the dog was small, it could be aggressive. As Pilar entered the house, she could see Marcos come out from their restroom and into their living room. Their house was decorated with gaudy, outdated flowery décor. There were giant crosses hung up, along with a few family portraits. Pilar then noticed the oversized portrait of Renee in her quinceañera dress. Holding a bouquet of pink roses by her face, looking off and smiling. Pilar let out a chuckle, to her Renee looked like a Mexican Barbie. Marcos sauntered through the entry way, a plastic hair cap on his head. Pilar did a double take, then burst into laughter— egging Chequita to bark even louder. "What's up with that?" Pilar asked through laughter while pointing at his head. Marcos pointed at his head, "I'm bleaching my hair. Ama gave me permission." Renee, squirming with Chequita, "Yeah, he wants to be blond and blend in with the white boys." Pilar noticed that there were still some stitches by the side of his face, his eyes were still bruised up and mouth still swollen. Marcos snapped at

Renee, “No me importa fea. It’s gonna look good. Vas a ver. Then you’re going to be begging me to bleach your hair too.” He clapped his hands in front of Renee’s face and she swatted back at him like a pesky fly while Chequita sat at the edge of her hip, still squirming. At this point the dog was flailing and slipping between Renee’s arms, “I’m going to put her in my room.” Renee said and she walked off, still struggling with the chihuahua in her arms. Marcos scoffed, then looked at Pilar. Pilar shook her head, it’s as if Marcos could read her mind. To them Renee acted like an entitled brat, she always had to make a comment about everything and would always find a way to manipulate her parents into getting what she wanted.

Pilar handed the plate to Marcos as they made their way to the kitchen. The gaudy décor continued into the kitchen, there were miniature statues of the Virgin Mary on the island of their kitchen. Tia Sofia was going to make sure that everyone knew they were Catholic. Just like Pilar’s mother, Ximena, who, for some reason, had the last supper figurines displayed year-round and a framed picture of the pope in their bathroom. Pilar wondered why their families were so insistent on displaying their Catholicism everywhere— she never really questioned it, until now.

Marcos set the plate down on the kitchen island and opened up one of the taller cabinets, reaching high up to grab one of the plates. As he gathered his plate, opened the mole and potato salad, Pilar stared at the stitches. She thought back to that night, the yelling echoed in her memory, she could faintly see the blood trickle from the side of his head, though it was hazy—the memory was there. Pilar thought back to the moments before the intruders entered the dance hall. Marcos and Cecilia were dancing, spinning. Without thinking, Pilar asked, “Did you press charges?” Marcos heard Pilar’s question but stayed silent.

The silence felt deafening and Pilar felt as though she may have crossed a line. Maybe Marcos didn't want to talk about this. *I shouldn't have brought it up*, Pilar thought. She changed the subject, "Renee said you already ate."

"Yeah, but we just had a sad bucket of colonel Sanders. Mole is where it's at." Marcos says as he takes a heaping bite of food into his mouth, smiling through his bites. Pilar cautiously smiled back at him, moving her gaze down to her own tattered shoes and shorts. She noticed there was some dirt by her shoes, probably from where the basketball had bounced off her foot. She quickly bent down to dust it off.

"I heard someone likes you." She heard Marcos say as the clanking of his fork hit his plate.

He always liked to tease Pilar like this, and she could never tell if Marcos was being serious or not. Pilar was very gullible and would believe almost anything anyone would tell her.

"Who?" She asked out of curiosity. She couldn't help herself. Even though she had no interest in anyone at Lincoln High. She could barely hold a conversation with some of the boys at her school. Pilar felt as though she was far too reserved to make friends. Marcos grinned, "Victor, he's on the varsity basketball team."

"I don't know who that is." Pilar says bluntly. The name sounded familiar to her, and she was sure she had heard of him. But she had no idea who that was. And she was too distracted, still thinking about the fight at the Quince. Her mom hadn't mentioned anything to her, and she figured that if there were any updates someone would've said something.

"You don't know Victor? Wow, I'm surprised." Marcos said, breaking her thoughts.

“Where’d you hear that anyway?” Pilar figured that at this point maybe Marcos was just toying with her.

Marcos continued to shovel food in his mouth, talking between bites with barely anytime to breathe. Pilar could see the food swirl around in his mouth, Marcos ate the way he talked—fast and with no consideration to anyone around him. In between chews, Marcos explained more about Victor to her, “I heard someone mention it. I think during gym? I don’t remember where. But I mean, he plays varsity and every girl I know has a crush on him. I’m surprised you don’t know the guy.”

“Yeah, I guess I don’t really care.” Pilar said, “Besides, this is my last year. I need to focus on college applications and getting out of Eagle Pass.”

“Getting out of Eagle Pass? Where are you going?”

“New York, if everything goes right.”

Marcos gave Pilar a *yeah right* look, as if to tell her that there was no way it was going to happen. Pilar could see the doubt in his face. She realized then that this was the first time she had ever really mentioned her dream of living in New York to anyone. She was afraid that by saying it that she would somehow jinx it. And the look on Marcos’ face made her doubt herself.

“How are you gonna pay for that?” Marcos asked while shoveling more food into his mouth.

“I’ll get a job.” Pilar replied with confidence. It was true that she didn’t have all the details sorted out just yet— but she felt that if she wanted it bad enough, she could make it happen.

Marcos nodded his head and widened his eyes as if to say *sure you will*. He continued eating as Pilar sat in front of him, her mind trailed back. She wanted to know more, like how did those boys know to be there that night. And why Marcos, what did he do? She couldn't imagine Marcos ever doing anything wrong. But maybe he said the wrong thing? It was possible, especially since Marcos was the kind of person that openly spoke his mind with zero consideration as to how it may affect the people around him. His big mouth had gotten him in trouble in the past— especially with his teachers. He one time blurted out to his teacher that he looked like a cracked-out Donald Duck. And, of course, he was put into in school suspension for a week. But Pilar admired that about Marcos. He had the courage to say exactly what was on his mind without caring about what anyone else thought.

“Pilar, don't get offended, but I don't see you moving to New York.” Marcos told Pilar.

This was exactly the kind of thing Marcos was notorious for. He didn't care how much it hurt— he'll tell you the truth. His version of it, anyway.

“Why? What makes you say that?” Pilar asked. Her hopes diminishing.

“Well, for starters. I don't think Tia Ximena will let you. And you're a people pleaser, you won't want to disappoint your mom.”

“This isn't about her. This is about me and what I want.”

“True, but you're scared. I know you are. Hey, maybe you'll prove me wrong. But huerca, it ain't like you. You're too attached to this place, whether you realize it or not. I'm sorry, I just don't see it.”

She was hurt by Marcos's doubts. She figured if anyone would be supportive of her dream, it'd be him. Though she'd never mentioned it to him before, she'd imagined that he was in her corner. Pilar got up. She wasn't sure what she was feeling but it felt as though everything was crushed.

She didn't want to end up like everyone else in Eagle Pass. She wanted more for herself.

Marcos realized then that perhaps he shouldn't have said that to his cousin. He could see that Pilar was hurt. And truth be told, he did believe what he had just said. Marcos wasn't sure how to backtrack and make it better. He could see that Pilar was crushed. She picked up her hair in a ponytail and was getting ready to leave.

"You know what sucks Marcos? I thought if anyone were going to support me it'd be you. You're like my best friend. I can't believe you actually think I won't leave." Her emotions started to get the better of her, she couldn't hold her composure, "I ran in there Marcos. I ran in there to try and stop those guys. I put myself in danger for you. You know that? And you act like I'm weak. Shows what you know."

"Pilar, Marcos started, unsure of what to say. He didn't know that she'd done that for him. All summer he'd been trying to forget that night. Everyone in his family would pressure him for answers and he didn't know what to say, he wished he could somehow erase it from everyone's memory. "Pilar, please. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like that. Look, if you want New York, then go. Make it happen. What does it matter what I have to say?"

"Because I actually care what you think. Because you're the only person who really knows me. I trust you." Pilar took a deep breath and let out a heavy sigh, "You know what, forget it. Forget I said anything. I'm gonna go." Pilar rushed to front door, hanging her head

down to avoid having to look at her cousin. She opened the front door and began unlatching the screen door when she heard Marcos come up behind her, the shower cap on his head bouncing and crinkling. Even though she was upset with Marcos, she couldn't help but laugh a bit at how ridiculous he looked.

“Pilar. I want to tell you. But, I can't. Not yet anyway.”

“Tell me what?”

“About that night. But,” Marcos stayed silent a moment, thinking of how to phrase his thoughts, “I'll tell you when I'm ready. I just need some stuff to blow over.”

Her stare was fixed on Marcos, unsure of what he meant by that. She looked Marcos straight in the eye. *If something ever happened to you again and I'm not there?* She thought. She wasn't sure what he was hiding, but she hoped he could handle it. “I gotta go, take care of yourself, vato.” Pilar said, as she gave him a pseudo swipe at his shower cap. The tension between them melting just as easily as it had risen. They both laughed. Pilar knew that Marcos was tough, even though people always underestimated him. She knew he could handle himself. But Pilar wasn't sure what he was up against this time, she worried that whatever these bullies were up to wouldn't stop at the quinceañera. She hoped that no matter what happened they would always support each other. Pilar unlatched the screen door, looked back at Marcos, grinned and said, “I agree with Renee by the way, blond hair is gonna look gross on you.”

“Huerca, don't you start. Just you wait.” He snapped his fingers, Pilar snapped back and walked out the door.

## CHAPTER V

August 12, 1994. San Diego, California.

Vanessa was perched on the edge of one of the mountainsides, by her home. Her legs dangling off the side. She'd scooped a hole inside an apple to create a makeshift pipe because she couldn't remember where she had left her other one, and she was out of papers. She slowly inhaled, and as she did so an apple seed ejected to the back of her throat. Panicked, Vanessa could feel the dryness of the smoke and the irritation of the apple seed, she coughed and coughed, sending unintentional smoke signals until she eventually spit up the apple seed. Her eyes red, watery. She let out a sigh of relief and looked around to see if anyone was watching her, not sure what she would do if there was. But it was unlikely, she was sure that this little corner by the mountainside had not been discovered yet. She had claimed this little corner, this tiny part within the vast world was her own. Whenever she and her father would argue, this is where she would run off to. She'd come here, get high, and just let everything melt and slide off her. Evaporating all her worries into nothingness and letting her thoughts turn into white noise.

This time the voice in her head was too loud. *I need something stronger*, she thought.

Tomorrow was moving day. She'd been forced to pack all her belongings. She'd rushed to do so. Putting things haphazardly in random boxes with no labels. She didn't even care. She felt numb, disconnected. She still hadn't cried, and she thought to herself that something must be wrong. They didn't feel gone to her. They felt so close.

*Vanessa, que haces muñeca?*

Vanessa could hear Imelda's voice. Like a soft echo above her. Vanessa turned her head. She swore she could see her mom standing behind her.

"I don't want to leave Ma. I want to stay here. I want to be with you." Vanessa said aloud, her slurred tongue barely able to enunciate. Her lips hung and drooped. Her eyes half closed, they were red and dry from the breeze and smoke. "Tell Frankie, Ma. Tell Frankie we should stay."

Vanessa waited for her mom to reply, nothing.

Just the humming of the wind as it blew by the nape of her neck. She turned her torso to look behind her, but all she could see was a small crow picking at some leaves, ruffling them in its path. Vanessa's focus was transfixed on the crow. She watched as it slowly made its way through the leaves that had fallen from the towering tree above. The crow, defeated from its lack of success in scouring for food, took flight. Vanessa followed with her eyes, the crow flew above her head and into the bright orange, pink sky. It was then that she realized that Frankie was going to get home soon from the mechanic shop. She didn't want to raise any sort of suspicion, she unfolded her legs and straightened them to stand up. The apple still had smoke seeping from it, there was residue all around- the meat of the apple had turned dark as if it had become rotten. She blew at the apple, looked out at the ocean, and hurled it out. She watched as it splashed, creating ripples as it plopped inside the water.

Vanessa had arrived before Frankie. She weaved through the pile of boxes that were stacked all along the living room. She couldn't believe they had managed to pack all their belongings in two weeks. She got to the hallway and noticed that her parents' room was open.

Vanessa had left it up to Frankie to sort their belongings. *What did he do with their stuff?* She thought to herself as she slowly swung open their door. She flipped the switch, and for the first time in years— her parents’ room was empty. She scanned the room. She could vaguely remember the bed with the giant floral comforter flushed against the wall. The giant outdated lamps that dimly lit the room by their equally outdated wooden nightstand. The one with the clock radio that would play Francisco’s music. Anytime Vanessa would enter, sure enough it would be tuned to that same station.

She stood in the doorway of her parents room, and she could hear Frankie loudly open the front door so that it slammed into the wall. This was always the way he did it, always loud. Always obnoxious. “Did you finish packing, Vani?” He yelled out.

“Yeah, I’m done. All my stuff’s in the living room with yours.” She carefully closed the door.

“Okay, good.” He said, still yelling even though he stood close to her in the kitchen. “I brought some food. Some burgers.”

“What’d you do with their stuff?” Vanessa asked. Frankie set the paper bags on the table, kicked off his tattered boots by the chairs. He ignored her question. “Frankie, did you hear me?”

He flipped the light switch of the dining room area on, “What does it matter?”

“I just, I want to know. Are we taking them to Lola’s?”

Frankie hesitated a moment. He opened his mouth and accidentally bit his tongue in doing so. He had packed their things, but he had no intention of taking them. He’d already made arrangements to have their boxes picked up. “Vani,” he could see the anguish in his sister’s eyes.

He hadn't considered asking her first about what to do with their parents' belongings. He was so focused on getting them both out of there and to Eagle Pass. *The quicker we leave, the quicker we can leave this all behind and move on.* He thought to himself.

"Dad's radio." Vanessa said firmly. It wasn't a question, she demanded it.

"What about it?"

"Where is it?"

Frankie glanced over his shoulder to the boxes in the living room, he looked back at Vanessa. Her eyes widened. She didn't have anything to say, her body tensed. She tightened her fist, then released to shove Frankie aside and storm into the living room, falling to her knees. She frantically began sorting through the boxes, desperate to find her father's radio. She flipped her head around to find a pair of flimsy scissors near some packing tape. She separated the scissors as wide as she could and zipped through the first box. Clothes. She forcefully tossed it aside, causing all the contents of the box to spill. It was mostly clothes along with some trinkets. Frankie, realizing what Vanessa was doing, ran over to try and take the scissors from her. "What are you doing?"

Vanessa anxiously moved through the sea of boxes, "I need to find it."

"Vanessa, are you crazy? We'll never find it in this mess."

"I need to find it Frankie."

"Vani, let it go." He struggled to get the scissors away from her. It was then he noticed how bloodshot her eyes were. Vanessa squirmed in his arms, gripping tight to the scissors.

When he finally managed to get a firm grip, he slipped the scissors from her hands. Blood began to trickle from her palm. “Shit.” Frankie muttered. Vanessa didn’t notice immediately, her body slowed as she glared at Frankie. Frankie looked carefully at his sister. He knew something was off about her. Her palms lay motionless above her thighs, blood dripping on her jeans. “Vani, I’m sorry. Shit. Let me grab a towel or something.” Vanessa looked at her hands for the first time. It wasn’t till she saw her right palm that she felt a twinge of pain rise through her. She hadn’t seen her blood like that in a while. Not since she would scrap her knees playing kickball in school or even wrestling Frankie. The way the blood reflected with the glow from the lamp. She could smell the iron. Its potency irritating to her nostrils. She squeezed her nose closed, her eyes watering. The high hit her again, the glistening blood reminded her of art class and how carefully she had to dilute the watercolors to get the perfect amount of pigment. She dipped her left finger into her right palm and began drawing on one of the boxes.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Frankie ran over to her, towel in hand. “What is it? What are you on?”

Vanessa froze, she looked up at Frankie. She could see traces of both her mom and dad. Mostly her dad. Francisco had some pretty strong genes- a prominent, slightly bumpy nose. Eyes sunken in and very close together. Long eyelashes. Vanessa half smiled then scoffed, “Relax, it’s just weed.”

“Wow. You’re something else. Where’s the rest of it? You have more?” Frankie interrogated.

Vanessa shook her head no. Her eyes reverted back to the boxes. Francisco’s radio. She needed to find her father’s radio. She felt Frankie tug at her arm, wrapping her hand inside a

towel, twisting it tight. She could feel the pressure, her palm pulsating in between the tight makeshift bandage. Frankie's face dissolved from anger to confliction. He recognized that Vanessa was self-medicating. He felt as though he was the least qualified to handle this situation. But he had no other choice. "Vani let's wash your hand. I don't want you to get an infection."

After Frankie helped Vanessa wash her hand in the sink, he bandaged it up and helped her to her room. When she entered, Vanessa looked around to see how empty it was. Just the mattress and box spring in the middle of the bare walls that enclosed her space. So long as she was with Frankie, she had no freedom or say. *We don't need to stay together.* Vanessa mused in her thoughts. She began to imagine what a life alone might be like. She could find a job, live on her own, get her own car. She didn't need him. She didn't need anyone. She sat on her bed and let the weight of her body sink her into her pillows.

Frankie saw out of the corner of his eye that Vanessa's lights shut off. He'd determined that the wound on her hand wouldn't need stitches and decided to let her rest. *Why is she so obsessed with that damn radio?* He thought to himself. Frankie sat at the kitchen table, looking at the brown paper bag that held the burgers. He took one out, unwrapped it in front of him. His fingernails filled with grime underneath. He was too hungry, too tired to walk over to the sink and clean the grime. The burger was already cold and mushy. The lettuce had turned into a watery, goopy mess. He inhaled every bite, trying to remember to chew. As he ate, he looked back at Vanessa's door, then to the boxes. *I'm going to have to find the damn thing, aren't I?*

## **Next Morning.**

Vanessa woke to the sound of a loud, beeping garbage truck outside. Her head was throbbing, the light seeping through her bedroom window made her wince, guarding her eyes with her hand. As she sat upright, she struggled to gain control of her body. Her body was still gaining consciousness, the weight of it tugging her back as if it wanted to rejoin the nocturnal realm of sleep. She stood up, walked to her door- not looking forward to having to face Frankie. Today was moving day. She'd been fighting this, but it still came despite how desperately she wanted to stay. She opened the door. Everything was dim except for some light bleeding through the windows of the kitchen and living room. Vanessa took a step and as she did, she lost her balance, something below her feet caused resistance. She looked down to see her father's busted up clock radio along with several crumpled-up newspapers all along her floor. She hadn't expected to find the radio, she noticed that all the boxes in the living room had been torn open. She walked into the living room, flipped the fan switch, and saw that Frankie was passed out on the floor with a pair of scissors that still had remnants of dried up blood. She smiled and looked at the radio in her hand. Though she wished she could stay in San Diego, and probably would if it weren't for the fact that she didn't know where she would stay, she was glad that her brother cared enough to do this for her.

Several hours later, Frankie and Vanessa had finished packing up the trailer that they'd hooked up behind Frankie's truck. Lola was expecting them in a few days, and Frankie had already mapped out their route. Vanessa carefully stuffed her backpack with the last of her belongings, checking the front pocket to make sure her stash was carefully tucked inside the mint box. While packing she was able to find some rolled up joints she'd forgotten about and

delicately placed them inside the mint box. Frankie was already sitting inside his red Chevy pickup, the hand-me down truck that their dad had passed on to him the day he'd gotten his license. Though it needed a lot of work, Frankie still drove it faithfully. He had no plans of ever letting it go. Vanessa struggled to open the passenger door, its hinges were morphed, bent from that one time that Frankie accidentally slammed it into a tree. She had to lift it up first for it to get loose enough for her to open it wide and climb in beside her brother. She tossed her backpack in and Frankie popped in one of his Metallica CD's, *Nothing Else Matters* began to hum through the speakers. She could barely make out Hetfield's low baritone voice, but she could already hear it in her head. She looked at the rearview window on the passenger side, looking at the house where she'd spent the last few years with her family. *Everything's going to be so different now.* Vanessa thought to herself. She tried to peel her eyes away, but she couldn't. The sun had already begun to set behind her old home, and she wished she could reverse it all and go back inside to find her parents dancing in their bedroom. Or her mom cooking in the kitchen while she set the table. She couldn't understand why they weren't here. She didn't want to. Vanessa had been trying to block out that reality, and so far, it had been working. But for a moment, the reality sunk in like a heavy rock sinks to the bottom of an ocean. As much as she wanted to release the oceanic waves of pain inside her, she forced her waters to be still, unwavering. She would not let allow her pain to surface.

“Vani, here,” Frankie handed her the tattered-up map with the route that he had planned to get to Eagle Pass, “Help me navigate.” They'd already been on the road for several hours, and Vanessa was feeling some motion sickness. She hated the way Frankie drove—erratic and unforgiving to all the bumps and curves. Their dad had always told Frankie that he needed to learn to control his heavy foot, but he rarely listened to anything their dad said. She held the map

up, looking at all the lines intersect— all the various routes she could take. Frankie hit a bump, dizzying her, causing her to feel something come up. “Frankie, can we stop for a bit?”

“But we’re almost out of Cali.”

“Frankie, I’m gonna be sick. So, either I puke in your car or I puke outside, your choice.”

Frankie begrudgingly stopped on the side of the highway, “Here, go ahead.” And without warning, Vanessa pushed open the car door and began to puke, planting her hands on her thighs as she hunched over to let everything out. The acid from her bile stung her throat and lips as it expelled from her body, her eyes watered and, when she blinked, tears began to trickle from her face. She hadn’t eaten much she realized then. It had been a couple of weeks since she was really able to eat a full meal. She barely nibbled on the cold burger that Frankie had bought for her last night. Vanessa dry heaved, trying to get the last of the sickness out. She slowly stood upright, she felt loopy doing so. Everything around her felt like a mosaic abstract painting, the lights from the highway beamed. Her eyes were still watery and so the lights were extra sensitive to her. She closed them for a moment and could hear the whirring of passing cars. “Are you okay?” Frankie asked her. She turned to look at him, he motioned to her lip. She wiped the viscous saliva from the corner of her mouth and onto her pants. “Yeah, think so.” She murmured.

“Good, let’s go. I’ve got to stop at a gas station soon. We can get you some Pepto or some shit. You’re not puking in my truck, you hear that?”

“Yes sir, I hear you.” She groaned.

As Vanessa slowly climbed back into the truck, she shoved the backpack in the back compartment that was usually reserved for Frankie’s tools. There were still traces of car oil, and random car parts scattered all throughout the back. The dome light flickered, it probably needed

to be changed. “Can you get the map?” Frankie asked as he inserted the key into the ignition, the whirring of cars could still be heard in the distance since he still hadn’t closed his door. “Give me a sec.” She replied, still trying to settle into her seat. She leaned over and opened up the glove compartment, rummaging through the assorted mess of old receipts, tattered CD case and an old photo. Vanessa stopped and slowly retrieved the photo, plucking it out as if it were a petal from a wildflower. It was a holiday photo of their family. She was so small, Francisco still had on an atrocious mustache. Imelda wore a tight, blue velvet dress with over-sized shoulder sleeves as she held Vanessa in her arms. Imelda had the biggest wide mouth smile. She always smiled that way in all her photos. As if she were in the middle of laughing. Francisco had on a sleek button down with a sweater vest- her mom probably made him wear it, he rarely wore button down shirts. Much less sweater vests. Frankie had on a cheesy holiday shirt and Vanessa wore a small holiday dress. Red with frills and matching mittens. Vanessa looked closer at herself, was she sleeping. Was she drooling? She could see a small damp mark where she was cradled inside the nook of her mother’s arm. “Look Frankie, I’m drooling,” Vanessa said through a smile, “Where was this? Do you remember?” Vanessa asked eagerly. Frankie looked down at the photo, a pang of nostalgia hit him as he remembered exactly where that was, it was a few months after Vanessa had been born in Germany. He remembered how annoying she was as a baby, how loud she would wail in their home and how sunken his mother’s eyes would look.

He remembered how their mother forced them to that professional photo studio to have their picture taken- and how much Francisco protested, “We don’t need more clutter, Imelda,” Francisco said to his lovely wife, “We move too much to carry around all those heavy frames.” “Amor, por favor. I want to have these. I want to remember our children when they were small.”

Francisco gave into his precious wife's request. Appeasing her desire to have a professional photo of them taken.

"Germany," Frankie replied to Vanessa, "I think that was taken in Germany, sometime after you were born. Dad didn't even want to take that photo. Mom made him."

"I don't blame him, look how awful we look. This looks so tacky. And I'm not even awake." Vanessa blurted. She snickered then looked at the photo once again. This time looking closely at her parents. She wished for a moment that she could wake the little baby in the photo so that maybe she could recall that moment she was held in her mother's arms.

"Vanessa, the map please. We have to get going." Frankie demanded. Vanessa carefully tucked the photo in between the stack of papers inside the glove compartment. She retrieved the map, and she could hear the fragile paper begin to tear as she tried tugging it from underneath the CD case. She looked over to Frankie to make sure he didn't see. He was still busy deciding what song to listen to. She sighed a breath of relief when she realized it was still intact. She unfolded it carefully in front of her lap, smoothing it above her crossed legs, "Got it."

"Okay good, where to next."

After some hours on the road, Vanessa woke up to the sound of herself snoring. She'd snorted and her mouth was completely dry. She tried to swallow and spit up some moisture into her mouth. She'd been asleep for a while, she looked over to the radio. It was close to three in the morning. "Frankie, where are we?"

“Arizona,” Frankie turned the dial down on the radio, “I think I’m going to stop for the night. I’m too tired to keep going. I’ll call Lola in the morning and tell her where we are.”

“Where are we going to stay?”

“Good question, I was actually thinking we could maybe camp out somewhere. I saw some signs for a rest stop near here. We can probably just stay there.”

Vanessa nodded, not exactly thrilled with the idea. She started to really miss her bed.

When they eventually arrived at the rest stop, there were two other cars and an 18-wheeler parked. She watched as one woman held her child’s hand, he was visibly groggy and started to audibly whine to his mother. Vanessa peeked inside the 18-wheeler and the person inside had a baseball hat covering their face. “I need to use the restroom. Are you cool in here?” Frankie asked Vanessa, Vanessa shook her head yes and Frankie immediately climbed out of the Chevy. The dome light stayed illuminated and Vanessa could see her backpack in the back. Frankie darted straight to one of the stalls, and as the dome light flickered and began to fade, Vanessa reached over for her backpack. She unzipped the front pocket where her stash was. She found her lighter and grabbed the mint box. She pocketed it inside her loose, red sweater. She wasn’t sure if she’d actually get to sneak out to smoke, but the thought crossed her mind and she figured if she couldn’t sleep maybe this could help. As Vanessa zipped up her backpack and returned it back to the rear compartment Frankie opened up the driver’s side door. Vanessa, startled, jumped back into her seat. “What’s up with you?” Frankie said, a little alarmed with the way that Vanessa had jerked back. “Nothing, just getting some mints from my bag.” Frankie nodded his head, incredulous, but he didn’t bother to question.

Frankie snored like a chainsaw. Vanessa, knowing how much of a heavy sleeper her brother was and how prone he was to snore through the night, figured she would likely not be able to get any sleep. She decided she would sit on the bed of the truck for a while. She glanced over at Frankie, then scanned the rest stop to see who else was around. The 18-wheeler was the only other car parked, she looked more closely and saw that there was no one inside. She brushed it off and didn't think anything of it. Careful not to make much noise, she gingerly opened her car door. A gust of wind nearly forced the car door wide open, but she was able to maintain control and slowly crawl out of the cabin of the truck. The trailer was latched onto the truck, but she was able to maneuver around it, launching herself up by using the coupler to leverage her weight onto the bed of the truck. There was debris everywhere, dead leaves coated the edges. Along with dried up oil and a small stack of car rims. The night was cool and slightly breezy, her red sweater didn't do much to help her keep warm. She held herself tight, her teeth began to uncontrollably chatter as she plopped down on the bed of the truck- realizing then that it was damp. She looked over to see if she had maybe woken up her brother, but she could still hear the loud motorizing sound of his snoring through the rear window. She scoffed and grinned. She would always play silly pranks on him because he was such a heavy sleeper. This would sometimes cause Frankie to wake up in a fit of rage after having looked in the mirror and realizing that his sister drew a penis right by his mouth.

Vanessa reached for the mint box, opening it delicately as if it were a rare treasure. She had already carefully rolled up a few small joints for herself, she searched for her back pocket and found her trusty sunflower lighter. She lit the tip, the small flame a warm beacon that lit the way to a far-off place where her mind could travel to. She wanted to be anywhere that wasn't the world where her feet were planted. She took a drag, allowing the smoke to simmer in the hollows

of her mouth. She exhaled, trying to hold in a cough. Vanessa panicked for a moment, thinking that maybe this was enough to wake her brother, but still nothing. He was dead asleep.

She decided to place her hood over her voluminous curls on her head and lay down. The curls peeped out from her hoodie, but they were enough of a cushion for her to lay on. The ridges of the truck bed were uncomfortable, so she did her best to try and maneuver in a way that best accommodated her small frame. She lay flat on her back and looked up at the stars. The stars were so clear in the blanket of night. She could vaguely see a crescent moon in the distance. She couldn't remember the last time she stargazed like this. Carefully, she let her eyes wander around, picking one star at a time to focus on and watch as it flickered.

She'd never given much thought to her life, how she got here, who she was. But for some reason at this moment- that was all Vanessa could think about.

All her life she moved. Wherever Francisco went, the Delgados would follow. Not once was she allowed to let her whim lead her. She was never given the freedom to decide where she wanted to go. And she so desperately wanted that. *But, she thought, it would be nice to have a place to call home.*

San Diego was the closest thing Vanessa had to calling a place home. Everywhere else she went she never felt like she belonged, she never felt as though that was where she was meant to be. She was sixteen going on seventeen now, and she thought about what that might mean for her soon. She could be free someday, free to choose where she wants to go. And all she wanted, more than anything, was that freedom. To be able to decide her own path.

Vanessa looked over to her bandaged hand, though the gash was merely a flesh wound she could still feel it sting. She was aware of it now because she'd adjusted herself and could feel

an ache. Vanessa shivered as a breeze rolled through, she tucked her bandaged hand into her sweater pocket. *I've lived through England winters, come on.* Vanessa thought as she took one last drag of her joint and rubbed it on the edge of the truck bed to put it out. She closed her eyes a moment to try and relax. The familiar weightless feeling overcame her. She felt as though the Chevy below her was suddenly airborne, the stars felt as if they were nearer than before. *Ma and Pa must be on the other side of the universe.* She mused. She imagined that the dark sky was a thin veil that only needed to be lifted. She envisioned her parents waiting for her on the other side of the veil, looking just like they did in that Christmas photo. Francisco in the sweater vest and button down. Imelda in the long-sleeve blue velvet dress. Vanessa began to hear a familiar soft voice, *Muñeca? Por qué andas aquí afuera, regrésate dentro del camión.* “Mami, are you waiting for me?” Vanessa said aloud. *¿De qué hablas muñeca? Estoy aquí contigo.* “Ma,” Vanessa’s lifted herself, trying to gain balance by using one of the stacked tire rims. She placed all her weight on her right hand, causing the bandage to tear and reopen her wound.

Vanessa yelped and instinctively clasped her hand to her chest. The blood began to trickle from underneath the bandage. Panicked, she looked over to the stalls off in the distance.

Without much thought, she hopped off the bed of the truck, careful to not put too much weight on her right hand.

As she got closer to the dimly lit stalls, she saw that the blood had already stained the entire collar of her shirt and front part of her sweater. She ran over to a sink to try and rinse off the wound, her gash almost completely exposed. *How am I going to explain this to Frankie?* She desperately tried to rinse it off, but the blood would not stop.

As she continued to frantically rinse her hand, she heard a deep man's voice echo through the stall, "Are ya okay?" Vanessa froze and used her peripheral vision to make out who it was, all she could make out was a tall heavy-set man wearing a baseball cap- *must be the truck driver*. "I'm fine," she said, her voice quivering, "thank you." The man continued to stand in the doorway of the stall, "Ya don't look fine, you look like ya needa have that checked er somethin'."

"I'm fine," was all she could think to say. *Please, just go away*, she thought.

"Here, let me take a look," the man began to approach her, his shadow looming above. Vanessa began to panic and cower in the corner of the stall. She fell into a fetal position, she felt as though the wall was sucking her into a deep rabbit hole, as if she were Alice in a truck stop Wonderland.

"Please, please don't hurt me." Vanessa cried out. His shadow crept closer, she felt helpless and small.

"Hurt ya?"

Another voice could be heard from just outside, "Don't you dare touch her." The man turned around, Frankie was right outside the stall, the light from behind him giving him an ominous glow about him. Though Vanessa knew this was her brother, she had never heard Frankie use that tone on anyone before. He sounded like he was ready to kill. The man lifted his hands up in the air, "I was only trying to help, her hands bleedin' somethin' awful. Ya should take her to a doctor er' somethin'."

"Alright, buddy. I will. You can go." Frankie's glare insinuated that this was a warning, and the truck driver took heed, carefully maneuvering around Frankie and out through the doorway.

Frankie followed with his eyes as the man exited, then reverted them back to look at Vanessa, who was still hunched in the corner. “Vani, your hand,” Frankie said to her. Her hand was still trickling blood. She grasped it close to her chest- holding it firmly with her left hand. Frankie began pacing, then crouched down to his sister, “Fuck, I’m so sorry. Let’s go. You need to get that stitched.” She tried to lift herself up, but she couldn’t feel her legs.

*Muñeca, esfuerzo muñeca. Esfuerzo.* Vanessa could hear her mother’s voice echo inside her mind. Her eyes fluttered until they were still, she was deep in the rabbit hole now— there was only darkness.

## CHAPTER VI

August 12, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

Pilar looked at herself closely in the mirror, observing her every curve and newly formed breasts. She didn't expect them to suddenly appear, she just assumed that since they hadn't already developed that she would never have them. She couldn't remember if they had always looked that way or if it happened overnight. Like flowers that bloomed, or melons, better said. She very rarely looked at herself, she had problems facing her own reflection. Whenever she walked past a mirror, she instinctively looked away. But now, at this moment, her focus was fixed on her chest— on how these two mounds had suddenly formed.

She'd heard the comments that some boys would say about her, the way they'd objectify her to her face like she couldn't hear them, as if what they were saying was some form of flattery, '*Hey mami, you so fine.*' '*Aye mami, your ass lookin' really good in those jeans.*' And she'd just smile timidly, she had nothing to say. What could she say? It didn't matter, they'd keep doing it anyway. Pilar wore big shirts and heavy sweaters to try and mask the fact that her body was developing into a woman's— though she still very much identified as a young girl. Pilar wasn't sure how she would hide these mounds. She worried that they would get bigger.

As she continued to observe herself, she heard the door open behind her, "Pilar, what are you—" Cecilia's eyes widened as she saw her topless sister standing right in front of the mirror. Pilar quickly pulled her shirt down and catapulted a pillow straight at Cecilia, "Can you learn to knock?" Pilar yelled out to Cecilia.

“Sorry,” Cecilia said as she strategically avoided the pillow hitting her face. She ducked her head down and placed a hand above her face, and asked Pilar, “Mom was asking if you wanted to go shopping for school?”

Pilar couldn’t imagine having to shop for her new body. She felt so disconnected to the body that was now reflected to her in the mirror.

“Let me get dressed,” Pilar answered back, “I’ll be there in a second.” Pilar looked for her favorite tattered jeans, though they dragged at the bottom and the threads were already unraveling- they were the most comfortable things she owned. She looked for an oversized t-shirt, a white one with her old with her school logo on it.

Cecilia and Ximena were already in the van, Pilar quickly ran out and locked the door. Ximena was impatient with her daughter. Pilar slid open the van door and hopped onto one of the back seats. Cecilia was sitting comfortably in front— her mother’s sidekick. Cecilia was the golden child she could do no wrong. And Pilar resented Cecilia for it. Cecilia seemed to have a knack for being good at almost everything- she was a talented dancer, she was good at math, she was athletic, she was conventionally beautiful. She was everything that Pilar wasn’t, at least that’s what Pilar thought. But Pilar felt that she was attuned to the world in a way that most people weren’t. Pilar felt that she connected with people, she felt that she had a sort of empathy that most people wouldn’t understand. Pilar loved words, the way you could string them together and paint ideas. No one in her family understood her.

When they finally arrived at the store, Ximena didn’t even bother waiting for Pilar to unbuckle her belt and get down. She was already making her way inside the store, Cecilia following suit. Pilar was used to this- she always felt like the odd one out. As Pilar entered the

store, she was greeted by one of the salespeople, “Would you like to try a sample of our perfume? It’s a beautiful floral scent,” The robust woman proceeded to spray, and Pilar felt suffocated by the overtly sweet scent. It instantly made her head spin, the woman tried to hand Pilar the sample she had just sprayed, but Pilar politely shook her head no. She hoped that she wasn’t rude, but there was no way to tell. She wafted her face, trying to get the scent away from her. She hated flowery scents.

Cecilia and Ximena were already looking at some skirts, Cecilia holding it up against her hips to demonstrate to her mother how flattering it looked on her. “Pilar, come,” Ximena called out, “What do you think?” Ximena handed a similar skirt to her along with a short-sleeved button-down shirt. Pilar scanned the navy- blue skirt, its material felt stiff, rigid. Pilar reverted her gaze to look at her mother, knowing that if she told her mother what she really thought of the skirt she might try and fling a mannequin at Pilar. “It’s fine.” Pilar decides to say. Hoping that this will somehow suffice in showing her mother that she wasn’t interested in the skirt. Ximena nods, “You girls should try them on to make sure they fit.” Cecilia had the cheesiest grin on her face, it was obvious she was excited about the idea of a new matching skirt. Pilar, on the other hand, detested it. She hated that her mother was always trying to match their clothes like if they were still little girls. But Pilar wasn’t up for arguing, she knew she’d lose anyway. Pilar followed her sister into the dressing room. She undressed, looked at herself in the mirror, and there they were again. Her boobs. No, those boobs. Pilar tried to avoid looking, instead focusing on the corners of the dressing room, or the hooks that were drilled on the side. But there was no avoiding it, there they were. Those new mounds. Those wide hips. Pilar unzipped the skirt and slipped it up. It fit, yes, but it also didn’t. It didn’t feel like her. She observed the skirt on her body, the way it flared out and hit right below her knees. How it even made her look like she

could be a teacher at Liberty High School. She took a heavy breath and decided to come out to let her mother witness her in this skirt. As Pilar exited, Cecilia did too. “Pilar! Don’t you love it?” Cecilia asked, twirling in the most graceful way that only she could. *Do you have to be so perfect at everything?* Pilar thought. “Pues, como lo ves?” Ximena asked Pilar, “I know Ceci likes it, what about you?” Ximena asked her daughter. Pilar shrugged, not saying a word. She didn’t want to lie to her mother, but she wanted to tell her that she didn’t want to have to wear a skirt to school. She wanted to scream how it felt like a lie, how it wasn’t even remotely close to her style. Pilar felt as though Ximena didn’t really know her. Ximena never had a real conversation with Pilar. Only those empty questions, the routine ones *How was your day? How was school?* Those mundane questions never amounted to anything real. Pilar felt at that moment that her mother really didn’t understand her, because if she did, Pilar would not be trying on a skirt. Pilar wanted to tear it off her body, she imagined herself ripping it off and throwing it clear across the department store. She imagined how the scene would play out, how Ximena would lash out at her and tell her daughter she was a malcriada. But Pilar didn’t. Instead, Pilar returned to the dressing room, hanging the skirt back on its hanger. And accepted the fact that it would soon hang in her closet.

Ximena bought the skirts, and Pilar dreaded it because now she would be obligated to wear it. It then occurred to her that her mother wouldn’t allow her to shave her legs. She’d be forced to wear some awful black stockings. Pilar audibly groaned at the thought of it, but then stiffened up at the realization that she might offend her mother. Ximena paid the cashier, new skirts in tow. “Here,” Ximena handed the bag to Pilar while Cecilia pirouetted on the other side of the register, “don’t ever say I don’t buy you anything.” *Great, Pilar thought, that’s exactly what I need, guilt.*

As Pilar settled herself into her seat in the van, she remembered that not too long from then she would be going off to school. One day she'd be free to buy her own clothes, free from her mother's opinion. She was already imagining New York, even though she'd never even set foot in a city. She'd seen pictures of New York in magazines, seen New York in movies. And the way they always painted it made it seem like a magical place of possibilities. The closest thing she'd ever witnessed was Austin. She went last year to visit the state capital. She was fascinated by the city, the lights. The hustle and bustle of people moving, the urgency within their stride. She wanted to be like one of those people, wanted to imagine that she too could live that kind of life. She so desperately wanted something outside of what she had seen in Eagle Pass. Outside the walls of Liberty High. She was going to be a writer. She was going to work in New York. One way or another, Pilar was set on making that dream happen.

When they finally arrived back at their house, Pilar didn't even bother to announce that she was going straight to her room. She hadn't heard from Marcos in a while and wondered how he was doing, she wondered what his hair looked like now that it was bleached. In her mind he looked like a younger, tanner Walter Mercado. She laughed at the thought. Pilar kicked off her shoes, hopped on her bed, and with her right hand she reached above her head to find her journal. The pen she'd been using was faithfully tucked between the last page she had written and the new page waiting for words to breathe life into. She'd been working on her poetry, but she felt she was nowhere near the likes of Sylvia Plath or Maya Angelou. She'd been sure to hide her journal from her sister and mother because she didn't want anyone to see them. She started to put the pen down to the paper, not sure where the words would take her...

*Wrapped in stiff clothing,*

*Breathing in a body that doesn't feel like my own*

*The air feels stifled*

*it struggles to inflate my lungs*

*Though I know I am alive*

*Though I see my reflection*

*My body doesn't feel mine.*

Pilar stops. Looking at her writing. She's not sure what she's just written. She stares at the markings, the way they've indented the page. The ink smudged along certain parts of the page. Her words were there, permanent. Though she feared the idea, it also fascinated her that she'd created these markings. Her words had suddenly found life. Maybe they weren't profound, maybe they were contrite and cliché. But they were hers. As she ran her index finger across the page to feel the indentions, Cecilia tried to and open the door. Pilar swiftly hid the journal underneath her pillow as her sister swung the door open. "Ceci, what did I tell you about learning to knock? Are you trying to catch me naked?" Pilar questioned. Cecilia's face flushed as she stood at the doorway silent. "Why are you here anyway?" Pilar asked her.

"Mami wanted to know if you were hungry, she's making dinner."

"Oh," Pilar regained her composure, "Yeah I'll be there soon."

"Pilar, can I ask you something?"

Pilar, hesitant, looked over to her sister's meek face, like a docile mouse waiting for the right moment to move through the darkness. "What is it Ceci?"

Cecilia meddled with the door a moment, "I...um. I was just...you know what, never mind."

“Ceci, just spit it out.”

“I just, I wanted to know if you knew anything about Marcos? I tried asking him about what happened, but he wouldn’t tell me anything. I figured maybe he’d tell.”

“Ceci, I don’t know anything. You shouldn’t be so nosy, either. That’s actually kind of rude.” Pilar could tell she had offended her sister. But Cecilia’s question made Pilar wonder, *why hasn’t Marcos told me anything?* There was a pretty good chance they’d have to see those boys again, and if that happened would they try to hurt Marcos again? Why did they hurt him in the first place? “Just let it go Ceci, it’s none of our business.”

“I’m worried Pilar, what if something happens and no one’s there to help him?”

“Don’t say that. Don’t even think it. Now, can I get some privacy please?” Pilar said as she dismissed her sister out of her room. Pilar knew that if she wasn’t blunt with Cecilia, she might try to continue with her line of questioning. And Pilar had had enough of her sister’s pestering.

Cecilia didn’t protest. She walked out of Pilar’s room, leaving the door only slightly open. The sun was already beginning to set, and Pilar’s room began to darken. The only light was a small lamp that was lit in the corner of her desk. Once Cecilia fully exited her room, Pilar reached for her journal again. She thumbed through the pages, many of them drawings and poems that she’d been writing since middle school. She sometimes looked back at her writing from middle school and cringed. She’d often write about mundane things, like family gatherings or listening to a new song on the radio. She picked up her pen again, not even really sure what she was going to write. At first, she doodled a bit, then the words came

*Entrenched in his own fluids,*

*Markers of a blaring hatred*

*That is making its presence known,*

*Like sirens hollering in the dead of night,*

*A warning to all*

*Move or you will be moved*

Pilar knew that Cecilia was right, if something happened to Marcos and no one was there to help him, “don’t think that,” Pilar told herself. She shut the journal and tucked it in the tight nook between her headboard and mattress. But she did wonder and hoped that Marcos would feel safe enough to tell her the truth. She hoped that he knew he could trust her. Just like she trusted him with everything- all her dreams, all her poems and drawings. He was the only one who really knew her. Who understood her. It was like they were on the same wavelength. She didn’t know anyone else who could even come close to understanding her like Marcos did.

## CHAPTER VII

August 13, 1994. Tucson, Arizona.

The early hours of the morning when the sun began to meet at the seam of the sky was when Vanessa finally started to regain consciousness. Her eyes felt weighted, body felt heavy. She could feel herself slowly start to gain control of her limbs, her toes. Her left hand, her right, “Ah,” Vanessa winced, she looked over to her hand, it’d been bandaged up. The fluorescent lights above her head blurred her vision, she blinked her eyes several times before they adjusted to the brightness of the room.

“The stitches will need to be removed in a couple of weeks, be sure to dress the wound and give her fresh bandages as needed.” An unfamiliar voice said. Vanessa tilted her head over to see a thin woman in teal scrubs talking to her brother. Frankie looked down at some paperwork that was being handed to him, “Will she be okay to travel?”

“She should be fine. She might feel a little nauseous because of the medication. Just monitor her. We need to finalize a few things, but she should be released soon.” The nurse walked out of the room, leaving Frankie idly standing in the middle of the room with the paperwork. Vanessa observed how distraught he looked, “Frankie?”

“Vanessa? You’re awake!”

“Yeah, what happened?”

“You tell me? Your hand was bleeding like crazy, had to bring you to the hospital.” He set the paperwork down at a nearby table that had all sorts of q-tips and gauzes perfectly lined up. He pulled up a chair and sat down, it looked like this was the first time he had really taken a breath in a long while. The sunlight continued to brighten up the room and Vanessa’s sensitive eyes watered as she squinted.

“I cut it open trying to get out from the back of your truck.”

“What were you doing out there in the first place Vani? What if something had happened to you and I didn’t see or hear you? Vanessa, you realize how stupid that was?”

Vanessa softly replied, “I’m sorry.”

Frankie raised his voice, “No, don’t be sorry. Don’t do that again, you hear me?” The room got quiet as he sank his face into his hands, audibly breathing into the meat of his palms. He wiped his face and ran his fingers through his disheveled hair. Vanessa noticed the dark circles under his eyes. “Vani, I need you to have some common sense. You can’t fucking be running off, getting high, thinking that you’re invincible. You’re not. You’re just as vulnerable as the rest of us. And I won’t always be there to protect you.”

Vanessa stayed quiet. She could feel her right-hand pulsating inside the bandages, the stitches were sensitive and raw. She winced again, this time slowly putting her hand to her chest, she could feel her heart racing as it thumped against her chest. She wished to be anywhere else. With anyone else, “Frankie, I’m sorry, okay?” That was all Vanessa could think to say. And she meant it. She was grateful for her brother. Grateful that he didn’t abandon her at a rest stop in the middle of Arizona.

**August 14, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.**

Vanessa launched her backpack onto her new bed in Lola's home. Lola's home was adorned with Elvis and Coca-Cola antique Memorabilia. Every time the clock struck at eight, Elvis would come gyrating his hips and singing *Blue Suede Shoes*. It was very odd to Vanessa that her aunt was such a fan of Elvis, she couldn't understand it. Frankie was already unpacking most of their belongings into Lola's home, while Lola started to cook some traditional Mexican food- Mole.

Vanessa had visited Lola's house a few times, there were a few occasions when their family would come to the states from one of her father's overseas assignments for the holidays and they would all cram together in Lola's tiny home.

She recalled one Christmas, Noche Buena, with her cousins Rick and Sandy— Lola's kids. Rick and Frankie were playing with their new guitars, Rick already knew how to play, and he would show Frankie some riffs. Sandy was engrossed in her new CDs, playing them on her fancy stereo setup that she had in her room. Vanessa didn't have anyone to talk to, Sandy always seemed bothered whenever Vanessa would try and talk to her. And she knew that Frankie and Rick wouldn't want her around either, so she would quietly sit in the living room and listen to her aunt Lola and Mom talk. Vanessa tried to seem interested, but they would just gossip about each other's families and everyone else's kids. Vanessa decided to walk outside instead, her father cooking up some meat on the grill. She wondered why other families ate turkey while they ate carne asada, arroz, and charro beans. As she walked up to her dad, he was already turning over some meat- smoke rising as he closed the pit shut. He sipped on his beer and took a seat in one of the wooden chairs. Lola had patio furniture scattered throughout her backyard. It was all hand-me-downs that she'd collected throughout the years. She had accumulated so many things

that the house started to become cluttered with many things. Francisco tried telling his sister-in-law Lola that she should try to part with some of her belongings, but it was clear that she had a strong attachment to them. Perhaps because they were things she had collected throughout her marriage, Vanessa never learned what happened to Pepe, the man Lola was married to. All she knew was that he no longer lived there, and she was to never ask about him. She never tried asking her cousins either because she didn't want to offend them.

Vanessa had pulled up a chair next to her father, by this point he had one of his cigarettes in between his fingers, the bright tip emitting a small glow amid the dark, star filled night. Her Dad puffed out some cloudy air and the smoke joined that of the BBQ pit. "Dad?"

"Si hija?"

"Dad, will we ever just live in one place?"

Francisco looked at his daughter. He knew that she longed for some stability, that she longed to be in a place long enough to make friends. He set the beer down on the arm rest, "One day hija, you'll see. One day we'll have a home, a yard. You'll have lots of friends. One day we'll be in a place so long you'll be begging to travel again."

"I just," Vanessa wasn't sure how to tell her father that she felt so alone. That she felt as though every moment she was living in a country with no one to connect to she was becoming more disconnected with the world around her. That she wasn't even sure who she was, "I want to know what it's like to have a home, I guess."

"You will, hija." He walked up, cigarette in hand, and kissed his daughter on her head. "Now help me put this meat on the plate."

Lola set the table while Frankie continued to gather boxes from the trailer into the house. Vanessa looked at all the clutter and couldn't imagine any more things fitting in Lola's home. She noticed that she could barely see the floor to begin with. Frankie started placing some of the boxes on the plastic covered couches, making crinkling sounds as he slid and arranged the boxes like carefully stacked Legos. Vanessa helped Lola serve the food, and although everything smelled delicious— Vanessa's stomach turned at the sight of the mole. The last time she had it, it had made her so sick she had to kneel by the toilet for hours. Frankie set the last box down, he wiped the sweat from the side of his forehead with the sleeve of his t-shirt. His unmistakable grimy hands were the darkest that Vanessa had ever seen. "Relax, mijo. Close the door, wash your hands. Let's have dinner." Lola said as she was bustling around the crowded mess of her kitchen. As Frankie finished washing his hands in the kitchen, Vanessa sat down, Lola joining her. "So, how was the trip? You two must be so tired."

"It was fine," She glanced over to her bandaged hand, remembering the ordeal that she and Frankie had faced while traveling on the road. As Frankie settled into his seat, he caught the attention of Vanessa as she was setting her hand down, "Do you want to change the bandages?" She shook her head, "Nah, I'll wait till after dinner." Lola registering the bandages on Vanessa's hand for the first time, "Hija, que te paso?"

"Nothing Tia, I accidentally cut my hand with some scissors." Vanessa caught Frankie's eye. His expression tense, but once he smirked a bit of the tension released, "Yeah, she got this crazy idea to go through all the taped-up boxes to find Dad's radio. She had to find Dad's radio." Vanessa smiled at her brother, then looked around the room. If anyone could understand the sentiment of having to hold on to certain belongings, it was Lola.

They wrapped up dinner. Lola ran the water, the clinking of the dishes echoed as Vanessa settled into her cousin Sandy's room. Sandy's room was still set up the way she had left it before she left for college. Pale pink bedsheets with an abundance of pillows. She had posters of boy bands that Vanessa did not recognize. As Vanessa set her backpack down, she sat at the foot of the bed. She opened her backpack and found her Dad's radio, she carefully reached with her left hand and set it on the nightstand table underneath the frilly lamp. Vanessa stared at the radio. She could imagine her parents dancing in the corner of the room, somehow the noise of the running water in the sink became drowned out by the noise of romantic music. Vanessa closed her eyes, and there they were- slow dancing right in front of her.

## CHAPTER VIII

August 14, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

Pilar searched through her backpack. She was trying to find her favorite pen. In exactly one week she would be returning to Liberty High School, her last year. And she wanted to be sure she had every possible token of luck she could gather so that she could somehow get through the last year of high school and into her first year of college. The pen in question was wrapped in brightly patterned fabric with Santa Maria Desert flowers, the topper was a small blue metal flower that appeared to be hand crafted. It reminded Pilar of the time when her Mami took her and Cecilia to Piedras Negras in Coahuila the previous year. Pilar had lived in Mexico a brief while, but she'd never felt a connection with the place.

Although her mother was born there, she rarely spoke of it. It was as if Ximena had decided to take a vow of silence when it came to the topic of Coahuila, the topic of her past.

On the rare occasion that they would go visit, they'd stay at a brightly colored old adobe style home- the colors were very similar to her pen. The tiles were orange, the outside a vivid colored pink. They were greeted by a frail man with a wooden cane, who smiled big- showing the giant gaps between his teeth, "Ximena, mija, hace mucho tiempo." He said to her, it was Pilar's grandfather. She was a lot closer to him when she was younger, but her Spanish evaporated from her- a pool of water, flowing with words, gone. She no longer had the vocabulary to communicate with him. She could understand, but she no longer had access to the words.

Ximena asked her daughters for privacy. Cecilia and Pilar obliged. Cecilia proceeded to dance in the backyard, practicing her routine for an upcoming dance team audition. Pilar was too distracted. She wanted to know what her mother and grandfather were talking about. Cecilia continued to practice, and Pilar positioned herself close to the door so she could hear the conversation between her mother and grandfather.

“Estoy preocupada, papa.” Ximena said as she poured coffee into a bright orange round cup.

Ximena poured a cup for her father as he carefully took a seat in his kitchen table, hooking his cane on the edge of his chair, “Por qué hija? ¿Qué pasa?”

“Cristobal.”

Pilar’s grandfather’s face changed. Pilar focused closely, it was as if he was cloaked with fear and worry, “Que has escuchado de el?”

Ximena stayed silent, she whispered to her father and Pilar could not make out what it was that her mother was saying. “¿Y si él nos encuentra, no sé qué voy a hacer? No quiero poner mis hijas en riesgo.”

*Riesgo.* Risk. Pilar wasn’t sure what risk her father, Cristobal would pose. She vaguely remembered him. In her memory, he was a tall man, slender. He had curly hair and a thick beard. Pilar couldn’t recall any real conversation she had with him. He felt like a distant dream she had once. But it wasn’t like Pilar didn’t want to know him. There was still a part of her that was curious to know how he was. How her parents met, how they ended up together. Whenever Pilar tried to bring up this conversation with her mother, Ximena would snap and shut down. She

would reprimand Pilar, telling her that it was none of her business. To not worry about it, to not go looking for her father either because he was a mendigo desgraciado, a deadbeat.

The only stories Pilar ever heard were told to her by her Tio Tavo, Marcos' dad. Sometime before the incident at Renee's Quinceanera while she and Cecilia were getting together to practice the choreography, Pilar remembered looking at her Tio Tavo and imagining that he was her father. Though she still had reservations around adults, she still longed to know where she came from. Pilar's Tia Sofia was with the girls as they practiced their dance out in the driveway while Tio Tavo was inside watching a football game on T.V. Pilar wasn't sure what came over her, but she sat across from her Tio Tavo and felt adamant that she would learn about Cristobal, her father, "Tio?" Her Tio Tavo did not unglue his eyes from the Cowboys game. Pilar could see that her uncle had not heard her, she tried again, "Tio? I have a question?" Her uncle, realizing that his niece was directing her words at him, grabbed the remote and lowered the television. "What is it Pilar?"

"Tio, I want to ask you something?"

"What is it?"

Pilar wasn't sure how to phrase it, she'd been conditioned to never even bring up any thoughts about her father out loud. But she felt safe in this household, she knew her uncle would probably not say anything to her mother Ximena, "Tio, did you know my dad?"

Tavo took a deep breath, it was as if he'd been anticipating this question but didn't know when it would come up. The announcers from the football game hushed down to a buzzing whisper as Tavo rapidly tapped the remote to lower the volume. "What do you want to know, Pilar?"

Tavo told Pilar that her father was a man named Cristobal Alanis. Pilar recalled that her mother had given her and her sister Nieto as a surname, she was never an Alanis. Ximena met Cristobal when she lived in Mexico. He was much older than Ximena. And a bit of a troublemaker. Cristobal was always doing drugs, but many in town considered him a bit of a poet. And, according to Tavo, that was how he wooed Ximena, with his words. It wasn't long till Ximena found herself pregnant with her first child, Pilar, while she was still in high school. Cristobal and Ximena were forced to marry by Ximena's family. When Ximena became pregnant with her second child, things took a turn for the worst. Cristobal started to become violent. Ximena would wake up sore, with bruises on her face. She feared for her children's safety but didn't see a way out. One day Cristobal caught himself in a bit of a bind, the details of this weren't very clear to Tavo, but he insinuated that perhaps Cristobal had been doing something illegal. When Cristobal disappeared, he didn't tell Ximena where he was going. In some ways, Ximena was relieved. She'd been set free. Ximena, along with her sister Sofia, decided to relocate to the United States. They settled in Eagle Pass.

Pilar thought of her father as a faceless figure. A dark shadow. She never feared him. Maybe because she rarely thought of him and knew so little.

Pilar recalled that conversation with her Tio Tavo, she noted the terror engrained on her mother's face while talking to her grandfather. Pilar wondered, was there something about Cristobal Alanis that she should fear?

When Pilar finally found her pen, she clicked on the flower end to allow the ballpoint exit. She dug behind her bed for the journal that was wedged between the headboard. She recounted the fact that her father was a poet, and that perhaps the gift of words was something that she had inherited from him. Could it work that way?

She hoped that her gift was all her own and not something that was passed onto her like the shape of her nose or color of her eyes. Not something that was determined by DNA. Especially not from someone as violent as her father.

She flipped through the journal, searching for any empty space in which she could write- where she could exercise her gift. Exorcise her gift. Pilar thought about her gift and the possibility that it was given to her by someone as evil as Cristobal. She suddenly felt conflicted about using words. She wasn't sure how alike she was to her father, but if he was an evil person, she didn't want to feel any connection to him. She stared at the paper for some time. After a while she tucked the pen in between the pages, leaving the flower end sticking out so that it met with the edge of the spine. She set the journal back into its home, wedged in between her headboard and bed.

**August 22, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.**

The clouds in the sky were getting darker, it seemed like it was going to rain anytime soon. The smell of rain hitting the pavement was one of Pilar's favorite smells. But today she couldn't even stop to appreciate the smell because they were already running late for school. Pilar had been obligated by her mother to put on the outfit that she'd bought for them, and she was struggling with putting it on. She wanted to rip it off but forced herself to zip up her skirt and button down her shirt. Cecilia had also taken her sweet time getting ready and caused them to miss their bus, forcing Ximena to drive her daughters to school. "Córrale, I'm not going to wait another minute." Ximena yelled out at her daughters as she loaded up their van. Cecilia rushed out of the restroom while Pilar impatiently waited for her at the front door. By the time they reached the van, Ximena was already sitting inside- her face fuming. Pilar slid the van door

open, Cecilia tugged at Pilar, “Can I sit in the back?” Cecilia asked. Pilar shook her head no, “Nuh uh, you’re going in the front with Mami.”

As they pulled up to Liberty High, students trickle in from all sides of the building. There was a cross guard waiting for them at the entrance of the building, it was about ten minutes till the first period bell would ring. Ximena was scathingly quiet the entire drive over, and Pilar knew that her mother was in no mood for pleasantries. As Cecilia and Pilar climbed out of the van, Ximena called out to her daughters, “I’ll be home later tonight, niñas. You have the key?” Cecilia nodded and flashed the key. Ximena took notice, “Okay, have a good day, las quiero.”

“Love you too.” Both girls replied.

The cross guard led them to the entrance of Liberty High. They entered the hallway in matching outfits, Pilar was embarrassed and hoped no one noticed them. Pilar kept dodging everyone’s eyes and looked down at her feet as she briskly walked. Although this wasn’t Pilar’s first time here, it was Cecilia’s. It then occurred to Pilar that maybe Cecilia was nervous about her first day, that perhaps that was why she was prolonging their arrival. It could also be that neither one of them was ready to step into the monotonous routine of school. Pilar sped, Cecilia following close behind. Cecilia tried rushing to Pilar, “Wait, Pilar.”

“What do you want? We’re going to be late.” Pilar spit back.

Cecilia’s frustrated pouty face scrunched as she called out to her sister, “I don’t know where anything is Pilar.”

“Well maybe if we’d been here on time, I could’ve helped you. I have to get to History Ceci.”

“Pilar— “

“What?” Pilar snapped.

Cecilia’s eyes welled, she stood frozen in the middle of the hall. Pilar, embarrassed, walked closer to Cecilia hoping that none of her classmates had spotted her. The buzz of voices and crowded halls were loud enough to deter from the fact that Cecilia was about to have a meltdown. Pilar was close enough to whisper to her sister, “What’s going on Ceci?”

Cecilia lowered her head, in a hushed tone and replied, “I just...I feel like I don’t have a sister anymore.”

“What? What are you talking about? Don’t be so dramatic.”

“You’re always with Marcos, and I bet you’re not even going to pay attention to me here.”

“Ceci, we’re in school. You’re a freshman. There’s a good chance I won’t even see you.”

“I don’t know...I just. Even when we’re home you barely listen to me. You don’t talk to me. Even now, I’m trying to ask for your help because I don’t know where anything is, and you’re trying to blow me off.” Cecilia’s eyes welled up. She blinked a little too hard and the drops began to stream down her face. She could no longer hold back. Pilar instinctively wiped her sister’s face, “Ceci, you’re making a scene, stop.” Cecilia started to choke up. Pilar searched for something to say. She felt embarrassed by her sister’s antics, “Look, I’m still your sister. Of course, I care about you.” Cecilia’s breathing shuddered. Pilar awkwardly smiled as passerby walked by them, she mouthed to them that everything was fine. “Ceci, I’ll walk you to class,

alright? Could you calm down?” Cecilia nodded, wiping the rest of her tears away, her face puffy and red.

Once Pilar led her to class, she quickly glanced at her schedule to see which classroom she was in, room 326. She darted, realizing that the class was clear across the building. Liberty High was deceptively big and navigating around the school took some getting used to. Pilar recalled when she first started how often she would get lost- she suddenly felt bad that she'd been so short with her sister. “I figured this high school thing out by myself,” Pilar said under her breath, “she can too.”

When she finally entered inside her history class, the teacher was already in the middle of the lecture. The lights were dim and there was an overhead that projected a transparency sheet. “As I said mentioned at the start of class, tardiness will not be tolerated.” The teacher said as he zeroed in on Pilar entering the room. Pilar was flustered once she realized he was talking about her. The teacher nodded and pointed to an empty seat, indicating to her to move and sit down. As she plopped her backpack beside her, she reached for the first notebook she could find and set it on her desk. She looked at all the students in class, some of them giving her smirks and snickering under their breath. Pilar tried to ignore it, but she couldn't help but feel like everyone was talking about her. She then remembered that Marcos mentioned to her he was going to be taking this class as well, but she couldn't find him anywhere in the dimly lit room. Then it occurred to her, he'd bleached his hair and she hadn't seen him since then. She changed her focus to try and find blonde, dried up bleached hair. No blonde in sight. “Mam, pay attention to the front of the class.” The teacher called out to Pilar. He was a pudgy short man with wiry white hair. “Yes sir.” She quickly responded. The snickering started up again. She wished Marcos were

there, he'd probably quip something clever at them and shut them up. Pilar nervously tapped her pen and wondered, *where the heck is Marcos?*

While the teacher droned on and on about the class schedule and expectations, Pilar's mind wandered. Thinking the worst. It then occurred to her, in the middle of the lecture, that she hadn't reached out to Marcos since she last visited. *I should've called him last night*, Pilar thought. The memory of the attack at Renee's quinceañera was still fresh on her mind. All summer she'd replay that night, trying to see if there was any detail she missed. Especially since there were still so many unanswered questions. And it wasn't like Marcos to be so secretive. Especially to her.

When first period finally let out, Pilar looked down at her schedule. Next was Pre-Calculus. She was already dreading this class, math was her least favorite subject, so she was in no hurry to get to it. She thought back to whenever Marcos and she would meet up in between periods, they had their usual spot in the courtyard. Although the courtyard was meant to have all sorts of greenery, the sweltering Texas heat and lack of maintenance had caused all the flowers on the trees to brown and wilt. The dead leaves still hadn't been raked, so the crunchiness could be heard every time Pilar took a step. She searched for their tree. She was nervous to find it empty. As soon as she turned the corner, she was relieved to spot a black beanie with blonde hair peeping from underneath. "Marcos?" Marcos' head jerked towards Pilar and held his beanie down to his ears as soon as he realized it was her. Pilar playfully tugged at his beanie, revealing his poor dye job. Patches of brown hair were still in some parts of his head, Pilar did her best to hold in her laughter, "Oye si, se te mira bien. It looks good." Pilar sarcastically joked. "Cállate, I know it looks like shit, Pilar." Marcos hissed back.

Pilar teased, “I’m waiting for you to tell me my horoscope, Walter Mercado.” Marcos rolled his eyes, swiped the beanie from her hands and adjusted it back onto his head. He sank lower to the ground. “Why weren’t you in class?” Pilar questioned him.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Pilar. Also, this,” Marcos said as circled his beanie with a pointed finger.

“Well, are you going to any of your classes?” Pilar asked. Marcos shook his head no. This was the most timid she had ever seen him. Usually whenever Marcos entered a room, he’d make his presence known. He had a way of gravitating people towards him. To see him crouched on the ground, making himself small, hidden- Pilar could tell something was wrong. “Talk to me Marcos,” Pilar knelt down next to Marcos, “Please.” The buzzing voices around them seemed to turn into a collective hum, diminishing as Pilar’s focus was fixed on her cousin. She placed her hand on his and playfully tugged at his index finger. He pulled his hand away, “Pilar, don’t. Just go to class, alright?” Marcos firmly said to Pilar.

“Well if you’re planning to ditch class, I’ll ditch class with you. I don’t wanna go to Cal anyway.”

“Pilar, don...”

“No, I’m skipping. And you’re going to tell me what’s going on ‘cause I can tell something is bothering you. You’re acting so weird. This isn’t like you at all.”

The warning bell rang, indicating that it was time for the next period to start. The crowd of students began to dissipate into the halls. The collective noise began to die down and pretty soon it was just Pilar and Marcos, sitting together against a wall by their tree. “So?” Pilar questioned Marcos. He glossed over Pilar’s question, got up and took a deep breath, “Pilar, I

can't talk about it. You won't understand." He told her as he reached down to grab his backpack, slinging one strap over his shoulder- the weight causing a sort of shift, making him lose his balance. Pilar jumped up and braced herself on Marcos' arm. She brushed off her skirt, then looked around to see if she could spot anyone, but there was not a single soul in sight. "Marcos," she started, "I don't get you. We've known each other since diapers and now you're acting like I'm your mom and you can't trust me. You can tell me anything, you know that, right?"

"It's not that easy, Pilar. This isn't about me. I mean...it is about me but it's also not only me...I've already said too much. You know what? Just pretend I didn't say anything, you got it huerca?" Marcos was fumbling his words.

Pilar's face remained perplexed, "Fine. But I'm here, alright. When you need to talk. About anything, got it?"

"Si, huerca. I got that."

In the distance they heard some commotion then a voice. "SHIT." The voice hollered. Both Pilar and Marcos jumped. Marcos looked behind him and he spotted a girl with big curly hair, a baggy black t shirt, a bandaged hand, and black with red tennis shoes. She had just spilled the contents of her backpack all over the floor. Pilar looked closely and spotted a mint box open with some thin rolled up papers flying out. The wind started to pick up and the gust took the small rolled up paper to Pilar's feet. She picked up the mysterious object, Marcos' eyes widened as soon as he recognized what it was that Pilar was holding. He let out a big grin and through his teeth, "Oh shit."

"What, what is it?" Pilar said, looking at the object in her hand.

“You should probably just give that back to her, you don’t want to get caught with pot.”

Marcos said to Pilar.

Pilar, “Pot?” She shoved the joint into Marcos’ hands. “You, you give it back.”

Marcos waved the joint in front of her face, “This is why you don’t skip class, huerca. You don’t want to get stuck with troublemakers like me.” He looked over to Vanessa, who was scrambling to get her mint box, scouring the ground as the gust of wind continued to blow away every last bit of weed that she’d been trying to hold onto. She was on all fours, desperately trying to find the last joint that had gotten away from her. “Excuse me?” Marcos called out, “I think you dropped this.” Vanessa looked up and spotted Marcos holding the tiny joint in between his index and thumb. He motioned it towards her. Vanessa hurriedly walked towards Marcos and Pilar, checked the courtyard to make sure no one was watching them. As Vanessa retrieved the joint from Marcos’ hand, she struggled to catch her breath and say, “You shouldn’t wave this shit around, you’ll get us all in trouble.”

“Eh, I could probably use a suspension.” Marcos teased. “I’m Marcos. This is my cousin, Pilar.” He said as he motioned to his cousin. Pilar zipped up her sweater and smiled awkwardly, pushing up her glasses that had slid down her nose when she had crouched down for the joint. Pilar stayed silent as Vanessa studied them. Vanessa coyly grinned at Pilar then looked back at Marcos, “Does your cousin talk?”

Pilar, taking offense, “Um, uh...yes. I talk.”

Vanessa let out a snort, “I thought so. I’m Vanessa.” She replied, with a bit of coy confidence, “what are you two doing out here?”

Pilar looked carefully at Vanessa. It was as though Pilar had known her from somewhere, but she couldn't quite place it. Something about Vanessa felt familiar. Even the way Vanessa talked, the way she was dressed. Pilar stared a little too hard, and when she felt her thoughts slip away, she caught herself staring then immediately looked down at Vanessa's shoes. "I like your shoes," Pilar said without much thought.

"Thanks." Vanessa paused, remembering the shoe store, "My mom got them for me." She said as she looked down at her red and black sneakers. Vanessa debated whether to mention that her mom was dead. She figured that maybe that was a loaded thing to mention to someone you just met. She decided to change the subject, "So, what? You guys monitoring the halls or-?"

Marcos interjected, "I'm just skipping on life."

Vanessa lifted her joint, "Same. Well, thanks for handing this back." Vanessa turned her back towards them and began to walk away. Pilar felt as though she couldn't let her walk off. She wanted Vanessa to stay, "Vanessa, wait." She called out. Vanessa stopped in her tracks and turned around, facing Pilar and Marcos. "Why don't you just hang with us?" Pilar suggested. Marcos subtly shook his head no, narrowing his eyes as if to try and tell Pilar, *what the hell are you thinking?*

"You sure? I mean, I've really got nothing better to do. But I don't want to bother you guys." Vanessa said.

"Yeah, hang with us." Pilar said, noticing that Marcos was once again crouched against the wall.

After some convincing, Vanessa was able to persuade Marcos and Pilar to walk off campus grounds to a nearby park. Pilar's heart was racing, she'd never missed a class in her

entire life. Much less walk off campus grounds during school hours. For the first time she was doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing, and she couldn't help but feel paranoid. She felt like at any moment her mother Ximena would pop up behind the jungle gym and pull her by her ears.

Vanessa climbed the roped-up ladder, Marcos followed. Pilar hesitated, opting, instead, to just go around and climb with the metal ladder. "What? Are you afraid of falling?" Vanessa asked through a snicker. Pilar bowed her head, unsure of how to respond, "I don't want to ruin my clothes." Pilar replied, brushing her skirt. She thought about what her mom would say if she had ruined the skirt, she'd bought for her. Even though Pilar wanted to rip it off, she didn't want to upset her mother. Marcos teased, "Aye please huerca. You mean that outdated nun outfit you got going on?" He said as he made an up and down motion with his hand and let out a snicker. Pilar crossed her arms across her chest, averting her eyes from Vanessa. She could feel Vanessa looking at her, but she tried really hard not to look back. Pilar questioned her decision to join them, but then she looked over to Marcos. He and Vanessa were joking and laughing, and he seemed okay. Pilar just needed to know Marcos was okay. She wished that he would just tell her what was bothering him. Pilar knew it was something complicated. But even if he couldn't tell her right now, Pilar had to make sure her cousin was alright. Both Marcos and Vanessa climbed up some steps that led up to the tallest slide of the jungle gym. A gust of wind picked up some dirt and landed on Pilar's face, she quickly uncrossed her arms and wiped her eyes- trying to get the itchy dirt out. Vanessa called out, looking down at Pilar from up where she was sitting, "You're so uptight, you should chill."

"Chill?" Pilar questioned.

"Yeah, here," Vanessa pulled out her joint from her mint box, "this'll help."

Pilar looked carefully at Vanessa's outstretched hand. Pilar had never even dared to try anything like that. She knew other kids in her class had already done it. They'd always gloat and talk about how good it made them feel, how it opened their minds. But the idea of something altering her mind, of something taking away her control- it made her nervous. Pilar waved her head side to side and told Vanessa, "I'm okay."

"Ya sure?" Vanessa said, lifting the joint a little higher in a taunting sort of way.

"Yeah, it's okay." Pilar replied.

Marcos chimed in, "I'll try it." Pilar's eyes met Marcos' as if to challenge his decision, "What? I'll be fine," he looked over to Vanessa, "Right?"

"Yeah, it's not that big a deal. Here, let me light it up first." Vanessa said as she reached into her tattered backpack and pulled out her sunflower lighter. She expertly lit the tip of her joint, the flame igniting the tip, causing a puff of smoke to emit from it. Vanessa pursed her lips ever so slightly, then tightened them around the thin joint, inhaling deeply. The tip glowing as she did so. When she finished, she held her breath a moment- coughing once she was finally done. Letting out puffs of smoke with each cough. "Here," she said in between coughs as she handed it to Marcos, "your turn."

He examined the joint carefully, not really sure what to make of it. He looked over to Vanessa, "What do I do?"

Vanessa smirked, "Ah nah son, don't tell me you've never smoked before?"

Pilar stood right underneath them, she watched as Marcos began to shake his leg and tug at his beanie. "I have, long time ago though." He lied. He observed the joint carefully, "This

side?” He asked. Vanessa snickered then shook her head yes. Marcos pressed the joint to his mouth, inhaled and instantly began to cough profusely. His eyes watering as he handed the joint back to Vanessa. He continued to cough up smoke. Vanessa couldn’t help but burst into laughter, “Just give it a minute,” she said to him, “This stuff’s really potent.”

Pilar leaned against the side of the jungle gym, since she was short, she was still able to stand upright. She continued to look up and watch them as they continued to pass the joint back and forth. She stood there, idly while she removed her wire-framed glasses from her face and rubbed the dirt off them. As she looked out at the park with her blurred vision, Pilar’s thoughts started to run from her. She didn’t know how long they would be there and worried about getting caught. She scanned around the park to see if there was anyone else there, not a single person. She could vaguely see some cars waiting at the stop sign in the distance, but it didn’t appear to be any cops. “We should get going soon, we don’t want to get caught with that stuff.” Pilar insisted as she placed her glasses back on her face, the blurred lines from her vision clearing as she met Vanessa’s eyes.

“Don’t worry so much,” Vanessa said, “So anyway, I wanna know about you guys.” Vanessa adjusted herself, crossing her legs underneath her. “Are you two from Eagle Pass?”

Pilar started but Marcos, through uncontrollable giggles, interrupted, “Technically Coahuila. But we were raised here. And have been living here our whole lives. Never seen anything outside of Texas or Mexico, right Pilar?”

“Right,” Pilar said, annoyed. *But that’s going to change as soon as I graduate, I’m going to leave this town and see everything I’ve ever wanted to see.* Pilar looked over to Vanessa and asked, “What about you, I’ve never seen you around here before. Where are you from?”

“Well,” Vanessa started, “Depends, I was technically born in London. My dad was in the military, so we lived in a lot of places. Germany, England, Spain, to name a few. But my bro Frankie and I moved here from San Diego.” Vanessa took another hit, inhaled, then released smoke emitting from her nostrils sinuously.

Vanessa tried to keep herself from letting the well of her emotions overflow. She’d been really good at not thinking about her parents lately. Except for a few moments ago when she thought about her shoes. She’d been suppressing her emotions- the longer she could hold them down the better. She didn’t want to let those emotions in. She could feel them there, in the corner of her mind. Trying to break through the cage that she’d built for them. The memory of her parents laying side by side in coffins came back to her. Then she recalled hearing her mother’s voice right outside the funeral home. *¿Muñeca, quienes son tus amigos?* Vanessa could feel coolness on her back, she rolled her shoulders. Trying to ignore her mother Imelda’s voice. Vanessa sighed. Trying to play it off like it was a distant memory. She knew her parents were no longer in this world, but she didn’t have to tell herself that. She refused to admit it.

“You okay?” Pilar asked Vanessa, breaking the silence after some time. Vanessa gently smiled, “Yeah, I’m cool. It’s just. You know what, I don’t think I ever really made any friends in all that time. Like, I’m thinking about it, and all those times my dad moved us around I never really felt at home, you know?” Vanessa thought back to her middle school friend, Jazmin, the closest friend she’d ever had. Vanessa picked up her smoking habit in middle school, and even though Jazmin didn’t approve, she loved her all the same.

Marcos was too distracted, he was too busy playing with his beanie and stroking at the strands peeping out from underneath the beanie, he finally peeled the beanie off and revealed his bright, patchy yellow and brown hair.

“Oh shit, it’s one of the Hanson brothers.” Vanessa teased.

“I know, I know. Looks like shit.” Marcos said, as he quickly placed the beanie back onto his head. He climbed down to the second level of the jungle gym where Pilar was and looked over to Vanessa, he asked “Now what? Are we skipping the entire day? I wasn’t planning on going back.” Marcos announced as he strolled to climb out of the jungle gym. Pilar and Vanessa’s eyes met. Though they’d only met moments ago, Pilar felt drawn to Vanessa in a way she couldn’t quite explain. It was as if they’d met before, and she wished she could name what the feeling was. Like running into a childhood toy you’d forgotten about and being sucked back into the moment you first played with it. Nostalgic.

“I do need to meet my mom at the pickup spot, she’ll ask too many questions if I’m not there.” Pilar responded, directing her words to Vanessa.

Vanessa, deciding to join both Marcos and Pilar on the ground as they climbed down, hopped off the jungle gym with ease and said, “I mean, I wasn’t going back either. I didn’t even want to be there in the first place. If it were up to me? I’d probably just drop out. Actually, you know what? I might just do that.”

Pilar, stunned, asked Vanessa, “Why? You’re already a senior, right?”

“Yeah.” Vanessa replied.

“Well you might as well finish out the school year and get a diploma. Even if you don’t go to college, you’ll at least have that.”

“Pilar, I don’t care about school. I really don’t. I don’t want to spend my life trapped in a classroom all day long. It’s so boring and annoying. And I probably won’t use any of the stuff they’ll teach me. You see what I mean? It’s pointless.”

“But you haven’t even given this place a chance,” Pilar stammered, “I just, I guess I don’t get how you could come this far and just decide you don’t want to finish.”

“Because, like I said, what’s the point? I’m not planning to go to college. I didn’t even want to come here. My brother forced me.”

“Forced you?”

“Yeah, it’s a long story.” Vanessa said as she adjusted her jeans, they were a little too loose so every few minutes she was dragging them up.

Marcos, who had his neck craned up looking at the tree, was giggling all by himself and pointing at nothing. “And what’s up with you? Ya feelin’ good?” Vanessa said as she elbowed Marcos. “Uh huh.” Marcos pointed to Pilar, “She wants to go to New Yorkkkkkk.” Marcos slurred. Pilar had never seen Marcos like this, she was alarmed at how different he was acting.

“New York?” Vanessa said, surprised, “is that so? What are you going to do in New York?”

Pilar, flustered, replied, “Go to college. Become a writer.”

“Well good for you. I suck at writing. Hey, if you become famous, I can say that I know a real writer.” Vanessa said.

Pilar smiled, “Yeah, that’d be cool.” Even though Vanessa said it off-handedly, the idea of it made Pilar beam with hope.

Marcos struggled to stand still, every motion he was making was slow and weighted. It was as if it took double the concentration to do something as simple as take a few steps.

“Marcos,” Pilar said as she walked closer to him, “can we go back? I think school’s going to let out soon. And you know my mom.” Pilar tugged at Marcos’ shirt, but this didn’t seem to get his attention.

Vanessa stared at Pilar. She admired the fact that Pilar had ambition. Vanessa never had any ambition to do anything. She coasted through life. Mainly because she never had a say in it anyway. Everyone was always telling her what to do. Imelda was the only one that seemed to care about Vanessa’s interests, few as they may be.

Vanessa observed Pilar’s features. The way her thin glasses framed her petite face. She’d never seen someone with features that small before. She could see from Pilar’s profile that her eyes were much bigger than what was shown through her glasses. It was as if the refraction from the lenses minimized the true brightness of Pilar’s eyes. “You have really pretty eyes.” Vanessa said.

Pilar stopped. She wasn’t great with compliments. In the past whenever people would give her compliments, she would politely nod and say nothing. Because she never believed them. “Thanks.” Pilar weakly replied.

“You don’t think so?” Vanessa asked.

“Um. I’ve never really gotten that before.” Pilar admitted.

“Well it’s ‘cause your glasses hide ‘em. But it’s true. I can tell. You have really big, pretty eyes. Accept it, chick.” Vanessa told her. Pilar wasn’t sure what to make of Vanessa’s comment. But Pilar could feel Vanessa’s sincerity despite her inebriated condition.

“¿Oye, Pilar,” Marcos hollered, ¿“Sabes qué? Bese a Victor.”

Both Pilar and Vanessa froze, Vanessa made eye contact with Pilar and made a face that said *did I hear that right?*

Pilar turned back to face Marcos, who was still looking off in the distance, and asked him, “Wait, Marcos. You kissed Victor, the varsity basketball player? The one you claimed to have said he had a crush on me?”

Marcos, realizing that his cousin Pilar heard him, pulled his beanie down to cover his face. Hoping that this would somehow hide him.

Pilar turned her cousins body to face her, “No, no. You can’t hide from me. You’re going to explain yourself, is it true?” Marcos, thinking he could run, tried to speed away. Unbeknownst to him that he was actually moving slower than a gusano. “Marcos, talk to me.” Pilar demanded.

“Okay, yeah.” He admitted.

“So, is that why you’re skipping?”

“That’s part of it.” He slurred.

Vanessa interjected, “What’s the other part?”

Marcos hesitated, but finally let out, “I don’t want them to find me.”

Pilar knew who he meant. He didn’t have to say. It all started to come together. The attackers who crashed Renee’s Quince. The ones that had hurt him, had made his eyes puff out, almost sealing them shut, the ones that obliterated his nose to make it bleed profusely. She recalled that night in her memory, the screaming echoing in her brain. She remembered how helpless she felt, watching her cousin getting kicked in the stomach while she lay helplessly

beside him. She remembered the bleeding from his forehead and noticed the scar that now marked the side of his face. Pilar felt sorry for her cousin, she could feel it deep in her chest. He was afraid. *Of course, he's afraid, who knows what they'll do when they see him.* Pilar thought. "They can't hurt you." Pilar said to Marcos.

"Who can't hurt him?" Vanessa asked.

Marcos' eyes pleaded with Pilar to not say anything more.

"Never mind," Pilar replied. "It's a long story. Marcos, let's get back." She said as she hooked her arm around his. "Vanessa, I'm sorry but we need to go. My mom's really strict and if she doesn't see me at the pick-up, I'll never hear the end of it."

"It's cool, I get it." Vanessa said.

"Are you going to stay here? You could come back with us if you want." Pilar offered.

"I don't live far. I'll just walk back home," Vanessa said as she picked at her bandaged hand, "thanks for asking though."

Pilar nodded, "Hopefully I'll see you around?"

"Yeah. Maybe. See you around, Ms. New York." Vanessa responded coolly.

Pilar shrugged and smirked as if to say to Vanessa that they would likely run into each other. And Pilar hoped they would. She couldn't put her finger on it, on the feeling that she had being around Vanessa. It made her feel good. It made her feel at home.

As they were finally reaching campus grounds, Marcos stiffened and stopped in his tracks. “Pilar,” he started, “ama can’t see me like this.”

“Well, I have to get home Marcos.”

“Do you think I could go home with you?” He asked with a sense of desperation.

“Aye, I don’t know...”

“Please, I already know ama will tell me something.” He pleaded.

“And you think my mom won’t? Have you met Ximena Nieto? She can smell a lie from miles away Marcos.”

“Then what do we do?”

Pilar wasn’t sure what to do. She wasn’t good at lying to her mother. Then she remembered seeing a flyer for an after school creative writing club. “Okay, this is what we’re going to do. We’re going to tell my mom that we’re staying for a creative writing club, okay? That’ll buy us some time.”

## CHAPTER IX

August 22, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

As Vanessa arrived at Lola's house, she saw her brother Frankie leaning up against his Chevy truck, he wore an old shirt with the sleeves cut off- grime all along his hairy arms. His face looked dusty, and furious. Vanessa could tell by his expression she was in trouble, "So, are you going to tell me why you weren't in class?" He asked her.

"I was supposed to go to class?" She replied sarcastically.

"What the fuck Vanessa? We just got here. You can't even do me the simple favor of going to school?"

"What if I don't want to be in school."

"Vanessa, we've talked about this- "

"No, you talked about it. *We* didn't talk about it."

"Mom and Dad didn't want that for you. They wanted you to finish school."

"Stop trying to be Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad aren't here." She snapped back.

Then stopped and immediately wished she hadn't just said that.

This stung Frankie. Paralyzed him in an instant. Frankie was trying so hard to try and make Vanessa understand. But he didn't know how to get through to her. To make Vanessa want more for herself. He could see his sister spiraling, and he didn't know how to make it stop. He

was there once. Right where his sister was. But this was different. Vanessa didn't have the guidance that he had. Vanessa would never have the guidance of Francisco and Imelda Delgado.

As they stood there in silence, a creak from the entrance door could be heard and Lola walked out. "Food's ready." She called out.

"Does Lola know?" Vanessa asked in a hushed tone.

"No, and you're lucky she doesn't." Frankie responded. Then softened a bit, "She probably would've come at you with a belt by now." He teased. He didn't want his sister to be against him. Not after all they've been through.

After they'd finished eating, Vanessa went back into her room- laying down on her side and cradling her knees to make herself into a small ball. It was an odd habit she had, but this was how she felt safe.

Everyone was so quiet during dinner, there wasn't much to say. Lola did ask a few questions about school- and Vanessa lied. Her eyes would occasionally land on Frankie, but he never said a word. For as much as they fought, nunca lo puso el dedo. He'd never put the finger on her. And she'd never tell on him either. Even when they were kids. It was like an unspoken rule between them.

One time many years ago, while they were out shopping, Frankie spotted a rare baseball mitt. It was one of a kind. A limited edition white one that the Dodgers had released that year. Frankie was a big fan of baseball, and he really wanted that glove. But as much as he begged his

father Francisco, they weren't going to get it for him. Then, while both of his parents went to go pay, he went to go swipe the glove, and wasn't caught. When they got home, Vanessa spotted the glove in Frankie's room. And she knew he'd stolen it. Frankie caught Vanessa looking at his glove and she played it off like she didn't see anything.

As she recalled the memory, she smiled. Sure, they had their moments. What brother and sister didn't? But they also understood each other. As she looked around the room, she looked at her Dad's radio which was on top of Sandy's fancy stereo system. She wanted to turn it on, to listen to the corridos. But Vanessa worried that the music wouldn't be there. So, she continued to stare at the radio, and imagined the music playing from it. She replayed the memory of her parents dancing in their room. Eventually falling asleep.

The morning light beamed from Vanessa's window, she turned over and placed the pillow above her head.

"You better get out of bed." Frankie warned her from the other room.

"Or what?" She groaned back.

"Or else."

Vanessa tucked the sheets closer in, creating a warm comfortable cocoon. She then felt a jolt of freezing cold-water seep from her bed sheet. "What the fuck Frankie?"

"Don't make me drag you out, because I will." He cautioned, and she knew he would make good on his threat. She lifted her bandaged hand, as if to indicate that he should think twice

before attempting that. Frankie rolled his eyes, and then told her, “You have ten minutes. Let’s go.”

It felt like the first day all over again, except this time Vanessa actually walked the halls of Liberty High. She searched for the front office, and greeted the receptionist, “Hi, um...I’m new here.” Vanessa told the receptionist.

“Oh, you’re Vanessa Delgado, right? We were waiting for you yesterday, you had everyone very worried.” The receptionist told her. She was a young lady with a wide nose, and an annoyingly pleasant voice. Soft, in a tone that seemed to demean Vanessa’s intelligence—talking to Vanessa as if she were a grade school student. “One moment,” the receptionist told her, as she walked off. She came back after some time with a few papers and handed them to Vanessa, “here’s your schedule. Do you need any help finding your classes? I will gladly fetch one of the security guards to walk with you.” The receptionist offered.

“No thanks. I can manage.” Vanessa snidely replied.

The last thing she wanted was to feel like a criminal being walked into her cell. Vanessa at least wanted the freedom of walking the school grounds. She looked down at her schedule, first period: history class.

## CHAPTER X

December 5, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

Pilar looked forward to seeing Vanessa and Marcos in History class first period. But she could tell Mr. Cook was already fed up with their nonsense. Anytime the three of them would walk into class, he'd groan. "Y'all better behave, or I'm sending you to I.S.S."

Pilar, Marcos, and Vanessa were that one group in class that were obviously having way more fun than everyone else. Marcos was a notorious class clown, and he'd make both Pilar and Vanessa laugh by making fun of Mr. Cook's size or his Southern drawl. "Y'all better behave," Marcos mocked. "What was that?" Mr. Cook said as he swiftly turned around, chalk dust clouds looming above his elf-like face. Snickering could be heard from Marcos, Vanessa, and Pilar. "Am I going to have to separate you three?"

"Nombre, sir." Marcos hollered out. He then looked back at the girls while sneering and flashing them a devilish grin.

"Keep it down, Salazar." Mr. Cook said to Marcos as he went back to writing on the chalkboard.

Pilar looked over to Vanessa, who was looking down. Her giant, shiny, frizzy curls hiding her face. Pilar really liked the way Vanessa's curls framed her face, they were parted to one side and accentuated her heart shaped face. When Vanessa finally looked up, she had finished a drawing of Mr. Cook with a big cloud over his head and small dots that seemed to

resemble flies. It was true that Mr. Cook seemed to have an odd scent about him. He smelled like wet clothes that hadn't dried completely. Sometimes his musty scent was reminiscent of food that had gone bad. Like molded, rotten cheese. It was obvious to Pilar that Mr. Cook rarely brushed his teeth, he had dark yellow stains. He always had on hand a giant mug filled with Coca-Cola.

Pilar tried to contain her laughter when she saw Vanessa's drawing, but ultimately ended up shaking in her seat from her suppressed giggles.

"Ms. Nieto, Ms. Delgado, may I ask what's so funny?" Mr. Cook snapped. His patience was wearing. The rest of the students started *Ooo*-ing in unison, while Vanessa quickly hid the drawing underneath her notebook. But not quick enough. "Ms. Delgado, may I see that?"

"What sir?" Vanessa dismissively replied.

"Don't get smart with me Ms. Delgado, hand it over or I'm sending both of you to the office."

Vanessa reluctantly handed over the drawing to Mr. Cook, the rest of the students were peering over his shoulder to see the drawing. The boy sitting in front of Pilar could see the drawing and yelled to the class, "Oh sir, they're saying you stink." The class started to roar with laughter.

"Quiet, be quiet." Mr. Cook said as he tore the paper. His face bright red, beads of sweat dripping from his wiry, white hair. "You two, detention. Come see me after school."

When the class bell rang, Vanessa, Pilar and Marcos walked out together. They would meet at their usual spot in the courtyard until they each had to get to their second period. Sometimes Vanessa would jump at the chance to smoke a bit since the spot was so secluded. The three of them settled in, Pilar leaning up against the wall and Marcos sitting down, his legs crossed with his sketchbook on his lap. Vanessa took out her small joint, lit it up and took a drag. Pilar shook her head in disapproval, "You really think that's a good idea right now?"

"What? Does it bother you?" Vanessa asked. "Never bothered you before." She said, inhaling in yet another defiant drag.

"Well, it's 'cause you're already in trouble with Mr. Cook. And if you get caught...I... I don't know what they'd do to you- but it wouldn't be good." Pilar told her.

"Pilar, for once would you just relax," Vanessa said as she dropped her shoulders, "besides, shouldn't you be more concerned about what you're going to tell your mom?"

Pilar stayed quiet. She was already dreading the fact that she would have to tell her mom that she had to stay late for school because of detention. Pilar wasn't even sure how she would get a hold of her. Ximena had started a new job working at a clothing factory where she was helping to sew jeans. "I think I'll just lie and say I'm staying for creative writing club again. She didn't find out last time." Pilar said to Vanessa, then she looked over to Marcos who was still busy sketching- but he heard what Pilar had said.

Marcos recalled how his cousin took care of him when he was too inebriated to get back home that first day they hung out with Vanessa in the park. Pilar stuck with him as they walked around campus a couple of times until they'd stopped to watch the football team practice. Pilar

watched as her cousin stared at the football players, then recognized two faces- his attackers. She froze. *Why aren't they locked up?* Pilar thought. A part of her wanted to jump out at them and scratch their eyes out. Another part of her knew that she just wasn't strong enough to take them down.

As they huddled and ran across the field, Pilar tugged Marcos, who was intensely staring at the players, and asked him, "Marcos, you should say something."

"What do you mean?"

"About them, they shouldn't be allowed to come to school, let alone play football." Pilar said as she pointed at the players.

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?" She asked Marcos, trying to understand where he was coming from. It didn't make sense to her. She'd always learned that if someone had done wrong, that they should be held accountable for it. They had hurt him. They needed to be punished for what they had done to him. "What about your dad, or you mom? They haven't tried finding these guys?"

"Aye por favor, they're just glad I didn't ruin Renee's pictures. Look, you don't understand. It's too hard to explain." Marcos turned to face his cousin, then back to the field. "I'm not afraid of them." He said to Pilar. Marcos wasn't sure if he meant it, but he hoped he sounded convincing.

Pilar looked behind her to see the sea of students still wandering around campus grounds, then she spotted her sister Cecilia. Cecilia was walking with a group of girls- all from the dance team that Cecilia was now a part of. Pilar rolled her eyes. All the girls in the group seemed superficial to Pilar. Pilar noted that Cecilia even began to dress and act like them. Cecilia was even forcing their mom to buy her the latest styles of clothes and shoes just to fit in with her new group of friends. No longer did Cecilia try to match with Pilar. Pilar didn't care. But Pilar did wonder why Cecilia was trying so hard to fit in with those girls.

When Pilar turned around, she noticed that Marcos was working on an intricate drawing of a beach shore and sunset.

“That’s pretty, almost looks like the beaches we used to go to as kids.” Pilar said.

Marcos stayed silent, giving her a slight smile. As Pilar’s eyes scanned the page, she saw some initials etched in the corner- *V&M*.

Pilar had suspected something for a while, but she never pressured Marcos to confess anything to her. At least, she hoped he didn't feel that way. But Pilar was almost certain that Marcos was seeing Victor. She'd caught them a few times 'hanging out', and it was obvious. Obvious in the way that they would look at each other, the way they would playfully touch each other when they thought no one was looking. Pilar's eyes met Vanessa's and they gave each other a knowing look. It was one of those things that was never said aloud, just understood. Vanessa observed the drawing, tilting her head to be able to orient herself to the image of the shore and sunset. “That’s pretty dope, Marcos,” Vanessa remarked, “Kind of reminds me of the sunsets I'd see back in San Diego.”

“Thanks.” Marcos replied.

“You never told me you were good at drawing.” Vanessa said.

“He’s good at painting too.” Pilar exclaimed, remembering the painting he made for his mother of the Virgin Mary that now hung in the hallway near Renee’s quinceañera photos. “It’s just he’d rather be known as a smart ass than a talented painter.”

“Wow, impressive. A regular Picasso. I can’t draw worth a crap.” Vanessa snarked.

“We all have our talents,” Marcos said as he finished sketching one last bit of the shore before deciding to close the sketchbook and put it back in his book bag. “I’m sure you have yours.” Marcos said to Vanessa.

“I’m good at getting high and running from my problems, that count?” Vanessa joked.

“Hmm, you *are* pretty good at that.” Marcos bantered. “Anyway, I’m going to get going. See you huercas later.” Marcos grabbed his book bag and walked off, blending in with the crowd. Leaving Vanessa and Pilar alone.

Vanessa was still trying to figure out Pilar, she wasn’t sure what to make of her. Vanessa decided that Pilar was an awkward girl, with her wiry frames and stringy hair. But even though Pilar didn’t talk much, Vanessa could tell there was a lot going on inside her mind. Marcos was always a good comedic buffer between them, making it easier for the girls to be around each other. But when they were alone, they weren’t sure how to interact.

“Are you going to go to class today?” Pilar asked, breaking the silence after some time.

“Thinking about it.” Vanessa replied dryly. She’d occasionally attend class whenever the mood struck her, which was rare. And even though Vanessa was doing all the work and getting decent grades- it was only a matter of time before her lack of attendance would catch up to her.

At least, that's what Pilar felt. Pilar worried for Vanessa, but Vanessa made it seem like she had everything under control. As if she knew how to navigate the world better than most people. Pilar envied that about Vanessa. The way she never seemed to worry about anything. And if Vanessa did worry, she never showed it. Pilar wondered why Vanessa acted that way, and why she would never open up. She found it almost annoying how carefree Vanessa was.

A few months ago, Pilar learned that Vanessa had lost both her parents in a car accident. Pilar only knew about this because she overheard a conversation between Vanessa and Frankie. And though this wasn't something that Vanessa openly shared with Pilar, it helped Pilar understand Vanessa. To Pilar, Vanessa seemed more complex than she let on. Pilar could sense that Vanessa was trying to mask her pain by acting so cool and in control.

"Vanessa," Pilar started, not really sure with what she was going to say next, "do you ever think about the future?"

The wind had blown Vanessa's curls, she used the back of her hand to brush them away as she replied, "Not really, if I'm being honest. Why?"

"It's just I'm- I'm curious? I don't know." Pilar said, as she pushed up the frames of her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

"Pilar, I don't know what's going to happen. But I'll figure it out. One thing's for sure, I have to move out of Lola's house." Vanessa told her.

Vanessa thought about how tense she and Frankie had been lately. He'd been working at a new mechanic shop and wasn't getting along with his new coworkers. Especially since he had accidentally hit on the boss's girlfriend. Everyone at the mechanic shop pegged Frankie as a lowlife. But Frankie didn't care, he and Vanessa had that in common. They walked around with

a sort of carefree swagger that insinuated they knew more about the world than the people around them. Frankie was still trying to get Vanessa to settle into Eagle Pass. They'd have the same argument over and over- she wanted to drop out and work, and he was adamant about her finishing school. She tried to appease her brother by occasionally going to class, but, just as she had suspected, school was just not for her. Even though everything came fairly easy to Vanessa, she couldn't stand sitting in a classroom all day long. Her mind would wander, traveling to every corner of her memory.

It'd been a while since Vanessa had thought about her parents.

She still hadn't adjusted to her new reality. Lola and Frankie, however hard they tried, could never fill the shoes of Imelda and Francisco. Whenever her parents' memory would cross her mind, Vanessa could feel a pang in her heart, it ached. It was all consuming and would sometimes keep her up at night. She knew she missed her mom and dad, but she didn't allow their memory to seep in. She'd block it. As soon as the sadness would begin to overwhelm her, she'd numb herself. As much as she could. In every way she could.

Pilar wondered how much time she had left for the bell to ring. As she turned to try and glance up at the courtyard clock, a cool, humid breeze made Pilar tremble. Pilar had a knack for getting cold easily, she wrapped her arms around herself, teeth tattering.

"You alright?" Vanessa asked.

"Ccc...oo...l...d." Pilar replied through her teeth. Vanessa grinned and took off her coat. Handing it off to Pilar. "Wh..at...about...youu?" Pilar asked.

“I’ve lived through brutal London winters. So, no offense, but this is nothing.” She teased. “Just give it back to me in detention.”

Pilar had almost forgotten. *How am I going to tell my mom about that?* She thought. The bell rang, and both girls made their way from the courtyard back inside Liberty High.

After school, Pilar found her sister Cecilia outside the pick-up area with her dance friends. “Ceci,” Pilar called out, “come.” Cecilia gestured at her friends to give her a moment and walked over to her sister.

“What is it Pilar?” Cecilia asked her sister, annoyed.

“I need you to tell mom that I’m staying for Creative Writing club.” Pilar hastily demanded.

“Tell her yourself, Pilar.” Cecilia dismissed.

“No, you don’t understand. I need you to tell her.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t lie to her, she can see right through me.” It was true. Ximena had a way of knowing. Especially with Pilar.

“Oh, so you’re lying then?” Cecilia’s eyes widened.

“Please, Ceci. If she asks, I’m in Creative Writing. Got it?”

“Ugh. Whatever, fine. You owe me Pilar.” Cecilia walked back to join her friends.

Pilar fastened Vanessa's coat around her, tightening it closer to her body. The idea of having Vanessa's coat made her feel safe.

Pilar braced herself as she walked back to campus. She wasn't ready for an hour of detention with Mr. Cook.

When Pilar walked in, she was surprised to see that Vanessa was already sitting there in the middle of the classroom. They exchanged looks that said *this sucks*. Mr. Cook noticed Pilar walk in and motioned her to come to his desk, "Here," he handed her a few sheets with history facts, "Pick one of these prompts to write about. I expect it at the end of the hour."

"What if I can't think of anything?" Pilar asked with sincerity. History was not her forte, and she was not afraid to admit it. The topic bored her, she didn't care to learn about checks and balances or The American Revolution. Maybe she should care, but whenever Mr. Cook talked, he'd bore Pilar to tears. His voice was so monotone, and Pilar dreaded being in his class.

"Then write about anything else. But I want to see you busy." Mr. Cook ordered, and with that Pilar took the paper from Mr. Cook and began walking to her usual spot next to Vanessa. "Oh, no, no Ms. Nieto. Take a seat three rows away from Ms. Delgado. I will not have you two sitting together."

"Aww come on Mr. C, don't be that way." Vanessa groaned.

"That's Mr. Cook to you, Ms. Delgado. Learn to respect your educators."

Under her breath Vanessa grumbled, "Whatever."

"What was that?" Mr. Cook snapped back.

“Nothing, Mr. Cook.” Vanessa replied dryly.

Pilar’s eyes met Vanessa’s and she made a face as if to say *oh well*. Pilar took her seat and looked at the sheet in front of her. She already knew she had no interest in talking about any of the Founding Fathers or her thoughts on the Battle for the Alamo. She turned the paper over, a blank page. Pilar sifted through her bag and found her favorite pen. The one wrapped in brightly patterned fabric with Santa Maria Desert flowers. She began to instinctively write her name on the top right corner- *Pilar Nieto*. She stared at her name, remembering that her mother had once told her she was named after her great-grandmother whom she’d never met. She remembered that her mom had explained that her name meant pillar- which honors the Virgin Mary. Pilar felt her name didn’t suit her sometimes, she found the meaning behind it too overwhelming a title to bear. Pilar looked over to Vanessa.

Vanessa actually enjoyed history. Partly because her father, Francisco, instilled that innate curiosity of the world around her. Francisco had travelled so much, had taken his family to many parts of the world. Vanessa was fascinated with how different each culture was. How different every country was, and how they also shared many similarities. She recalled the few times that she, her dad and Frankie would walk the crowded streets of London- everyone would stare at them because they stood out since they were Latinos. But whenever they were together, the world around them didn’t seem to matter. Vanessa recalled a picture of the three of them standing in front of Big Ben. She actually hated her time in London, only because she didn’t have many friends and didn’t spend nearly as much time as she wanted with her dad. Vanessa decided to write about the time they explored all the tourist sights while living in London.

Pilar scribbled in the corners of her notebook. Her eyes wandered around the room. She looked over to Vanessa again and observed Vanessa’s hair, her eyes, the way her slim fingers

gripped her pencil as she rapidly wrote. Pilar stared down at her own page. Her pen met the paper,

*Your world is vast,*

*Distant, captivating*

*If only you allowed others to disembark onto your land,*

*Step into the curious maze of your mind,*

*Venture into the depths of your ...*

Pilar stopped. She realized she was writing about Vanessa. She couldn't make sense of what she was feeling. Whenever she was around Vanessa, she'd feel her heart stop. She turned over to see Vanessa, and the feelings inside her intensified. She put the paper aside.

She attempted to write about the Alamo instead.

Once they were finished with detention, Vanessa offered Pilar a ride home. "Frankie will be here any minute, he just got out of work." Vanessa said to Pilar. As they waited, Vanessa looked over to Pilar- she could see Pilar's face drift and snapped her fingers, "Hey chick, did you sneak into my bag or something? Don't tell me you've been smoking without me." Vanessa joked.

"No, never...I...I would never smoke..."

Vanessa snorted and playfully pushed Pilar, "Relax, it's a joke. Damn Pilar, you need to lighten up. Like for real."

“Yeah. I guess I’ve never been good at that.” Pilar said, realizing how true that was. She thought back to how stiff she had been when she was trying to dance with her mom at Renee’s quince.

She remembered how wooden she felt in her mother’s arms. But the music, the music felt good.

“Vanessa, do you dance?” Pilar asked without thinking. She immediately blushed at her own question. *Why would I ask Vanessa that?* She thought to herself.

“Hmm...I mean, I know how to dance if that’s what you’re asking. Why, do you?” Vanessa said through a grin.

“No. Not really. But I’ve always wanted to learn. My sister knows how to and so does my mom.” Pilar said through a gulp. Her palms were a little sweaty, and she could feel the cool air as it breezed between her fingers- causing Pilar to shiver. “But they never showed me anything.”

“Have you ever tried?” Vanessa asked.

Pilar shook her head no. Vanessa, without hesitation, put out her hand for Pilar. “Right now?” Pilar asked.

“Yeah, we’ve got some time. I can show you a little salsa.”

Pilar nervously laughed, “No...no, it’s okay.”

“You want to learn, don’t you? I promise, it’s not that hard once you know the basics. Come on.” Vanessa reached for Pilar, and Pilar carefully accepted Vanessa’s hand.

Vanessa pulled Pilar in, placing her hand on Pilar’s hip. “Okay, so the important thing to know about salsa is you have to feel the music and sway your hips.” Vanessa placed both her

hands on the sides of Pilar's waist and began to move Pilar's hips side to side. Pilar couldn't help but stiffen. "Okay, but you have to loosen up Pilar. Come on. I know there's no music playing but imagine Celia Cruz or something."

"Okay." Pilar said while moving robotically. She tried to loosen up. She looked at Vanessa's hands on her waist- she could feel the tingling sensation in her stomach again. Her heart began to race. Pilar took a deep breath and started to let go. Letting her hips sway with Vanessa's hand.

"There you go." Vanessa told her. "Okay, now try this. You're going to move your feet one by one- forward and back. Ready? Like this." And Vanessa began to demonstrate to Pilar how to move her feet. Pilar watched, smiled. "Now you." Vanessa instructed.

"No, I can't," Pilar's face started to feel hot. "I feel dumb."

"Don't feel dumb, you're learning. Come on. Ready? One, two, three."

Pilar started to play *La Vida es un Carnival* in her head. And she wondered if that was the same song that Vanessa was thinking of. She watched as Vanessa rhythmically moved her hips and feet in synchronization. Pilar could barely keep up, but she could feel the rhythm through Vanessa's motions. Pilar started to let go, allowing the music in her head to get louder as they danced.

Then they were really dancing. Vanessa even twirled Pilar a few times. The movements started to flow as Pilar started to loosen up.

"You sure you don't know how to dance?" Vanessa asked in the middle of a turn.

“Promise.” Pilar stopped. She was slightly out of breath. She could feel the cold air through her nose as she inhaled deeply. “Where’d you learn to dance?” Pilar asked.

“My mom. She taught me.” Vanessa said. “She was really good too. She’d always play some cumbias while she cooked, and we’d dance in the kitchen.” Vanessa thought back to her dad’s radio, “she and my dad would dance a lot too.” She replayed the memory of them in their room, dancing. Vanessa’s mood changed, she stopped.

“I’m sorry Vanessa. I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s okay. You know, the truth is I don’t talk about them with anyone. Not even Frankie.”

Pilar could see Vanessa’s mind drift. She knew this was something that Vanessa had kept deep inside. “You can talk to me Vanessa. I’ll listen.”

Vanessa gave a half-hearted smile, “Thanks. I may take you up on that someday.”

Just then, Frankie drove up in his truck, and honked. The brakes squealed as he halted in front of them. Vanessa struggled to open the side door, Frankie was shuffling through his CDs when he looked up and saw Pilar.

“Can we give Pilar a ride?” Vanessa asked.

Frankie finally agreed, “Sure. Hop in.”

While they were on the road, the cabin of the truck stayed completely silent. Pilar was scrunched up in the back seat if you could call it a back seat. She held her knees close to her chest.

“Have you girls eaten?” Frankie asked.

“Whatcha think?” Vanessa replied with sass.

“Lola’s making pozole.” He looked back at Pilar, “you could come have dinner with us if you wanted?” He said to Pilar.

Pilar was excited at the thought, but wasn’t sure how her mother would react, “I need to ask my mom. But if she says yes, then I’d love to.”

“Well we’re almost there, right? Let’s see what your mom says.”

Pilar could already hear her mother’s answer. Ximena was distrusting, especially with people who weren’t blood related. When Frankie’s truck pulled up, Ximena was already waiting outside, “Why didn’t you call me? If Cecilia hadn’t told me you were in your writing club, I would’ve already been calling the police.”

“I’m fine, it went a little long. I didn’t want you to have to come back after you picked up Ceci.” Pilar lied. She worried her mom could sense it but tried to brush off the feeling. Pilar could hear the exhaust pipe of Frankie’s truck behind her, she was trying to build up the courage to ask her mom to have dinner at Vanessa’s. “Mami,” she started, “I..I was wondering if – “

“Why is Frankie parked there?” Ximena questioned as Frankie waved at Ms. Nieto coolly. Ximena crossed her arms, as if to show Frankie that she was the authority figure. She was stone and would not be easily softened.

“Um...they invited me over to dinner. Can I go?”

Ximena raised an eyebrow, “I made pollo and arroz. You’re having dinner here.” She stated firmly to Pilar.

“Mami, please.”

“Another time Pilar. Next time you want to have dinner at your friends, call me before I slave away making my daughter a home cooked meal.”

Ximena was an expert at guilt tripping, something Pilar was keenly aware of.

Pilar, defeated, walked over to Frankie’s truck. She was fighting the urge cry. Pilar felt silly at the thought of her frustration. Even though Pilar expected this, she was hoping for some sort of miracle. It was the way Ximena always was, never letting anyone outside the family connect with them.

As soon as Pilar approached the truck, she tried to soften her disappointment. She was actually looking forward to spending more time with Vanessa. Vanessa had been over to her house, but Pilar hadn’t been to hers. “Um...another time. My mom already made dinner. Thanks for the invite though.”

“Of course,” Frankie said. Pilar could see Vanessa’s disappointment through the cracked open window. “You’re welcome at our place anytime.” Frankie told Pilar.

“Pilar,” Vanessa started, inching her way to the edge of her seat so that she could see Pilar, “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Pilar smiled, “tomorrow.”

“Practice the steps I showed you.” Vanessa told her.

“I will.”

Pilar and Vanessa held each other’s gaze a moment. Ximena was already bustling to get the front door open, the engine roared as Frankie started up the truck again signaling that they

were about to leave. Caught in each other's stare, it was as if Pilar and Vanessa could read each other's thoughts, they didn't want to have to leave.

When Pilar entered her home, Marcos was already sitting at the kitchen table. This caught Pilar by surprise, she wasn't expecting to see her cousin in her home. Perplexed, she tilted her head at him and mouthed *what are you doing here?*

"Ama is working late. And Apa is out of town." Marcos replied.

Pilar nodded as she digested the information. Her mind went back to the sketch he'd made earlier in the day, then to Marcos and Victor.

When they finished their meal, Pilar and Marcos went back to her room. Cecilia and Renee were gossiping in the living room, while Ximena continued to clean in the kitchen.

"Nadie me ayuda en esta casa." Ximena grumbled aloud as she complained that no one helped her clean. Pilar peeked out her bedroom door, made a face that said *nope, not me* and carefully closed the door.

"I always clean." Pilar huffed, though Marcos wasn't listening. In between silence, Pilar decided that she wanted to see if Marcos was willing to talk to her, "Marcos, can I ask you something?"

"What?" He replied.

"Don't get mad okay, I'm just curious. Are you and Victor, are you two...?"

"Yes, Pilar. *Shh...*" He said as he placed an index finger over his mouth. Urging his cousin to not say anything more.

"I mean, I kinda knew. But you never talk about it. And it sort of seems like a big deal."

“The less people know the better.”

She studied Marcos, it was as if he was repeating words that weren't his own, “Is that for your benefit, or his?” Pilar asked.

Marcos straightened up from the corner of Pilar's bed and gave her an intense look, “Both. He doesn't want anyone to find out. And neither do I.”

“But the guys...the ones on the football team...do they – “

“They saw us kiss. That's why they came after me. They were trying to teach me a lesson. Victor, Victor lied to them. After the quinceañera he told them that it wasn't what it looked like, that he was playing a prank on me.”

“Oh Marcos.”

“Look. I really care about him Pilar. And I know how he *really* feels about me. I don't care what they think, or what you think. I've never felt this way about anyone.”

They stayed silent.

Pilar was relieved to finally hear the truth from Marcos. But she worried about what this lie was doing to her cousin. After some time, Pilar's curiosity compelled her to ask, “Marcos, how did you know?”

“Know what? That I was gay. I mean, it's not like I was trying to hide it. The only one that's in denial is Apa.”

“But, I mean, how does it feel?” Pilar couldn't figure out what it was that she was trying to ask, but it felt like she was trying to piece something together.

“Feel? Huerca, estas bien metiche.”

“I don’t mean like *that*.” Pilar blushed, then questioned, “Wait, you guys have done it?”

Marcos burst into laughter, “Your virgin ears couldn’t handle the details, Pilar. But yes, we have.”

“Marcos! What?”

“What, it’s not that big a deal.”

“But— “

“Relax, we’re safe. And besides, it’s only been a couple of times.”

“Marcos...um. I don’t know what to say.” Pilar had always been taught to wait for marriage. The idea of sex, of someone getting that intimate, she’d never even fantasized the idea. The idea of her own body made her really uncomfortable. Except when Vanessa was holding her.

Pilar looked at her cousin, who was beaming with gloat, “Marcos, please be safe. Not just with, you know, *that*. But, with all of it. I’m worried about those guys on the football team.”

“You think I’m not? It’s okay, Victor will protect me. I trust him.”

Pilar didn’t know Victor very well, but she hoped that Marcos was right.

Pilar and Marcos didn’t talk much after that. Marcos had continued to sketch while Pilar looked over some notes for her English class. This week they were reading *Romeo and Juliet*. Pilar had already read it a few times, *Romeo and Juliet* was one of her favorites. She was the

only one in her class that was excited to read a Shakespearean play. Every now and again Pilar would glance over to her cousin. *I can't believe he's actually seeing a guy.* Pilar thought. There was something about his energy, he seemed light. Happy. *Maybe it feels easy.* She thought. Pilar didn't know much about love, only what she read. Like with Romeo and Juliet. Even though they were juveniles, they were passionate. They died for each other. Sure, they were two naïve teenagers who were maybe a little insane. But the point stands. Their love was a powerful, all-consuming force that united and connected them. Though they didn't really understand it, they didn't question it too much either. Pilar thought back to the idea of forbidden love. She'd never experienced anything like it. She'd never even had crushes on celebrities. She knew that people were beautiful. But she never looked too deeply into it.

She heard a car pull up, and once Pilar's Tia Sofia came to pick up Renee and Marcos, the house got even more silent than before.

Ximena, observing both Pilar and Cecilia's silence, asked, "Y eso?"

Cecilia looked over to her mother, "What?"

"Why are you two so quiet? What's going on? Are you two fighting?" Ximena questioned, looking closely at Pilar. Ximena was so good at reading people, especially her daughters. She could tell Pilar was hiding something.

Pilar nervously shrugged and averted her mother's eyes. Pilar decided she would protect her cousin's secret. Just like he would protect hers if she ever needed him to.

Cecilia, looking over to Pilar, then to her mom, "No, that's just the way Pilar is. She doesn't talk to anyone."

## CHAPTER XI

December 16, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

School was going to let out for Christmas break. Vanessa was oddly looking forward to first period. She had a present for Pilar.

Vanessa had been working on a mixtape of different cumbias, and salsas that Pilar could dance to. After first period History with Mr. Cook, who was in a surprisingly good mood, Vanessa and Pilar walked over to their usual spot.

“Where’d Marcos go?” Vanessa asked Pilar.

“Um, I think he went to meet up with Victor.” Pilar said. She trusted Vanessa, and she knew that Vanessa probably caught on to Marcos’ and Victor’s relationship.

“Hey chick, I got you something for Christmas.” Vanessa said.

Pilar’s heart stopped. She wasn’t expecting Vanessa to get her anything. And she felt bad that she hadn’t thought to get her anything. “No. You shouldn’t have.”

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing.” Vanessa searched in her bag, rummaging each pocket. Frantically trying to find the mix tape. “Shit, I think I left it at my house.”

“Oh, well it’s okay.” Pilar told Vanessa.

“I really wanted to give it to you today, since you said you were going to be leaving to Mexico for Christmas break and I probably won’t see you.”

“Maybe I can ask my mom if it’s okay to go over to your house. Would that be okay?”

Pilar asked Vanessa. Pilar hoped that her mother wouldn’t mind.

At the pickup, Cecilia and Pilar waited for their mother. Once Ximena pulled up, Pilar mustered up the courage to ask, “Ma, can I go to Vanessa’s?” Ximena’s eyes narrowed towards Pilar, then softened.

“Okay, hija. But I’m picking you up at eight. Don’t ask me to sleepover because the answer is no. Understand?” Ximena firmly stated.

Ximena dropped off Pilar at Vanessa’s house. Vanessa was anxiously waiting for her outside. Vanessa smiled with excitement once she saw Pilar get out of the van. Without thinking, Vanessa waved at Ximena. They’d only met on a few occasions, but Vanessa knew how strict Ximena was with Pilar.

When they got inside, Frankie was watching T.V. “Hey, they finally let you free.” Frankie teased Pilar. Pilar shyly smiled. The space wasn’t hers. She felt timid and made herself small to try and not take up too much space in their home. Lola appeared from the hallway and noticed Vanessa with Pilar, “Is this your writer friend, Vani? Hola Pilar, welcome. Welcome to our home.” The Elvis clock began singing *Blue Suede Shoes*, startling Pilar. “Oh, do you like Elvis? I love Elvis.” Lola commented as she imitated Elvis’ dance moves. Vanessa tried to hide her embarrassment, but Pilar grinned at the sight of Lola happily singing along to her Cuckoo clock.

“Lola, I was going to give Pilar something.” Vanessa said, trying to free herself from her aunt’s embarrassing display.

“Okay, hija. I’ll have dinner ready soon. Vamos a tener Chile Relleno.” Lola said as she walked towards the kitchen.

The girls walked inside Vanessa’s room. “This is actually my cousin’s room.” Vanessa said, trying to explain all the posters on the wall. “I don’t listen to any of that stuff.”

“It’s okay. I wouldn’t judge you if you did.” Pilar said.

Pilar looked at all the posters, all the pretty boys that were posed with perfect lighting. Pilar acknowledged that they were handsome, but she couldn’t understand why girls were so obsessed. She knew who they were, but she didn’t really listen to their music.

“What kind of music do you listen to?” Vanessa asked Pilar.

“I don’t know, whatever’s on the radio.” Pilar told her.

“But you have to know what kind of music you like. Don’t tell me you don’t know.”

“I don’t really pay attention. I mostly read.” Pilar could tell from the confused look on Vanessa’s face that she found that strange.

“You’re so weird. But I like that about you. People like you are the ones that make a difference in this world. I can tell you’re very observant. Do you get that a lot?”

“No. No one really notices me,” Pilar admitted.

“I notice you. I’ve heard people say you’re weird, but it’s ‘cause they don’t understand you. I mean, I’m still trying to understand you. But I think I get you. You’re just curious. A curious observer.”

This made Pilar smile as she sat on the edge of Vanessa's bed. Vanessa searched through her closet and drawers until she pulled out a haphazardly wrapped small box. The wrapping paper a sparkling blue with white snowflakes. Vanessa handed it over to Pilar. Pilar looked up at Vanessa, her curls almost covering her face. "Thank you." Pilar said.

"Open it. I want to see your reaction. You might think it's lame, but I think you could use it."

Pilar carefully undid the corners of the wrapping paper and revealed a small mixtape in the palm of her hand. Pilar read *Cumbias, Salsas, and other shit you can dance to* in Vanessa's handwriting.

"A mixtape? Thanks." Pilar told her, holding the tape in her hand like a delicate flower.

"It's music so you could practice."

"Practice?"

"Dancing," Vanessa said, bumping her hips to one side while clapping her hands in another, "Ya know, like I taught you."

Pilar nervously laughed, "well I have a lot of practicing to do then, I guess."

Vanessa looked back to her dad's radio, then back to the mixtape that Pilar was holding ever so carefully in her hand. "It's not going to explode. Hand it here, I'll show you what's on it." Vanessa said as she extended her hand towards the tape in Pilar's hand. Pilar tilted her head up and placed the tape in Vanessa's palm. Vanessa took the tape then walked over to her dad's radio, realizing she hadn't plugged it in since they first moved. Vanessa crouched down to plug the radio in, disconnecting Sandy's stereo system. She popped the tape into the cassette player,

carefully turned the knob so that the music could be heard through the speakers. She turned over to Pilar, who was watching the entire scene play out in front of her. The cumbia music started playing an upbeat track. Vanessa started moving her hips and hands to the music and extended an arm out to Pilar. Pilar shyly accepted, and Vanessa placed her hand on Pilar's waist.

“You remember what I showed you? With the hands?” Vanessa asked as she was moving Pilar side to side.

“I think so?”

Vanessa led Pilar's hands to move into an intricate knot, like the ones that Pilar saw at Renee's Quince. *I'm really doing it.* Pilar thought to herself. Pilar had on the biggest smile on her face. She was grinning. She couldn't help herself in Vanessa's arms.

Vanessa looked at Pilar, her bright smile. She'd never seen Pilar smile so big before- it was contagious. It made her smile too.

The girls were out of breath, and just as the song finished and transitioned to the next track, it began to play a familiar tune to Vanessa. She froze. She was brought back to the memory of her parents dancing in their bedroom, and her stealing a glance at them.

“Are you okay?” Pilar asked, noticing Vanessa.

Vanessa merely nodded her head, slide her back down on the edge of her bed so that she was sitting up against it. Catching her breath, she crossed her right leg over her left, her head tilted to one side and she just listened. “My parents would dance to this.” Vanessa let herself be hypnotized by the music, closing her eyes, and letting the tune bring her back to a different time. A time when her parents were still alive. *¿Muñeca, recuerdas cuando bailamos?* Vanessa

nodded her head yes. *Eres muy buena para bailar, hija. ¿Quién es tu amiga?* Vanessa opened her eyes and saw Pilar standing over her. Caught each other's gaze, Vanessa couldn't help herself. Tears began to roll down her face.

Without hesitation, Pilar met Vanessa where she was. Holding her close, allowing Vanessa's head to rest on her chest. Pilar could feel Vanessa's warmth, hot tears landing on Pilar's shirt as she tightened her embrace. "I'm here, Vanessa. I'm here."

Somehow, those simple words were enough for Vanessa to release what she had been holding onto. She'd been afraid to let the hurt out, to feel the pain that had been sequestered in the recesses of her mind. "I miss them both so much." Vanessa tightened her arms around Pilar, trembling.

"I know. It's okay. I'm here. I'm here, I promise." Pilar could feel Vanessa shake in her embrace. "I don't know what it's like. I wish I knew what to say. But, I'm here." Pilar wished she could figure out the right thing to say. But what do you say to someone whose pain is far beyond what you understand?

"I miss them so much, Pilar. I just. I wish I could see my mom again. It hurts so much. I would give anything to talk to her. To dance with her. To eat her food. To see them dancing in their room. I... I'm so lost without them. Frankie doesn't get me. Lola tries, but I can't talk to her. Why'd they have to die?" Her weeping broke Pilar's heart.

Pilar looked at Vanessa. She wished she could lift the pain from her. Expel it so that it no longer consumed her. She knew Vanessa had so much potential. If she could only see it for herself. She wished in that moment that Vanessa could see herself how *she* saw her. She wished that Vanessa could see how smart she was. How beautiful she was, how her big curls made her

look ethereal, gorgeous. How perfect her face was. Pilar brushed away Vanessa's curls from her face.

Vanessa lifted her eyes toward Pilar, holding her stare for what seemed like a long time. The frames on Pilar's face were sliding down, and Vanessa, without thinking, slid them up for her. The girls shared a laugh. Vanessa felt lighter in Pilar's presence. She'd never felt that before. Not even with her friend Jazmin from middle school. But this felt different. She felt home.

The music stopped, and both girls looked at the radio. "I should get that," Vanessa told Pilar, taking the deepest sigh she had in a long while.

"Vanessa," Pilar started.

"Yes?"

Pilar leaned in and kissed Vanessa.

Vanessa, shocked, pulled away. Pilar immediately regretted what she had just done. *I'm stupid, why did I do that? Please don't hate me. Please, Vanessa...*

Pilar wished she could take it back, "I'm sorry. Please. I'm sorry. I..."

Vanessa leaned in, held Pilar's face, and kissed her. Moving her lips slowly at first. Letting the moment sink in. Pilar allowed Vanessa to move her lips with hers. Allowing it to happen. Realizing this was the first time she allowed herself to not be controlled by fear of reprimand.

Pilar slowly pulled away. Vanessa half-smiled, "Well, that was unexpected," she said to Pilar.

"Yeah. I...I don't...Vanessa."

“It’s okay. I think I’d been wanting to do that too. I just didn’t know. And you sort of caught me by surprise.”

“You wanted to do that too?”

Vanessa nodded her head, grinning. She wiped the remaining tears from her face, got up and retrieved the cassette from her dad’s radio. “It’s funny. I never imagined this for myself. But it all kind of makes sense now.”

“Yeah, I think I know what you mean. I didn’t know I could feel this way about anyone. I care about you so much. And seeing you hurt. I...I just wanted to make it go away.” Pilar admitted.

“I care about you too, Pilar.” Vanessa replied. She handed the mixtape back to Pilar, Pilar stood up and took the mixtape from her hand. Holding it ever so carefully.

“I’ll practice, I promise.” Pilar said to Vanessa.

The air around them seemed different. Magnetic, light, and filled with hope.

## CHAPTER XII

December 18, 1994. Coahuila, Mexico.

The entire ride was quiet. Pilar's mind kept replaying the kiss in her head. She still couldn't believe that had really happened. She also wasn't sure what that meant about her. If it meant that she was gay. But somehow the label didn't seem to matter as much.

Ximena pulled up her van to her father's house. He stood outside the door, waiting for them to arrive. Ximena climbed out of the van, waking Cecilia up from her nap. Pilar waited until her mother greeted her grandfather. Ximena gave her father a beso on the cheek, looked back and called the girls to get down from the van.

Pilar unpacked her things. She sort of wished she were back in Eagle Pass. She wanted to really talk to Vanessa about what happened the other day. She wondered if she could somehow call her. But she knew that that probably wasn't likely.

"Sofía y Tavo?" Abuelo asked Ximena.

"Ya mero llegan. Estaban detrás de mi." Ximena told him, letting him know that the rest of the family would be there soon.

Pilar was relieved by the fact that Marcos would be there soon. She and Cecilia had been tense. Pilar wasn't sure why but decided to be as distant as possible. When they got inside the house, both girls went to claim the room they would be staying in. Though the house was small, there were still plenty of rooms in the house. Pilar would have to share a room with someone, but

it was almost understood between Cecilia and Pilar that they would be sharing rooms with their cousins and not with each other.

“Tienen hambre?” Abuelo asked the girls as they unpacked their belongings. Pilar, with her broken Spanish, replied, “Un poco, yes.” Cecilia nodded in agreement. Abuelo smiled and left the room to prepare a meal for the family.

Cecilia looked over to her sister. She’d been trying to talk to Pilar, trying to connect with her. But she could feel her sister’s apprehension. As if anything Cecilia said would instantly irritate Pilar. Cecilia wondered why Pilar was that way with her. “Pilar,” Cecilia was going to try and get to the bottom of this.

“Yes, Ceci?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“Maybe later Ceci, I’m tired.” Pilar told her sister as she shut the door to her room.

Cecilia stood in the hallway, she could hear her mother and grandfather talking in the other room. All she wanted was to talk to Pilar. And Pilar couldn’t spare her a moment.

Pilar opened her bag, found the Santa Maria pen and her journal. She knew what she wanted to write. The words bubbling inside her felt taboo. Forbidden. But she couldn’t get her mind off of Vanessa. She wanted to talk about it. Write it. Permeate the words onto a page so that it solidified the existence of that moment in time.

And so, she did.

*Vanessa,*

*I never dreamed anything like this was possible*

*I never knew what Selena meant when she talked about forbidden love*

*About how no matter what society thinks, she will love who she loves no matter what.*

*I feel as though I've learned something about myself that I somehow have always known. I think*

*I love you Vanessa. Is that crazy to say? I love you. And no matter what anyone else thinks, no matter what happens. I'm here. And I love you.*

Pilar smiled at the words on her page. She wondered if Vanessa was thinking of her too. She hoped she was doing okay.

Marcos and his family arrived a few moments after Pilar finished writing in her journal. He found Pilar and unpacked his things.

“I can’t believe we’re here. It’s been so long, right?” Marcos said to Pilar.

“Yeah, I can’t remember the last time we were all here like this.” Pilar replied.

“I just hope it goes by fast. I really want to get back to Eagle Pass.”

“Uh huh. You just want to see Victor.” Pilar teased. Marcos glared at Pilar and tossed a pillow her way, she swiftly dodged it and slapped it to her side. “I’m kidding.” Pilar said as she looked back to where the pillow had landed, near her journal. She immediately stuffed the journal back into her bag. Hoping that Marcos didn’t notice. She wasn’t ready to talk about her

and Vanessa with anyone. Although she was curious to see Marcos' reaction, she didn't think that'd be fair to Vanessa.

Once dinner was over, the family stayed up late playing music and catching up. Cecilia wasn't doing much talking. She'd been quiet all throughout dinner and wasn't up for gossiping with Renee. "Mami, can I go to my room?" Cecilia asked Ximena.

"Yes, hija. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm just tired." Cecilia lied.

Pilar noticed her sister's demeanor. She wasn't her usual annoying, bubbly self. But she didn't think much of it. She and Marcos were too busy playing cards.

As Cecilia entered her room, she realized that she hadn't packed her toothpaste. She decided to try and find some in Pilar's bag. She carefully entered the room, searched through the bag. She couldn't find the toothpaste, but she found Pilar's journal. Cecilia couldn't help herself. She cracked the journal open and began reading.

### **December 24, 1994. Coahuila, Mexico.**

Noche Buena. Christmas Eve. The family had been up late exchanging presents. Pilar actually found herself enjoying her time in Coahuila- but she had been counting the days for her return ever since they arrived. She couldn't wait to get back to Vanessa.

Ximena was talking with her sister, Sofia, they'd been gossiping and drinking most of the night. Sofia went to pour herself another glass and asked her sister, "So, what are Pilar's plans for college?"

Ximena realized she hadn't thought that far ahead. She was too busy trying to keep the family afloat. Trying to avoid getting kicked out of her rental home. The factory job was barely paying her enough to help maintain her home. And her mind was elsewhere. She'd been hesitant to come to Coahuila, feared that her ex-husband would appear and try to take her girls away from her. She wanted to keep her daughters close to her. As close as possible for as long as possible, so that she could make sure that they were safe. But she also feared the fact that her father lived alone. Worried that something would happen to him and they wouldn't be there to take care of him. College? How could she pay for Pilar's college? "I'm not sure, Sofia." Ximena confessed.

"Oh, well I ask because Marcos tells me she was thinking of going to New York. And I don't know about that. New York is so far. Such a dangerous city. And expensive too."

"New York?"

"Yes. I worry about your girl, Ximena. I know you're doing your best. But be careful not to lose sight of your girls. Remind them what's important. *Familia*."

Ximena had no idea her daughter was thinking of moving so far away. She would not allow that to happen. She couldn't. Sofia was right, New York was a dangerous city.

Pilar sifted through her bag to try and find her journal. She searched and searched but could not find it. *I left it here, I'm sure I did*. Pilar looked on her bed to see if she had perhaps misplaced it. She undid the bedsheets and tossed the pillow to one side. *Where is it?* As she continued to search, there was a knock at the door. But not from her room. No, it was from outside. She wondered who it could be so late on Christmas Eve. Pilar imagined that maybe it was a relative stopping by to say Merry Christmas, but she couldn't think of who. It was true that

she wasn't familiar with every single family member of hers. She blamed her mother for that. Pilar slowly creaked the door open and saw a tall, slender man with curly hair standing at the doorway. She recognized who it was, her father- Cristobal.

“Que haces aquí?” Tavo asked Cristobal in a malevolent tone.

“I came to see my family, Tavo. Where's Ximena?”

“You are not welcome here. You need to leave.” Tavo demanded.

Pilar saw her mother enter from the back door. Her face paled in expression when she saw Cristobal standing at the doorway. It was as if she had seen an evil spirit come to life.

“Cristobal.” Ximena said in a low murmur, barely able to utter his name.

“Ximena, amor. It's been so long. I've missed you.”

The room fell silent as Cristobal let himself in. Abuelo was standing in the kitchen with his daughters, and with his cane he slowly maneuvered himself towards the living room where Cristobal was now standing. Though he was slender, it felt as though he were a gargantuan statue that overtook the entire space of the small adobe home.

“Senor Nieto, I heard about your wife. So sorry about her passing.”

“Vete. No deberías estar aquí. ¿Te siguen buscando, lo sabías? Y si, te van a encontrar. Dios no castiga, pero diablos sí.” Abuelo Nieto told him in an all-knowing sort of way.

“You don't know what you're talking about. Where are my girls? Where are my girls, Ximena?” Cristobal boomed.

“Don't hurt us, Cristobal. We don't want any trouble.” Ximena pleaded.

“I want to see my girls, where are they?”

Pilar knew that her sister was in the other room across from hers, she could see the shadow of her footsteps moving from underneath the door. Pilar knew that her father was capable of hurting her mother. And she couldn't allow him to hurt her. Pilar slowly opened the door, and for the first time in many years she laid eyes on the man who helped bring her into this world.

“Pilar, my oh my you've grown mija.” Cristobal said to her.

“Don't you dare get near her, Cristobal. I mean it.” Tavo warned.

Cristobal motioned for Pilar to come to him. Pilar wasn't sure what to do. Her eyes darted towards her mother's eyes. She could see the fear behind them. Pilar walked closer to Cristobal, she could see Marcos from the corner of her eye standing near Sofia and Abuelo Nieto. Tavo was still standing near the doorway, it looked like he was ready to take Cristobal down at any given moment. *Renee must be with Ceci*, Pilar thought. Cristobal reached out his arms and hugged his daughter. Pilar felt suffocated. Her breathing stuttered and she felt like she wasn't able to get enough air. She'd always wanted to know more about the man standing in front of her, but she realized that this man was not family to her. He was an evil presence. A poison that she unluckily shared blood with. Pilar felt then that she did not want to ever see or hear from this man again, if she could help it. She could see the fear in her mother's eyes, and Pilar had always known her mother to be a strong-willed woman.

Without warning, as soon as Pilar was released from his grasp, Tavo pulled Cristobal by his shirt collar and sent him tumbling down. “Don't touch them, Cristobal. You will never touch them again. You hear, you fucking worthless piece of shit.” Tavo began to throw his fists at

Cristobal, Cristobal grabbed Tavo's fist and pulled him down with him. Cristobal threw out his right fist towards Tavo's face, but Tavo was able to dodge it. He quickly came back and repeatedly punched Cristobal's face.

"Stop, stop, please. Tavo...TAVO." Ximena yelled out. And just as Tavo was about to throw another blow at him, Cristobal pulled a gun from his boot. He pointed it between Tavo's eyes.

Sofia began to wail, pleading for Cristobal to not hurt him. Tavo raised his hands and they both slowly got up.

"I just want to see my family Tavo, look at the mess you've made." Cristobal said as he wiped the blood from his lip.

Pilar stood still. She remembered how Tavo was the one that had come to Marcos' rescue when the two football players jumped him. And here he was again, trying to rescue them from her father. Cristobal looked back at his family. Sofia was sobbing uncontrollably. Marcos was trying to calm his mother down and keep himself from trying to run over and get the gun away from Cristobal.

Ximena walked up to Cristobal, carefully running her hand by his face. Brushing his beard, then slowly using her hand to bring his down so that the gun was no longer facing Tavo. Ximena looked deep into Cristobal's eyes. Defying the power he was trying to assume. "Your words could be so soft, Cristobal. You knew how to string them together and make them come to life. I'm sorry that life has been cruel to you and that no one has ever shown you how to manage it. But this isn't the way. You've hurt us too much Cristobal. Please. Please, have some mercy.

Leave us be. Find a new way but leave my family out of this.” Ximena said, trying to appeal to his sensibilities.

Cristobal’s gaze softened. It was as though her words had tamed him. Though he still had a firm grip on his gun, he loosened his fist and forcefully kissed Ximena. As he pulled away, he looked around the room. Then to Pilar, who had not removed her eyes from him. Pilar wondered if Cecilia could hear everything that was happening, she had still managed to keep her door shut. Pilar was glad her sister hadn’t tried to come into the living room. Cecilia undoubtedly heard everything. But at the very least, she wasn’t in the middle of all this.

“You can always come find me,” Cristobal told Pilar. Pilar stayed silent. She knew she would never try to find him. Pilar wished, now more than ever, that she was with Vanessa.

Cristobal placed his gun back inside his boot, raised his hands at Tavo and walked out of Abuelo Nieto’s home.

“We should leave.” Tavo told the rest of the family. There was no protest. Pilar returned to her room and quickly packed her bags. Still no journal in sight.

## CHAPTER XIII

December 26, 1994. Eagle Pass, Texas.

The sun hadn't even come out yet when Vanessa heard the phone ring. She rushed to pick it up. "Hello?" There was some part of her that was hoping to hear a certain voice on the other line.

"Vanessa, it's me. Pilar." Vanessa smiled wide. She'd been thinking about her and had been waiting to hear from her. She wasn't sure when she would hear her voice again. And to have her wish realized, it made her feel so happy.

"Pilar, how was your trip? Why are you calling so early?"

"Vanessa, could I see you?"

"Sure, but will your mom let you come over right now?"

"I was sort of hoping you could pick me up?"

"Is everything okay?" Vanessa asked, Pilar sounded different and it worried her.

"I think so. I don't know. I don't really know what's going on."

Vanessa thought for a moment. She'd only driven Frankie's truck a couple of times. But he was fast asleep now. She could sneak out the truck and be back in time before he wakes up. "I'll be right over." Vanessa told Pilar.

Vanessa shakily drove over to Pilar's house. Pilar was waiting outside for her, sitting on her driveway. Vanessa could see that Pilar looked distressed. Vanessa knew something was wrong. She clumsily parked the truck near her driveway and climbed down. Pilar didn't even wait a beat, she rushed over to Vanessa and held her tight. This was the only embrace Pilar ever wanted to be in. The only one that truly made her feel safe. Pilar couldn't help herself. She began to weep in Vanessa's arms.

"What is it? What happened?" Vanessa asked.

Pilar told her about what had happened while in Coahuila. How her father had surprised them, how he pulled out a gun on her uncle. Vanessa was fuming.

Pilar circled around her words, as if she were trying to process what she had just experienced. There was so much that had happened in such a short amount of time. And she was trying to make sense of it all. The only thing that made sense to her was Vanessa. "Vanessa, do you think he'll come find me?"

"No, no he won't." Vanessa told her. "He won't find you. He won't hurt you. Not if I can help it."

Pilar sighed, and leaned in to kiss Vanessa. A weightless feeling overcame Pilar. This is what she had been looking forward to. To be reunited with Vanessa. It had only been a few days, but the days felt long. Pilar hoped that she could have more time with Vanessa. She feared that her father would someday find her. But maybe with Vanessa, maybe they could move as far away as possible. *New York*, Pilar thought, *don't forget New York*. Pilar imagined a life in New York with Vanessa. The thought of it made her smile.

Vanessa was grateful that Pilar was there in her arms, that she could keep her safe if even for this short time. She wondered how long this could last. She'd already received the letter that she'd been accepted for basic training. She'd made that decision before everything with Pilar happened. Her mind had already been set on the decision to leave once she graduated.

## CHAPTER XIV

March 31, 1995. Eagle Pass, Texas.

Pilar walked around the halls of Liberty High in a daze. The news of Selena Quintanilla's passing didn't seem real. How could something so horrible happen to someone so beautiful? Pilar couldn't understand. Just like she couldn't understand how those boys could hurt Marcos. Or how her father could hurt her mother. She didn't want to understand, to know what their reasoning was. The day felt different. Hazy.

Even though Pilar didn't know Selena, she felt as though she did. Because of what she sang about. She understood love because of Selena. When she found Marcos and Vanessa at their usual spot in the courtyard, their faces were sullen. The news had affected all of them.

Marcos still didn't know what was going on between Vanessa and Pilar. They had kept their secret well hidden from everyone. And even though Pilar did want to tell Marcos, especially since he had confided in her his secret, she couldn't find it in herself to tell him about Vanessa.

But Pilar liked the fact that she had something all to herself. She and Vanessa loved each other. It was clear in the way they would praise each other, defend each other, support, and look out for one another.

Except, Vanessa kept avoiding telling Pilar that she would be leaving for basic training soon. She would be leaving for Georgia shortly after graduation. Vanessa wanted to prolong

telling Pilar as long as possible. She enjoyed every moment she got to spend with Pilar and didn't want to ruin it with her news.

Pilar had been working on college applications. She applied to some Texas schools, but had her heart set on NYU. *I have to get in*, Pilar thought. She had been working hard on her grades. On making sure that she looked good for college admissions. She hoped it was enough.

Pilar, seeing Marcos and Vanessa's somber faces, broke the silence, "I can't believe it either." She said, knowing they would understand what she was referring to.

"Yeah. I can't believe Selena's dead. So crazy." Marcos replied.

"I didn't really listen to her music, but I know she was a big deal. And she was young too." Vanessa added.

Pilar nodded at Vanessa's reply. Thinking back to the night of Renee's Quince, and when she heard *Amor Prohibido*. Why that song struck such a chord with her, she wasn't sure. But when she looked at Vanessa, the lyrics made sense. The idea that the voice who sang those words was gone felt as though the words had left with her.

APRIL 20, 1995.

Cecilia had been holding Pilar's journal. She learned about Pilar and Vanessa. But her mind had been distracted. Ever since Christmas Eve when she was sequestered in her room with her cousin while her father terrorized her family, she hadn't felt herself. She wanted to talk to someone, but the girls on her dance team only wanted to talk about boys. And Cecilia didn't know how to bring this up with her mom. She didn't know who to turn to.

Some time had passed, and Cecilia's mind circled back to the journal hidden in her drawer. She'd been wanting to tell Pilar that she knew her secret, that she knew about her and Vanessa. But what good would that do? What good would it do to tell her sister that she had snuck into her bag and read through her journal. Cecilia's only wish was that Pilar treat her like family. Instead, Pilar treated her like nothing. Maybe this was why?

As Cecilia walked into her room, she looked at the journal. She thought long and hard about what to do. She'd been waiting for the right time to try and confront her sister about what she knew. But she couldn't find it within herself to approach Pilar. Especially with how dismissive Pilar was with her. But their mother? Maybe their mother would know what to do? Cecilia leaned on her Catholic teachings to make a decision, she felt that what Pilar was doing was wrong. She felt her mother should know.

Pilar had been working hard to send in her college applications. She was anxiously awaiting letters in the mail to see if she would hear back from them. Some part of her doubted that she could actually get in, but she held on to hope that she did. While Cecilia and her mother were in the living room, Pilar decided to go check the mail. She slowly approached the mailbox, trying not to let her anticipation overwhelm her. Perhaps it was too soon to start sending out acceptance letters? It might not even be in the mailbox. When Pilar unhinged the mailbox door, she sifted through the letters. And found a few with familiar letters heads. Her acceptance letters had arrived.

Pilar was nervous, but excited to see if she got in. When she walked back in the door, she found her mother and Cecilia sitting on the couch, with her journal. Pilar's heart began to race and sink all at once. The way her mother was looking at her made her feel mortified. Of course, she had read through her most intimate thoughts.

“We need to talk, Pilar,” Ximena told her as she motioned for Pilar to sit down.

“Why do you have my journal?” Pilar asked her.

“Cecilia handed it to me. She told me there was something in here I should read. I’m so disappointed Pilar. I’ve taught you better. God does not approve of this. You do know that?”

Pilar could think of nothing to say. Her head hung down, trying to keep it together. She hadn’t done anything wrong. It was innocent what Vanessa and she were doing. And Vanessa made her happy. What she was doing with Vanessa was innocent. She wanted to tell her mother how happy Vanessa made her feel, but she already knew that there would be no point in trying to reason with her.

“You must pray for God’s forgiveness, Pilar. Pray. You are to go to confession and confess your sins. And you are never to see Vanessa again, you understand?”

“What? You can’t do that. You can’t force me not to see her.”

“She is a bad influence on you, making you think these repulsive thoughts...it’s not right. Not in God’s eyes, Pilar. And Sofia tells me you want to leave for New York? What? Why would you want to leave us? We are your family, Pilar. You won’t make it out on your own like that.”

All at once her mother was crushing every possible dream and hope that Pilar was holding on to. Pilar felt as though everything around her was crashing down on top of her and there was no saving it. She could do nothing to save it. How could she make her mother understand that this was important to her? That she needed to pursue her dreams, that she would find a way to make it. Why did everyone close to her doubt her? No, not everyone. Vanessa

didn't doubt her. Vanessa believed in her. She was the only one that believed in her. "You don't get to tell me what to do. I'm practically an adult now, I can make my own decisions. Besides, look at all the stuff that happened in Mexico. We're just supposed to sit here and pretend that that didn't happen? Like he doesn't exist? You knew he was trying to find us and put us all in danger. If anyone is irresponsible here, it's you." Pilar blurted out to her mother. She had never talked back to her up until now. This was unlike her. She'd always just done what her mother told her, would just allow her mother to make decisions for her life. And that was exactly what she was trying to get away from. Pilar wanted to make decisions for herself.

"Fine. You're an adult. You can make your own decisions. But no daughter of mine will go against the law of God. You want to lead a life filled with sin? So be it. But you are no longer my daughter so long as you continue to do so." Ximena got up and threw Pilar's journal in the trash. She walked away, leaving Cecilia and Pilar alone. Pilar said nothing to Cecilia, only gave her look that said, *how could you?* Pilar rushed into her room, locked her door, and fell to her knees. Letters still in her hand. Pilar wished her mother could understand her. Why was she so closed-minded. But if that's the way she saw it, then fine. Pilar didn't need her mother's support. She would figure it out, one way or another.

Later that evening, Pilar searched for the phone in the kitchen. She dialed Vanessa's number and waited for Vanessa to pick up. She could hear the ringing. Pilar held onto the phone, gripping it like it were the only lifeline she had. She heard someone answering the phone, "Hello?" It was a male voice. Frankie.

"Oh, hi Frankie. It's me, Pilar." Pilar said in a hushed tone, hoping that her mother and sister couldn't hear her.

“Pilar, hey. Wow, it’s kind of late, isn’t it?” Frankie said on the other line.

“Yeah, I was sort of hoping to talk to Vanessa, is she awake?”

Franke stayed quiet on the other line. Pilar wondered if the call had dropped. But she heard some shuffling and, “Pilar?” Vanessa.

“Vanessa, it’s me, Pilar.”

“Pilar, are you okay?”

Pilar wasn’t sure how to answer that. There was so much running through her head all at once, and she wasn’t sure what to start with. The idea of never hearing Vanessa’s voice, of never seeing her again. No. Pilar would never allow that to happen, not if he could help it. “Vanessa, I want to see you.”

“Pilar,” Vanessa hesitated. Frankie was still awake so there was no way she could sneak out the truck without him knowing. “I don’t think I can tonight. But maybe your mom can drop you off tomorrow and we can hang out?”

Pilar’s voice began to tremble, “That’s the thing,” she wasn’t sure what to say next, “it’s complicated. Something happened. I need to talk to you.”

“What is it Pilar? You’re worrying me.”

“My mom found out.”

“Found out?”

“About us. About how I feel.”

Vanessa could be heard shuffling and closing a door. “How?”

“I wrote about us in my journal. My sister found it and showed it to my mom. Now my mom’s telling me that I can’t see you ever again.”

“She can’t do that.”

“No, she can’t. I won’t let her. I’ll find a way, Vanessa. But I won’t let her.”

“I love you.” Vanessa said to Pilar. This was the first time that she had ever said that to her. Pilar’s heart stopped, she sighed and said, “I love you too.” Pilar thought about possibly sneaking out the van to go see Vanessa. Could she? What more damage could she do?

It was late when Pilar finally arrived at Vanessa’s house. She had driven so slowly that she was pretty sure it took her at least forty-five minutes to get to Vanessa’s house from hers, even though it was only about fifteen minutes away. When Pilar pulled up, she parked awkwardly behind Frankie’s truck. Got down and tapped at Vanessa’s window. Vanessa’s bed was propped up against the window, when Vanessa opened her eyes and saw Pilar outside- she jumped.

Vanessa met Pilar outside in the cool evening. The stars shone bright and it was just enough to light Vanessa and Pilar’s faces.

“You’re crazy, chick. You must really have a death wish.”

“I needed to see you.” Pilar said, as she held Vanessa close and kissed her deeply. This was unlike Pilar. But maybe this was the new Pilar. The one she had always hoped she could be. Vanessa had shown her how to make her own rules. How not to worry too much about the ones placed upon her. Vanessa had shown her how to dance, how to be comfortable in her body. Vanessa believed in her. She loved her and understood her.

“You’re so different now,” Vanessa told Pilar, “even the way you carry yourself. You’re such a rebel. I love it. Welcome to my side of the tracks.”

“Vanessa, I got the letters.”

“Your college acceptance letters?” Vanessa questioned. Pilar nodded. “Well, did you get in? Don’t leave me in suspense, chick.”

“I haven’t opened them. That’s part of the reason I came here. I need your support.”

“Hey, no matter what you’re going to be a writer. Even if you don’t get in. It’s going to happen for you, I promise.”

“I hope so, one sec I have to get them from the van,” Pilar said as she walked over to her mother’s van to fetch the acceptance letters from UT and NYU.

Pilar’s heart was racing, but in an excited sort of way. Here they were. The first step to finding out what her future would look like. She began with the UT one. She could see herself in Austin, but New York was what she truly wanted. She pierced through the first envelope. Her eyes scanned through the letter and, “I got rejected.”

“What? No way, there must be some mistake.”

“No. It says right here ‘We regret to inform you’...” Pilar felt herself sink. If she didn’t get into UT, then there was no way she would get into NYU.

“Pilar, you still have one more letter. Open it.”

“What’s the point? There’s no way I got into NYU.”

“You don’t know that, here. Hand it over.”

Pilar handed over the second letter to Vanessa. Vanessa used her index finger to rip a hole and slide it through the envelope. She took a moment to read the page and stood perfectly still after having read it. Pilar's heart began to race, "What?" Pilar asked her, "I didn't get in did I?"

"I'm sorry but," Vanessa handed over the letter to Pilar, "you're going to have to start packing soon."

Pilar's eyes scanned the letter. There it was. Everything she'd been working so hard for up until now. She was in. She'd gotten into NYU. Pilar couldn't contain her excitement, she jumped up and down, letter in hand. "I got in! I got in! I can't believe it. Vanessa, Vanessa you have to come with me."

"What?"

"Come with me to New York. You can get a job while I go to school. We can make it work. Come with me."

"I can't." Vanessa said to her. She wished she could, but she had already made a commitment.

"What? Sure, you can. You have to come with me Vanessa. I can't do this without you."

"Pilar," Vanessa realized she had to come clean about her plans. All her life she'd been searching for a place to call home. Her family moved around so much that she never settled down long enough to meet people, let alone connect with them. And then there was Pilar. This wasn't what she had anticipated. Vanessa never thought about relationships up until the moment Pilar kissed her in her room. Pilar was special to her. But Vanessa needed to find her own way.

Find her own dream. *Maybe we could reunite again someday?* Vanessa thought. Her life hadn't been the same since her parents died. She was still learning to navigate her new reality. But knowing someone like Pilar existed, someone that loved her so much. It filled and broke her heart all at once. *I hope we can be together again someday.*

“What is it?” Pilar broke Vanessa’s reverie.

“Pilar, I enlisted.” Vanessa told her in the simplest way she knew how.

“Enlisted? Like, the army?” Vanessa nodded her head yes. Pilar was stunned, she started pacing in the driveway, letters still in her hand. “Why?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of. I’m not going to college, Pilar. Let’s face it. At least with this I’ll have some purpose. And Frankie’s actually okay with this idea.”

Pilar’s thoughts started racing. All at once she had everything she ever wanted, but not all of it. Not her, not Vanessa. What was the point of pursuing all this now without her? Now that Vanessa was in her life, Pilar couldn’t imagine herself without her. Pilar didn’t know what to do. *There has to be some way*, Pilar thought, *this can’t just end. Not like this.* Pilar knelt down, tucked her knees in and cradled her head between her knees as the tears started rolling from her face. In the silence of the night all that could be heard was chirping of the bugs and Pilar sobbing. Vanessa knelt down to Pilar, placing both of her hands on Pilar’s forearms to try and get her to lift her head.

“Pilar, I’m sorry.” Vanessa said as she rubbed Pilar’s arms and ran her fingers through Pilar’s hair. “I didn’t know. I had no idea that you wanted me in your future.”

There was silence, Pilar took a deep breath. Lifted her head and looked away from Vanessa. “So, what happens now?”

Vanessa used her hand to gently pull Pilar’s face towards hers. She cupped both her hands on Pilar’s cheeks. As she rested her forehead on Pilar’s she said, “I don’t know what’s going to happen. But I know what did happen. You came into my life at a time when I really needed someone like you. And you stuck around. The fact that you still want me around is more than I could ever ask for. I’ve never had that. Before you, my mom was the only person that actually took the time to talk to me, hear about my day. Dance with me. And when she left,” Vanessa fought the knot in her throat, “I didn’t know I could feel that much pain. Miss someone so much. I miss my dad too. But my mom and I were close, you know? I miss her so damn much. Pilar, I don’t want to lose you. You’re important to me.”

“Then don’t leave. Come with me, please.” Pilar pleaded.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. We can figure this out.”

“Pilar, please. This is hard for me. I need to find my own way. This is what I want. Who knows? Maybe we can find each other in the future. This doesn’t have to be the end. I just need to do this.”

Pilar couldn’t understand Vanessa. She was such a free roaming spirit, and all of a sudden, she’s decided to become a soldier? “I’m not going to wait for you. If you don’t come with me now, I won’t look for you in the future. This will be it for us.”

“Don’t. Don’t say that.”

“Come with me then.”

“Pilar,” Vanessa stayed silent. She wrestled with the idea in her mind. But no, the army would provide her with stability. And that was the one thing holding her back from saying yes to Pilar, there were too many uncertainties.

Pilar searched through Vanessa’s eyes to see if she could find the ‘yes’ that she was seeking. But it was as if she could see a switch in Vanessa’s mind, she wasn’t going to change it. “Then that’s it?” Pilar questioned. Vanessa didn’t utter a word, she remained silent. As if to solidify that she was firm on her stance. “I guess,” Pilar got up, reached for her mother’s keys, and opened the van door.

“Pilar, wait, don’t leave just yet,” Vanessa begged. But Pilar was done. She turned on the ignition and drove off. Leaving Vanessa with Pilar’s letters by her feet.

When Pilar arrived back at the house, the lights were still off. She managed to sneak in through her bedroom window and carefully placed her mother’s keys on the kitchen island where she always left them. Pilar had been fighting back tears the entire night. As Pilar was about to turn back to go to her room, she saw the trashcan where her mother had tossed her journal. She looked around to make sure no one was watching, dug out her journal from the trash. At the very least she could hold on to her words.

As Pilar made her way to her room, she spotted a small silhouette. It was Cecilia. Pilar hissed and went past her.

“Pilar,” Cecilia whispered to her sister, “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? You had no business going through my journal. Then you went and showed it to mom? I don’t get you. What did I ever do to you?”

“You ignore me. You pretend like I don’t exist.”

“Yup. Well you’re definitely dead to me now.”

“Pilar, I’m sorry. I didn’t know Mami was going to say those things to you. I just thought that maybe she would make you go to church more often or something.”

“Okay, but that still doesn’t explain why you went through my stuff.”

“I didn’t mean to. I was looking for something else. Then when I found your journal, I couldn’t help myself. I shouldn’t have, you’re right. But mom’s right too. What you’re doing with Vanessa, it’s a sin. It’s wrong.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that. Vanessa and I are done. And so are *we*, okay Ceci.” Pilar shut her door. Maybe Cecilia was right in saying that she had been avoiding her. But just because they were family didn’t mean they had to be close. Pilar sat on her bed, looked at her journal and tossed it across her room. There was nothing else she wanted to say.

## CHAPTER XV

May 27, 1995. Eagle Pass, Texas.

Pilar hadn't spoken to Vanessa in over a month. Even in first period history with Mr. Cook, Pilar started sitting in the front to avoid having to see or talk to Vanessa. Vanessa had tried talking to Pilar in the halls, but Pilar would brush her off. Marcos noticed the strife between them and tried to convince Pilar to talk to Vanessa, but she refused to listen to Marcos.

And here they were, Graduation day. Sitting on the bleachers at Liberty High's football stadium, waiting for their names to be called. Pilar still hadn't sent a reply to NYU. She wasn't so sure she wanted to go anymore. She sat next to the other Nietos in her class. She could see Vanessa up in the front. Pilar couldn't help but smile a bit at the fact that Vanessa was actually graduating. Pilar remembered when they first met that Vanessa didn't even want to be in school, and there she was- about to get up on a stage and get her high school diploma. Pilar's smile quickly diminished. She wouldn't be able to celebrate with Vanessa. That fact saddened Pilar.

As they called the Delgados, Pilar looked out for the girl with the curly hair peeping from the cap. Pilar could see the red and black sneakers from underneath the graduation gown. *There she is.* And as Vanessa retrieved her diploma, Pilar couldn't help but cheer for her in her seat.

Once the ceremony was over, everyone gathered in the middle of the football field taking pictures with their friends and congratulating one another. Pilar searched the crowd for Marcos. She couldn't find him anywhere. She circled, weaved through the crowd to try and find him. As

Pilar tried to maneuver through the bustling crowd, she bumped into a curly haired girl. She turned around and saw her. “Pilar?”

Vanessa didn't wait a beat, she hugged Pilar tight. Pilar wrapped her arms around her too. Though it hadn't been that long, in that moment it felt as though years had passed and they were finally reuniting. When Pilar finally pulled away, she held back the urge to kiss Vanessa. “Have you seen Marcos?” Pilar asked Vanessa.

“No, I haven't.”

“Can you help me find him?”

“Sure, yeah.” Vanessa replied.

The girls walked and walked but there was no sign of Marcos anywhere. The crowd had already begun to lessen, and he was nowhere to be found. “Vanessa, I'm worried.”

“He should be okay, let's go under the bleachers, maybe he's there?” Vanessa suggested. Just as they started making their way towards the bleachers, the sky began to roar with thunder. “Oh shit, it's gonna rain.” Vanessa warned Pilar.

As they got closer, Pilar spotted Marcos. He was breathing heavy and on all fours. “Oh my god, Marcos! MARCOS!”

The rain started to pour harder and Pilar slid on the gravel to Marcos. “Marcos are you okay?”

“Yeah...those...assholes...were trying to hurt Victor. We...we got them though. We showed them. Right babe?”

Pilar turned her head and saw Victor standing on the side of the bleachers tending to his fist. “Victor?” Pilar was stunned. She’d never really talked to Victor. *He was the one who needed saving?* “Victor, are you okay?” Victor’s gown was tattered, his fist, bleeding.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks to him.” Victor said as he pointed to Marcos.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.” Pilar said as he helped Marcos to his feet.

Vanessa playfully tapped Marcos, “Blondie’s got some fight moves. Good for you.”

“Huerca, you don’t even know.” The thunder started to crack again, and the rain came pouring down on them. “Let’s go, let’s go. It’s coming down bad!” Marcos yelled out. He rushed over to Victor, grabbed their caps from the ground and rushed to get out.

As Pilar raised her cap above her head to try and protect herself from the rain, she began to walk then felt a pull, was spun around to receive a kiss from Vanessa. Pilar breathed into the kiss as the rain poured down on them. When Pilar pulled away, she could see that Vanessa’s eyeliner was starting to run from her face. “Vanessa, we should- “

“Pilar, will you write to me?”

“Write to you?”

“Yes, write to me. Send me cheesy poems, limericks, Haikus. Whatever. Just write to me. Promise me you will, yes?”

Pilar couldn’t see clearly through her glasses, so she took off the frames and saw the hopeful look that Vanessa was giving her. How could she say no? They’d been through so much together. Juntas.

“Yes, I’ll write you. I promise.”

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