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The Last Karankawas

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THE LAST KARANKAWAS

Carly finally admitted something was wrong a couple of months before the hurricane, when her grandmother brought home a whole pompano and tried to eat it raw. She walked in just off her shift and found Magdalena crouched on the living room floor, tearing strips of fish flesh with her fingers. The linen pantsuit she had worn to 6 a.m. Mass bunched at her crotch, her waist, and tightened at the thighs and hips. Juice wormed down her hand; bone and meat snagged beneath her manicure. She looked up and with her mouth full said, “This is the way of our people.” When Carly snatched up the newspaper-and-fish bundle, Magdalena sat back on her haunches and hissed.

Carly hurried into the kitchen and dropped the whole thing in the trash can. Then she leaned against the stove and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

She waited for a few moments, until she no longer felt the burn of tears threatening, or the urge to scream churning in her throat. When she opened her eyes and found herself looking into the open trash can, the pompano stared back up at her. Its face was ravaged—Magdalena had always liked the head best. Still, one eye was intact, black as a piece of tar, Gulf-polished. Fixed on the fragments of a life she couldn’t see anymore. Bitter all over again, she slammed the lid down. And as her grandmother stormed into the kitchen, she braced to face her.

There had been bad days with the dementia, but none like this. Today, Magdalena thrust her face into Carly’s and battled. Her breath smelled of brine and the coffee that was still warm in the pot and the Listerine she gargled each morning before Mass and had done so just two hours earlier. In her anger, she’d lost all English and slipped fully into Spanish. Carly stood still, recalling the training. Relax your face, keep your hands loose and non-threatening in front of you even though they want to rise up, fist. Accept the flecks of spit on your chin. Translate, translate, shape Spanish to English. Imagine the words as toy blocks, the ones kids in the hospital pediatric wing play with—turning over from Spanish to English. One side A, one side a. One side *yo sé bien lo que piensas de mí*, one side I know what you

think of me. *Niña ingrata*: you ungrateful child.

Carly couldn't even blame the dementia. Not for all of it. For the vitriol, yes, her grandmother was always firm but not hateful, had never been hateful—but not for the fish, not for what Magdalena thought was the way of their people. Their people, being the Karankawas.

Her grandmother had believed they were descendants of the vanished Texas tribe since Carly was a child—long before she grew old enough to witness the threads of Magdalena's mind begin to fray, then fuse again in the wrong places. Magdalena offered up her musings as fact over breakfast (*Our people went days without food, and look at you, wasting scrambled eggs*); at Mass (*Sí, somos católicas, niña, pero it's not sacrilege to offer prayers up to the wind and the sun. It's hurricane season*); walking around Galveston (*oleanders, yes, they are dangerous but our grandmothers wore them because they are dangerous*). Her own father had told her they had Karankawa blood, Magdalena claimed, and his father had told him, and she came from a day when elders were believed.

So Carly had believed. Once.

Once, in the stillness before bedtime, soothed by the humming of the window AC, she had listened to the tales her grandmother weaved. The Karankawas were as real as Laffite, she said, as steeped in legend as the tree on Fourth Street that marks his buried treasure, the one tourists search for and none as yet have found. They became real to Carly, too—real as the uneven coils of her hair and the freckles that fireworked her shoulders. She sensed centuries of stories running in her veins: a presence of secrets that the body and not the mind could remember.

She believed. Even when her mother scolded her.

Don't be silly, Bernadette said, hands planted on hips, whenever Carly walked into the house with mud smeared across her cheeks or white oleanders twined into the band of her ponytail. *Your grandmother's people are from Texas, from Mexico. I am from the Philippines. You have no Indian in you anywhere. The Indians could not last here.*

Neither could Bernadette, as it turned out; one morning when Carly was six and at school, Magdalena at Mass, Bernadette packed a small bag and left without any word. They assumed she returned to the Philippines, to her island just south of Manila and the extended family they had never met.

Some people are not fighters, Magdalena had said, stroking the young girl's hair where it lay tear-tangled in her lap. For some people that is not their way. Ya. Enough crying, Carly Elena.

Grandmother and granddaughter crafted their own rituals. A tribe of two.

After the pompano incident, Carly pulled strings for weeks. She got a few of the UTMB doctors who liked her to call in some favors. It was worth it when she toured the place. Bay Pines Care Center looked more like a luxe condo building than a nursing home, all soothing beachscape paintings and plush armchairs in clusters and wide, clean floors. There was even a doorman and a guy at the check-in desk to escort visitors to your family member's room. The room itself was spacious, with both a hospital bed and a real bed—Carly had paid extra to make sure Magdalena would have the option. She'd also paid extra for a solo room.

The TV had HBO, so she wouldn't miss *True Blood*, and Telemundo, so she wouldn't miss *Más Sabe el Diablo*. Carly planned to bring her colcha from her bed at home to lay on her bed here, so the quilt she knew from childhood would keep her grandmother warm. She'd stick the neon green "BOI: Born On the Island!" bumper sticker in a place of pride on the mirror, where Magdalena could see it every day and remember that she held that coveted status among islanders. She'd hang the replica of the Virgen de Guadalupe on the wall beside the door, ready for the touch of fingers kissed in reverence.

But Magdalena took one look and shook her head, tossing her cloud of curly hair that had been sterile-swab-white since Carly's infancy. "I can't see the beach from here."

"There's no beach here, Grandma," Carly reminded her. "We're in League City, not Galveston."

"No. That won't work. I need to be on the island."

"There aren't any good homes there."

"Our home is there."

"Grandma, please." Carly's fingernails bit into her own palms.

"I belong on the island," Magdalena said cheerfully to the nurse—an LVN, it said on her nametag, as noted disdainfully by Carly Castillo, RN. "Somos las últimas Karankawas."

"She thinks she's the last Karankawa Indian," Carly said, and stonily ignored the look her grandmother shot her, her grandmother who hadn't missed the purposeful translation from *we are to she thinks*.

"I need to be on the island. I can't be gone forever," Magdalena said. "La isla sabe."

Carly again reached for a lie and, like her stony ignorance, found it too easily. "This is only temporary, Grandma. Hurricane season, remember?"

"Ah, yes. Our home is going to be very damaged," she told the nurse. "Very badly damaged from a storm this season. My granddaughter thinks I'll be safe here."

"That's nice," the nurse offered.

"My granddaughter has everything handled. She's very smart. She's going to be a nurse, too."

"I *am* a nurse, Grandma."

"You will be, *niña*. I wouldn't miss that graduation for anything."

It was a pinning ceremony, and she hadn't missed it. She'd sat next to Jess, sandwiched between his big frame and another, smaller, man. And when she'd tried to crane her neck to see Carly striding across the stage, Jess—who was 6'3—had simply taken her camera and snapped the picture himself. *Jess-eye view*, Magdalena had said of the perfect picture later. The three of them had laughed. It had been six years ago.

The nurse gave them some privacy. Carly showed her grandmother

how to work the remote for the TV, how to adjust the mechanical bed to her liking. Together they arranged the framed photos Carly had brought on the dresser, the nightstand, the windowsill that looked out at neatly landscaped courtyard. There was Carly as a red-cheeked, nearly bald infant; as a child playing on the beach, with frizzy curls and a tan line; beside Magdalena at her First Communion wearing borrowed lipstick. Magdalena's wedding photo beside Carly's grandfather, long dead now. Her hair gleamed black beneath her veil, her hand, where it rested gently on her husband's arm, gloved in lace. Neither smiled.

Magdalena sat stiffly on the bed, her hands folded in her lap.

"I'm working the next two days," Carly said, "but I'll be back on Thursday."

"I know." She didn't move.

"Call me if you need anything."

"Bueno."

Magdalena rubbed her eyes, and Carly took that as a sign that she was tired. She leaned in and kissed the paper-thin skin of her cheek. "It's all going to be fine. I love you."

"I'll see you soon," she replied. "When you come to take me home."

Jess was waiting for her by the car as Carly emerged. He took one look at her face and walked around to the driver's side, taking the keys from her cold hands as he passed.

The great thing about Jess was that if he didn't know what to say, he didn't say anything. He just laced his fingers through hers. Stayed quiet the whole drive back down I-45 while she pressed her face against his shoulder, tears and snot soaking into the sleeve of his Ball High T-shirt.

He rolled down the windows as they began to climb the causeway. It was August and the air of the Gulf was swampy, laced with sun and salt and tar.

"The water looks kinda blue today," Jess said, but he was lying. The water of Galveston was always brown.

Jess had never minded lies. Even now that they were older, after Carly had learned how ridiculous was the idea that she was descended from a long-vanished clan, he shrugged off her bitter rants. Shrugged whether Magdalena's theories were dropped into conversation offhandedly (*put on your shirt, Jesus María, only my people could walk around the beach naked*) or with the detail of delusion (*this is the spot, yes, here, míralo Jess, this is where my fathers made landfall when they arrived, here is where they sacrificed a sea turtle they'd found on the journey across the bay*). Even when she used his full name, which he hated, he always smiled. He had delighted in Magdalena's stories since he and Carly were kids together in Fish Village, playing pick-up ball in Lindale Park.

Stories. Carly knew them by another name.

She'd done a history project in eighth grade on the Karankawas. She stood in front of the class and restated what her peers—most of them BOIs like her—already knew: that the tribe of Indians had settled the swath of coastline from Galveston to Corpus Christi; that they'd vanished long ago; that no one really knew what happened to them. Some historians theorized they joined up with the Tonkawa, abandoned the Gulf and moved further inland. Or maybe they migrated down to Mexico and the Coahuiltecan. Most agreed they died out, killed or driven out by white settlers. Most also thought they were cannibals—a notion Carly disproved, using Cabeza de Vaca's own accounts of interacting with them.

Her teacher had smiled indulgently, pleased at the presentation, until Carly said her family was descended from the Karankawas; then she had frowned in disappointment. Afterwards, she pulled Carly aside.

"I want you to know that it's a tale—a nice tale," she said. "And I'm sure it's something fun you could believe as a kid. But history class is not the place for wild theories."

It was the first time Carly had heard that—*wild theories*—to describe what she'd considered as much a part of her past as her grandmother, her lost mother, her long-dead father. It was a theory, and not even a good

one, not even a shred of reason to it.

“No way,” Jess countered, kicking strewn palm fronds out of her path on the sidewalk as they walked home after school. He thought Magdalena’s belief about their ancestry were great, that Carly was rooted here in a way he, the child of Valley Mexicans, wasn’t. He was jealous, really.

They neared his house on Barracuda, but she knew he wouldn’t turn—he’d walk her all the way home first, then backtrack. He could be a good boyfriend, she realized. He’d been a steady best friend all these years, after all.

“It’s true, though. I can get that now.” Carly furrowed her brow. “My grandma’s been lying.”

Jess shook his head. To comfort him as much as herself, she slipped her hand in his. Held fast.

His apartment was little more than a hole in the wall in one of the city’s shittier corners, so after Magdalena moved into Bay Pines Jess moved into Carly’s house in Fish Village. Even splitting the mortgage, it was a little pricier than his rent, but the shrimping had been pretty good this summer. And oyster season would start soon.

They’d been together so long now it was anticlimactic to finally share a room, a home, for real. She’d imagined it would feel gleaming and new to combine their things, to make space in her closet for his jeans and superhero T-shirts, to have one nightstand for her lip balm, one for his glasses. But she and Jess were broken in. She already knew how far left in the driveway she’d need to pull her Accord so she wouldn’t clip his Silverado when she left for work; he had learned years ago that on days she was training a new nurse she’d be too annoyed to cook and they’d have pizza that night. He’d have to plan ahead and pick it up: Most delivery joints on Broadway still considered Fish Village and its distinctive street names—Bonita, Pompano, Dolphin—out of their range. Carly’s house was on Albacore.

In high school it had been different, hadn’t it? He’d been the ace

pitcher, a crappy student, popular in every circle. But he'd been quiet, more comfortable lying with her on the couch than tapping a keg somewhere. Their date nights usually ended on the western stretches of the beach, past the city limits, parked on an access point only islanders knew about. He opened every beer bottle for her, even if they were twist-offs. When they got tired of the sand, they'd move to the bed of his truck. She'd have salt snarled up in her hair for hours.

Back then he was getting scouted by schools, big schools like UT and Tech. And Carly was pushing for them hard. Tech in particular—she found something beautiful in the pictures of Lubbock on the Web, flat lands and real snow and wind turbines reaching out like giant, many-winged cranes. But Jess had already started working weekends out on one of the oyster boats during the November season, and whenever he wasn't there or playing ball he was talking about oystering. He described the breadth of the boat, the way the flat bottom sat so delicately on the ever-rolling water. He told her about how they tossed shells and too-small oysters overboard, back into the bay where maybe, just maybe, some alchemy of salt and spore would help them find each other. They might fuse to a sunken car or ship and form a new reef he'd one day dredge. Jess never spoke so much as when he spoke of working the bay.

"I can do this full-time once school is over," he said. "Be out every day during the oyster season. Work as a shrimper on a trawler the rest of the year. Why would I go anywhere?"

She'd smile when she really wanted to shake him. He could have left at any time for a place as far away as Lubbock, as exotic. Could have driven north on I-45 or west on I-10 and kept going, going. Could he not see that? She had pictured it countless times on the nights when she crossed the causeway to take nursing classes inland. She fantasized driving between the fringe of tall trees north of the Bay Area, flanking the interstate like guardians, the giant white statue of Sam Houston gleaming in the darkness of Huntsville, welcoming her to Something Else. Anything Else. She imagined a future on those solo drives to the mainland and wondered if this

was how her grandmother imagined their past: as something shaped from delusion.

On one such trip home, Carly remembered the Karankawas. Christ knew why. She was exits away from the causeway still and the blinking lights of Tiki Island that signaled the ascent were just coming on, and suddenly she found herself thinking *they were nomads, they never stayed at a single place for more than a few weeks*. She heard the words in her own voice from childhood, speaking to a class of eighth graders.

Nomads, did you know? They were expert swimmers and lithe, powerful runners. Built for moving. They would wait for a clear day, load their lives into canoes carved from the hollows of a large oak, and paddle into the shallows off the coast. Make their way from one craggy pile of Texas sand to another. The men studded shards of cane through their lower lips. The women wrapped themselves in skirts of Spanish moss, capes of animal fur draped across their shoulders—not from modesty but protection from the sun. No, not modesty, they were anything but modest. Their skins gleamed with the shark grease they smeared over themselves to ward off mosquitoes. Whether by foot or on sea they traveled in a V formation like the geese that they would look up as one to watch come south, then, as the days waxed, watch wheel northward again.

She could see it, hazily, as if she peered through a curtain of heat. How? she wondered as she approached Fish Village. Was any of it real? And did it even matter?

She turned onto Albacore and there were the lights behind the drapes her grandmother had hung. There was Jess's truck in the drive, tires coated with the grit of the docks, flanking—with Magdalena's Grand Marquis—the space where Carly should be.

A churning in her blood began. An urge branched like lightning through her muscles—to wheel, to paddle, to sprint. Between the Karankawas and her wayward mother, wasn't she built for moving, too?

But she imagined, clearly this time, her grandmother behind those curtains stirring a pot of chicken and rice. Jess, pouring her beer into a glass

because she liked it that way. Her people were here. She held that in her mind, took a deep breath, and opened her car door with a smile.

The storm started forming a few weeks after Magdalena was situated in Bay Pines, but no one paid attention until the weather service gave it a name: Ike. Jess thought he was the first to make the Ike Turner comparison, and he repeated it for Magdalena during their weekly visit. She cackled while Carly rolled her eyes. They ate breakfast tacos and cookies they'd brought from Magdalena's favorite panadería.

It was a good day. Her grandmother's clothes were pressed and clean, her hair neatly pinned back. Her dark eyes were sharp, lighting on every movement Jess and Carly made, a bird hopping from branch to branch.

"Tell me about this Ike," she said. "Will it be big?"

"They think so," Carly replied. She reached for the TV remote and flipped it to the Weather Channel. As one, they watched the swirl of silver that was out on the Gulf, far, far from them, so far away from the crescent curve of the coast. "They say it's headed our way."

"Gonna hit the Caribbean first," said Jess, "do some damage there, then pick up speed in the Gulf because of the warm water. Or something." He took the last of the macadamia nut.

Magdalena nodded thoughtfully, eyes fixed on the wind and water that had just been given a name. "I'll need to find some palm fronds."

"For what?" Jess asked.

"My blessing. For protection. I need to burn them, we always burn them, but they don't have palmas here, do they? Niña, you bring me some from home, next time you come."

Jess looked at Carly, who felt her face settle into those hard lines it always did when the delusions came on. "You don't have a protection blessing, Grandma. You never have. You usually just light a candle and pray."

She clucked her tongue. "That won't do any good. I need to burn the palms. They need to be from the island."

Her eyes were sharp. Shouldn't they be clouded, Carly wondered, if her mind had slipped again?

"You're not allowed to burn anything here," she said. "Not even candles. I'll go to Sacred Heart and light one for you."

"You'll be on the island, that's good. You won't leave even if they tell you, will you? Not like last time, look how that turned out." She meant Rita, when it had taken them six hours to make the two-hour drive to Jess's friend's house in Sealy. And they'd been lucky—in the gridlock, cars ran out of gas, stalled out, overheated in the blistering sun. A bus carrying nursing-home residents caught fire. And Rita, quite contrary, had veered north.

"No, Grandma," she lied. "I won't leave."

"I should be there with you. This storm, it will respect me. I'm the elder."

"Well, you can't. You're staying here."

"It's going to be fine, Mrs. C," said Jess. "You just pray for us."

"I will. You'll need me to."

Back on Galveston, they stopped on Seawall for an early lunch. It was the middle of the week, early enough in the day that the public beach wasn't swamped yet with late-summer tourists and swimmers. As a habit, Carly rolled up her jeans and cuffed them mid-calf, then checked Jess's glove compartment and confirmed he still had a bottle of baby oil to get any oil smears off. They might need them; even at a distance she could see tar globbed across the sand, washed in from the tankers on the bay. After a while, the tar became part of the landscape, moles on an otherwise even-toned complexion.

She and Jess kicked off their flip-flops and left them on a dune. Clouds had gathered, just enough to break up some of the heat; sunbeams lanced through, spotlighting sections of the water. Jess pointed to a pelican a few yards out. It flapped its wings and dove toward the water at high speed, then leveled out, belly feathers kissing the water.

Magdalena loved pelicans. "Just watch them," she had told Carly once. "No one thinks anything of them, because they're ugly. But they're the

most beautiful fliers.” So Carly watched this one now, the way he flapped his wings only once or twice, then coasted. Effortless. Low to the water, so low and never wavering. She watched him until he curved around a bend, toward the jetties, and she couldn’t see him anymore.

By then Jess had disappeared. When she spotted him he was further down the beach, bending down to gather things, and she realized he was picking up discarded palm fronds for Magdalena. “You’re an idiot,” Carly told him when he returned bearing them. But she took them from his hands, carefully brushing the grit and bits of trash away, and laid them gently atop her flip-flops.

The next visit was worse. Jess couldn’t make it, so Carly went alone. She brought the palm fronds and another box of cookies but found Magdalena in her robe rocking back and forth on the floor, curled up almost in a ball, chanting nonsense. She claimed it was the ancient Karankawa tongue—*I’m letting the spirits speak through me so they’ll protect us from the storm*. We don’t know anything, Carly insisted. It could move away somewhere else like Rita, dissipate over the Caribbean. But Magdalena slapped her palms against the floor and then lowered her forehead to the ground and began a rosary in Spanish and Carly threw the palm fronds in the trashcan by the door and left without another word.

The storm didn’t dissipate. It absorbed warmth from the water and doubled in size. Whenever she could see Jess’s mouth move, taking the shape of an Ike-Turner-better-not-beat-the-living-shit-outta-us joke, Carly leaned in and kissed him so he would shut up.

Storm preps were second nature by now. While he hammered boards over the windows she emptied out the refrigerator and freezer, tossed anything perishable. She unplugged all the electronics. She dug around in her own boxes for the only thing she wanted safe—her diploma—then dragged the waterproof lockbox Magdalena had kept beneath her bed and opened it.

She'd expected the birth certificates—her grandmother's and her own—and the photo of a very young Magdalena holding a baby that Carly knew was her father, Marcos. But there was one more, one Carly had never seen. Her fingers trembled as she lifted out the wedding photograph. Marcos Castillo was twenty and wore full Army dress. He tilted his head in the curious way of posed photos, smiling just enough to show the upper row of teeth. His hair was cropped short, of course. He had her grandfather's bones, his heavy eyebrows, but the crinkles beside his eyes were her grandmother's. Carly's, too. She recognized nothing else in him, but she wouldn't—he had died before she was born.

No, it was the woman beside him who earned Carly's careful looks. A younger, crisper version of the woman in her memories, Bernadette Velasquez Castillo had thick dark hair that waved appealingly about her round face. The curls were styled—Carly knew this because her mother's hair had been Pocahontas-straight. She recalled being a child and thinking that; her fingertips fluttered with the sudden memory of movement, of slipping softly down that waterfall of black where there were no bends in sight.

Here, her mother who had rarely smiled was smiling a full smile, one that crinkled her small, tilted eyes even smaller. She was leaning her right ear toward Marcos's shoulder. His hand rested lightly, fingers bent possessively, around her waist. They were young and bright with promise. Carly turned away from the bitterness that rose up like bile in her throat. She took the whole lockbox and put it in the back of Jess's truck, the photo still clutched in her hand. He was leaning against the driver's door, waiting for her.

“We need to make a stop,” she announced.

The air on the drive to the mainland was close, tense, even inside the cab of the truck. Radio announcers had used the words *certain death*. Remembering that made Carly shiver. Jess leaned over and patted her hand, the one that didn't hold the photo. He'd seen it and known enough from the angry red of her face, the tears in her eyes, to stay silent.

They maneuvered past a good deal of traffic crowding the League City streets. Jess said he'd wait in the parking lot, so Carly headed in to see her grandmother alone.

She was watching one of her novelas; a man was shouting, a woman was crying. That was nothing new. But then the woman rose up tall and, with a look of righteous fury, slapped the man. He stared. She lifted her chin. Commercial break.

"Grandma?"

Magdalena turned. "Mi niña." She reached up for her hand, tugged her down for a kiss.

"I just wanted to check on you before the storm. And ask you about—"

"Oh, I'm fine. We have generators here, you know. And I've been praying."

"That's good, but—"

"Oh! And thank you for the palmas." She winked. "They're perfect."

Carly stared for a moment before she realized. "Oh my God." She planted her hands on her hips, furious. "You dug through the trash to get them? You're not actually going to go through with that shit, are you, Grandma?"

Magdalena's eyes sparked. "Qué dijiste?"

"You heard me. You can't break the rules like that! You can't burn things here."

"I'll do what I want, soy una mujer—"

"Say you're a Karankawa and I'll lose it. I swear to God I will."

Her grandmother stopped speaking. Her mouth fell open.

"Burning palms won't work. Chanting made-up words won't, either. This is a storm coming and you can't stop it." Carly leaned forward, locked her hands onto the arms of Magdalena's chair and leaned in close.

"You. Are. Not. A. Karankawa. They're dead, Grandma. They died a long time ago. We don't come from them, you and me. We're just us."

Magdalena turned sharply sideways, looking away, but Carly saw her blinking back tears. Guilt seethed in the pit of her stomach and she sighed. She shifted her feet, then decided. She opened her mouth to apologize when her grandmother turned back in a sudden movement. Her face, like that of the novela actress, bore the sheen of righteous anger. The tears in her eyes seemed to reflect it, bounce it back like an echo.

“You know better,” Magdalena said in a quiet, hissing voice. “We fight. *You* fight. Una niña mia no es una cobarde. You used to believe what I told you, even when *she* didn’t.”

The mention of her mother shocked Carly’s mouth open. Magdalena steamrolled past. “I tell you we come from fighters, es la verdad. Because we say it is.”

“We don’t get to make up what’s real.” Carly found the words, pushed them through in a voice that cracked. “That is your sickness talking.”

“Carly Elena.” She sounded so sad.

“I don’t come from fighters, Grandma. I come from runners.” She dragged the wedding photo from the back pocket of her jeans and thrust it into Magdalena’s face, so suddenly that her grandmother recoiled. “I found this in the lockbox with your things.”

Magdalena stared at it for a moment, head cocked, and Carly looked at it again too. In the photo she thought her mother was happy, tilting her body and her mind already to her husband. Was there something in there that would show how she’d implode after he died just a year later? How she’d shrink to a point and keep collapsing until she was a spore that was once a person, no room for a daughter, or a mother-in-law, nothing except the urge to seek out another shell, another reef, start over again?

“Tell me where *she* fits in my blood,” Carly begged. *Please tell me.* “She runs. She leaves everything. And sometimes I want that, too. I want to leave.”

Her grandmother took the photo from her with careful fingers and held it close to her face. She stared at it for a long time, tilting her face

in various angles. Carly took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You can’t fight everything, Grandma. I’m not going to fight this storm. I came to tell you that Jess and I are on our way to Sealy. We’ll check on you on the way back, once they open the roads.”

Her grandmother nodded distractedly, eyes still fixed on the photo, thoughtful.

“Grandma?”

She blinked, as if stepping from a dark room into sunlight, and looked up. Seeing Carly she gave her a smile—so gentle, so hopeful that the tension drained from Carly’s body because she knew already what was going on in that mind even before her grandmother did, even before her mouth crafted the words that betrayed that mind of a few moments ago. When she did speak, Carly closed her eyes against one wave of pain, bit her tongue to counteract another.

“Qué linda esta pareja,” Magdalena said with approval, and that smile. “Who are they?”

Ike roared in at 2 a.m. two days later. Wind screamed against the glass panes of Aaron’s house in Sealy, peppered with hail or maybe just hard rain that sounded like hail, Carly couldn’t tell. The power had gone out hours before. On their air mattress they were sharing in the living room, she pressed her cheek to Jess’s chest and listened to the drumming of his heart and the hail. He rubbed her back in small circles like he was soothing one of his little sisters and eventually she fell asleep.

The seething sounds of the wind worked their way into her dreams, became her grandmother around a bonfire on the beach, her face lifted to the sky. She wore a wedding veil. She was screaming.

They didn’t open the causeway for days. The ferries would stay shut for even longer than that; only helicopters and rescue vehicles were on Bolivar, picking up survivors, the remnants of people who didn’t, or couldn’t, leave. From Sealy they watched the news reports and when aerial footage showed

boats, fragments of boats, random scraps of wood tossed across a barren and churned-up stretch of beach on the west end of the island, Carly gasped. There were long lengths of timber sticking up from the sand—stilt legs. All empty now.

“Our house?” she asked aloud.

Jess shook his head. “We won’t know until we go.”

The phone in her pocket buzzed. She looked at the caller ID. Bay Pines Care Center.

She’d set a fire during the hurricane—a small fire, but a fire. She’d let the palm fronds dry completely, then tore them into small strips and shaped them into a pile and set them alight with the lighter she’d borrowed from a resident who smoked. Jess pointed out her genius; she’d even ringed the fire with small, smooth rocks taken from the gardens in the courtyard so it wouldn’t spread. When the smoke alarm in her room starting blaring, the nurses and manager had found Magdalena in her nightgown, her hands in the air and cupping the smoke as if she could lift it to her mouth and drink. Her eyes were red and streaming but she couldn’t stop laughing. Neither could Carly, from the time she answered the phone to the time they drove Magdalena away from Bay Pines, a disgraced former resident. They embraced, laughing together, walking back to Jess’s truck hand-in-hand.

They began the climb across the causeway, and Magdalena clapped her hands with delight so Jess rolled the windows down. “Isla de malhado,” she said from the backseat, over the rush of wind and 97.9 The Box.

Jess glanced at Carly in the passenger seat, raised his eyebrows. “Malhado?”

“Misfortune. Doom.”

“Never heard it.”

“It’s an old word. No one really says it anymore. But that’s what Cabeza de Vaca called Galveston when he shipwrecked here. Isla de malhado.”

“La isla mia,” Magdalena said, then she reached forward and

scratched the back of Carly's head lightly with her fingers. "Nuestra."

Jess navigated down Broadway and various side streets, past fallen trees, piles of soggy junk, closed roads. An obstacle course of downed palms and mattresses and lawn furniture. They were going home. Carly smelled Jess's aftershave, smoke from her grandmother's hair, the sea. She closed her eyes and drifted.

She is eight, and she's heard the word *malhado* for the first time. Even with her Spanish—which is fluent, not broken into chunks of *excuse me* and *no thank you* and *motherfucker* like Jess's—she doesn't recognize it but she knows it means something bad because of the way her grandmother says it. She hardly moves her lips; the word darts through her teeth like a forked tongue.

Carly doesn't know what she's done wrong. All she has done is ask, "Do you ever hear from my mom?"

Magdalena straightens where she's facing the stove; her shoulders lower and set, as if beneath plate armor. "Nunca," she says, her voice firm but not unkind. "I don't, and I don't think we ever will." She looks at Carly over her shoulder. "Llena de *malhado*, esa. You be glad she's gone."

Tears prick at the top of Carly's nose, but Magdalena turns fully now to face her. "Don't you cry," she says. "No tears. Would the Karanka-was shed tears over this?"

She knows the drill, and shakes her head.

"Would they cry like sad little chickens over every hard thing?"

"No."

"No. Who were they, our people?"

In the living room, the window AC rumbles to a stop; instantly the air becomes heavy, losing the cool of the conditioning, swelling again with the warmth and salt of the Gulf. Her grandmother seems to swell with it, too.

"They were warriors."

"Claro." She takes Carly's chin in her hand, shakes it gently. "So are we."