

## TURISTAS

Hector Acosta

By Olivia's count, there were twenty of them tonight.

They sat and waited; their backs draped with the glow of the headlights from rusted trucks. Last minute stragglers broke through the white tint, directed to join the group by a bored-looking Mexican who stood on the sidelines, the handle of a silver gun peeking from his waistband. People grumbled and made room for the newcomers, trying to be mindful of the toritos scattered on the ground. The nasty little burrs were a staple of the Southwest desert, hitching rides via the clothes and skin of anyone who didn't watch where they walked. Olivia was almost done plucking away at the few clinging to the cuff of her jeans when the flaquita squeezed next to her. Smoothing the long, white floral dress she wore, the pretty girl turned to the boy to her right and said, "Es mi primera vez cruzando la frontera."

It was her first time crossing the border.

"Está bien fácil," the boy said, looking the girl up and down as if attempting to divine what lied underneath the fabric of her dress.

"Really?" Black bands formed around the girl's finger as she played with her hair.

"Sí," the boy nodded. "Just make sure to watch your stuff. I wouldn't trust anyone here." Leaning forward, he added, "But if anyone starts giving you trouble, just tell me, nothing here I can't handle."

Olivia rolled her eyes. This vato here, with his collared shirt, clean white sneakers, and gold-rimmed sunglasses atop slick-back hair was a fresa through and through. Just some upper-class brat from the other side of the border who decided to spend a Saturday night slumming it with the common folk.

La flaca bought it, though. Scooching her ass closer to the boy, she said, "I'm Veronica."

"Pedro."

The orange flame of a lighter sparked in the night, stretching the shadows like masa being pulled and rolled into new shapes. Before long, the smell of weed hung in the air, adding an undesired weight to Olivia's thoughts. When the joint reached her, she considered the rolled paper for a second before passing it to the bearded gringo behind her.

Around her, people fiddled with their phones, their fingers sliding across devices as messages were sent back and forth, slowed down only by the spotty cell phone reception. Strands of English and Spanish weaved together, people discussing weekend plans, dates they'd been on, and the latest chismos.

"Enough with the talking."

El Coyote stepped forward, the black ski mask blending his features into the night and muffling his Norteño accent. An AK-47 was slung on his shoulder in a manner so casual, Olivia imagined him in front of a mirror, practicing poses until he found the perfect one. Two things kept him from coming off like the mero chingon he so clearly wanted to be. First, the camo shirt he wore didn't cover his panza, giving everyone a glimpse of a belly button mired in coarse black hair. More importantly, Olivia knew the gun to be nothing but a cheap plastic toy, bought at the mercado and painted black.

Pacing back and forth, El Coyote started his speech, describing the dangerous journey they were about to embark on. He warned everyone of la migra, reminding them to keep their eyes and ears open. He spoke of the narcos in a hushed tone, telling them of the drug gangs that had taken over entire swaths of Mexico and who, according to El Coyote, could be lying in wait for them even now. He ended his speech with talk of Los Estados Unidos, the promised land. Of the families waiting to be reunited, of the jobs and the riches they would all know, long as they were willing to work hard to get there.

It was a good speech, Olivia thought, delivered with a conviction that pulled the crowd away from their phones and conversations. The mood tilted, a vibration jumping from person to person as the anticipation built. Looking at the eager faces around her, brown and white, Olivia regretted having passed on the joint. She watched the crowd nod along to El Coyote's words and marveled at how all these people came out and willingly paid one thousand pesos for a true-to-life border experience.

Five hundred if, like Olivia, you remembered to use the Groupon.

Las Caminatas had been around for a couple of years now, the first tours set up by town-folks in pueblitos far away from any actual borders, where turistas dripping in suntan lotion and carrying around fanny packs were charged a couple of dollars to walk around the desert until they tired themselves out. It was something to do by those who wanted to go back home and brag about how they didn't just eat tacos and visit the zocalo on their trip here.

With interest in the border at an all-time high, it wasn't long before enterprising folks started expanding on the original idea. They added extras routes, props, and most important of all, actors playing key roles. There was The Coyote, tasked with navigating everyone across the border, the narcotraficantes waiting to rob the group with toy guns and plastic knives, and the Border Patrol agents driving beat-up camionetas jury-rigged with flashing lights.

The tours drew in all types of people, Olivia had learned. There were those who came with a need to understand what family and friends went through as they made their journeys Norte. Others arrived saddled with the guilt of being born on the right side of the border, convinced two hours of walking in the desert would be penance enough. And some simply came out of curiosity.

"We didn't feel comfortable with Tommy going over there, you see," the mother had told Olivia. The woman's hair was piled high in a concha-like bun, and Olivia feared it would topple over as she spoke. Her makeup was carefully applied, giving the woman a plastic, Barbie-doll sheen. Her husband sat stiffly next to her, dressed in a business suit and looking like he'd rather be anywhere other than the small taqueria Olivia had told them to meet her in. Both looked like they came out straight out of a telenovela. "You just hear all sorts of horrible stories of what's going on in Mexico," the woman continued, not bothering to touch el caldo de pollo she ordered. "No offense," she'd quickly added.

Olivia had waved the offense away with one hand and picked up a taco al pastor off her plate with the other. She'd never looked for a missing kid before, but La Dueña Reyna had been bugging her about the rent for a few days now and besides, how hard

could it be? El gringito probably pissed off the wrong cop and was now sitting in some Mexican jail cell waiting to be bailed out.

Except he wasn't. Nor was he one of the seven cadavers she'd seen at the morgue throughout the weeks. And if he'd visited La Mariscal, none of the girls walking the streets and flashing tits at the slowed-down traffic remembered him. After a couple of days of fruitless searching, she was steered toward the tours by one of Tommy's friends. Tommy, she was told, had been trying to convince the friend to take the tour with him, to no avail. "Why would I pay to walk in the desert for a couple of hours?" Tommy's friend had asked her. This question led her to La Caminata's constantly updated social media page, full of pictures and tweets of people's experiences with the tour. It took some time and scrolling, but eventually she found Tommy's tweet. It was a picture he'd posted of himself staring straight ahead at the camera, the desert behind him. Tommy had thick eyebrows and small green eyes. Fat clung to his cheeks and dropped the look of his age, while pale wisps of hair were scattered across his chin in a style so random Olivia didn't know whether the kid had missed them while shaving or just didn't care. But it was the hat sitting atop Tommy's shaggy hair that Olivia focused on.

Tommy, it turned out, was a red hat.

A click through his social media account verified it. It was a churn of ignorance and the type of spiel usually found plastered on a truck's bumper sticker. His posts were written in all capital letters and were full of praise toward a president obsessed with building a wall. The kid's own tweets decried everything from immigrants to the girls at school who ignored him. Olivia wished she could have dropped the job right then and there, but the money had already been paid to Dueña Reyna, and there was still the matter of next month's rent.

"Solo un poquito mas, and we'll be at the border," El Coyote said, dropping Spanish and English words in his sentence, like an indecisive eater at a buffet line.

She'd been trying to get to El Coyote all evening, but the man refused to slow down. When he wasn't at the head of the group, promising they were this close to reaching the border, he mingled among the tourists, flirting with the girls and allowing them to hold his gun, or telling the Americans, which there were plenty, about the close calls he'd had at the border—back when "he did this for the real."

"You think he knows he's pointing in the wrong direction?" muttered a woman trudging up the same hill as Olivia. She was short, wearing a pair of dusty blue jeans and a black windbreaker to shield her from the cold temperatures that had taken by surprise many of the people around them.

"Is he?" Olivia asked, even though she knew that already.

The woman turned her flashlight westward. "El Paso is that way, vez?"

Olivia did see, the woman's flashlight pointing directly at the Franklin Mountains, and below them, the winking lights of the border city that lay on the U.S. side of the border.

"Almost as if this whole thing is fake," Olivia said.

Leaning forward, the woman whispered, "That gun of his isn't even real."

Olivia gasped. "No! Next, you're going to tell me las luchas aren't real either."

The woman laughed, a deep, throaty sound that caused her cheeks to ripple. Tommy started to become a distant second thought. "I'm Olivia."

"Teresa." The woman switched her flashlight to her left hand and extended her right one to Olivia.

“Are you enjoying La Caminata?” Olivia asked.

“¡Claro! Nothing I love more than walking aimlessly around the desert while a guy with a power complex screams at me.”

“Kind of amazing, isn’t it?” Olivia asked.

“What is?”

“The way we’ve turned what our people go through into a Disney ride, like something out of Los Mojados de los Caribbean. All for the entertainment of people like those over there,” Olivia said, pointing to Pedro. The boy and girl who sat next to her at the start of the tour walked a couple of feet ahead of them now, focused on each other rather than anything El Coyote was saying. Pedro’s arms were wrapped around the girl’s waist and often trended downwards, much to the giggles, squeals, but very little fight from the girl—Veronica, Olivia remembered her name was. Others around the couple either talked amongst themselves or stopped and grouped together to take selfies. Olivia figured the photos would end up in social media as soon as they had decent cell phone reception. Hashtag LA FRONTERA, hashtag CROSSING THE BORDER.

“There’s worse things than folks making money off the interest in our border,” Teresa said. “When you think about it, es puro Mexicano what’s happening here. It’s what we’ve always done—make the best of a shitty situation.”

“We should be trying to change the shitty situation.”

“Del dicho al hecho, gran trecho,” Teresa said, her flashlight flickering. She hit it on the side with the palm of her hand until the beam held shape. “So, why are you here, Olivia?”

“Curiosidad,” Olivia answered. Somewhere ahead, she could hear the murmur of the rest of their group, El Coyote’s words of encouragement rolling through the darkness. She tried to keep her focus on the man, but Teresa’s presence kept pulling at her attention like a child pulling the tail of a cat.

“¿Y? Has your curiosity been satisfied?” Teresa asked.

Before Olivia could answer, she spotted El Coyote breaking away from the group of tourists and heading out by himself. Olivia turned to Teresa and said, “I have to go.” She tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

Blinking, Teresa tilted her head at Olivia, hair cascading down one side of her face and pooling around her shoulder. “Fue un placer,” she said, her eyes tugging at Olivia and making her want to stay.

Glancing behind her, she saw the disappearing shape of El Coyote heading into the desert. “Maybe I’ll run into you again before La Caminata ends.”

“That’d be nice,” Teresa said, still looking at her.

Olivia broke her gaze, afraid that if she didn’t, she would remain at the woman’s side. She turned and hurried in the same direction as El Coyote, Teresa’s face fluttering on the edges of her mind.

El Coyote was humming the opening bars of a popular corrido, his back turned to Olivia.

His legs were spread wide, the gun laying on the ground beside him. As Olivia neared, she heard piss hitting the ground. She waited until his stream turned into a trickle and placed her hand on the man’s shoulder. El Coyote gave a startled shout and turned

around, moving so fast he almost tripped on his own feet. Olivia grabbed him by the arm and kept him balanced.

He'd taken off the ski mask, revealing gaunt cheeks and a pushed-in nose, the tip of it sprouting a field of blackheads. His skin had gone too many rounds with the sun and now looked as if it would crinkle and fold upon itself if the man smiled. "Chingado, casi me das un ataque," he said.

"¿Como van las cosas, Alejandro?"

At the sound of his name, Alejandro stopped checking his pants for wet spots and looked up. "¿Te conosco?"

"No, but you know Paco."

Paco was an old friend of hers, un borracho from the neighborhood who knew everyone and their business. Olivia had gone to him for info on the tours, and it had only taken three cups of café negro for him to dribble out Alejandro's name as someone she should talk to.

"Which Paco?" Alejandro asked, zipping up his fly.

"El de la colonia," Olivia said. "He said you two used to go out drinking at La Paloma."

"That Paco? I haven't seen that guy in years. How's he doing?"

"Igual que siempre."

"So, drunk then," Alejandro said, reaching down to pick his gun off the ground. "And why was Paco telling you about me, muñeca?"

"I'm looking for someone, and he thought you might be able to help."

"Yeah?" Alejandro threw her a grin, and Olivia suddenly understood why he wore the mask.

"Sorry," Olivia said, "but that's not what I'm looking for. Besides, looked to me like you had enough attention back there, way those girls flocked to you for pictures."

"One of the perks of the job," Alejandro said and looked at her. "You look familiar. Have I seen you before?"

He might have. This was Olivia's third Caminata, all of them with Alejandro as The Coyote. She chose to keep that to herself. "I don't think so."

"¿Como te llamas?"

"Olivia."

"And you sure we haven't met?"

"Maybe I just have that type of face." Taking her phone out, Olivia flipped through her pictures until she found Tommy's. "You recognize him?" she asked.

Alejandro didn't even shift his eyes to the photo. "Nope."

Rolling her eyes, Olivia pushed the phone toward the man. "Come on, look again."

Alejandro pushed the phone away. "I see tons of kids each night. After a while, they all start to look the same. White or brown, that's the only difference."

Undeterred, Olivia followed him. "This one made the news, though. He's been missing for a couple of weeks now."

"Que sorpresa," Alejandro said. "One of theirs get lost, and everyone is out buscándolo." He glanced to Olivia and added, "Even have one of us looking for him."

Ignoring the barb, Olivia pressed on. "What's the hurry, Alejandro? I'm pretty sure the kids waiting to buy your stuff will still be there when you get back."

"No sé de que hablas," Alejandro said, staring straight ahead.

But Olivia caught the quick flash in her direction when she uttered the accusation. He knew exactly what she was talking about. Pressing on, she continued, "I couldn't figure out at first," Olivia said, matching his walk. "Why there's so many chiquillos taking the tour. Or why they treat you like a celebrity, all of them asking for selfies and group photos. I find it hard to believe they've all taken a deep interest in border crossings."

Alejandro continued to avoid looking at Olivia and started to walk faster.

"You want to tell me what you got in those plastic baggies you keep passing to them?"

"No te metas en mis asuntos." Mind your business, he was telling her.

"Here's the thing," Olivia said, stepping in front of him. "It is my business. 'Cause right now, you're about the only person who I think can point me in the right direction. And if you don't, I guess I'll go to *El Diario* and tell them about your side job. Don't imagine your bosses would be too happy to find out you've been selling drugs to all the young American tourists back there."

The truth was, the only person she knew at *El Diario* was the guy who called her up and told her they were cancelling her newspaper delivery for lack of payment, but she figured Alejandro didn't need to know that.

"It's only a little weed and pills," Alejandro muttered, dropping the macho act just as quickly as he dropped his shoulders. "Most of them are already getting harder stuff on their own."

"You think your bosses would buy that?"

"¿Que quieres?" he asked, now looking like an unmolded piece of clay.

Olivia handed him her phone. "Tell me if you remember the kid."

Alejandro looked down at the photo on the phone and made a face. "Yeah, I remember this pendejo." He tapped on the screen. "He was wearing this gorra too. You say he's gone missing? Good."

"Must have been a surprise to see a guy like that here."

"We get them every so often, cabrones wanting to prove how easy the walk is, or who think the whole thing is real and that we're using this as another way to sneak in a bunch of Mexicans across the border."

"What you do with them?"

"What do you think? We take their money," Alejandro said. He must have seen the surprised look on Olivia's face, because he added, "Most of them are harmless. Bien chiflados, but harmless."

"¿No te enojas?" Olivia wanted to know. "Doesn't it make you angry to be around them? To know what they think of us?"

Shrugging, Alejandro said, "They're going to think it either way, right? So why not at least take their money? Y no somos estupidos. Any of them who even look like they're going to start trouble, we kick them right out."

"Did Tommy get out of line?"

"Not with me he didn't. El niño just hung back most of the time. I think he was waiting for one of us to start shit with him or something. He had his phone out the whole damn time, filming and taking pictures."

"Any idea why he was here?"

"Like I said, he kept mostly to himself." Glancing to the direction they both came from, Alejandro checked his watch and said, "He probably wanted to brag to all his racist friends that he did it."

Olivia remembered what she'd heard about Tommy pressing his friend to join him for the tour. "When's the last time you saw him?"

"I don't know! If it wasn't for that stupid red hat, I probably wouldn't even remember him at all." Alejandro looked like he was going to walk off before getting a strange look on his face. "Ya me acorde. I saw him around the halfway point."

Olivia knew the tour lasted about three hours, so that would have been around the hour and a half mark. "What was he doing?"

"Talking to one of our girls. I don't think it was for more than a few minutes, but it stuck with me."

"Why?"

"Because of how he was acting around her. I remember thinking that if all the red gorras got laid by a brown girl, there wouldn't be any talk about the wall anymore."

Olivia tried not to gag, or punch Alejandro. "You know the girl?"

"I already told you, one of ours, and I only saw them talking for a few minutes."

"Either of them finished the tour?"

"No te puedo decir. By the end of the tour, I'm more interest in going home than making sure everyone cross."

"You guys don't do a head count? Keep records to make sure no one gets lost?"

Alejandro laughed. "Yeah, sure, and we also make you to give everyone bottled water and fancy sandwiches. Listen, as long as no one is crying too much by the end, we call it a successful night and go home." He started to put his mask back on. "And I have to go now. We done here?"

Olivia studied him, looking for those small signs she came across daily, the twitches and fidgeting that told her someone was lying. But El Coyote did none of those. Olivia believed him. "Yeah, go," she said, wondering what she would do now.

"You ever heard of La Llorona?" Teresa asked.

Olivia nodded. Every Mexican knew the story of the woman who'd lost her children and now walked all of Mexico, wailing, "¡Ay, mis hijos!" eternally cursed to search for those who would never be found.

"My mom told me that story whenever we went out in public," Teresa said. "She used to say, 'Mija, La Llorona isn't picky; she'll take you if she sees you.'"

She'd come across Teresa not long after returning to the group, and now both sat together on an uncluttered piece of desert, Olivia stretching her legs while Teresa sat cross-legged next to her. Teresa's knee would occasionally graze against Olivia's thigh as she talked, sending small shivers through Olivia whenever it happened.

"It was El Cucuy for me. Every night my dad would tuck me in and tell me if I misbehaved, I'd be dragged out of bed by my feet and become un antojito for it."

The rest of the group stood a few feet away, listening to Alejandro as he pointed to a nearby tree. The only vegetation in miles, the tree broke through the desert soil, its gnarled, skinny branches stretching outwards rather than upward as if resigned with the knowledge it could never touch the sky. Hanging from the branches were a wide variety of women's underwear, in all sizes and colors. Some of them were draped across the branches like wet clothes on a laundry line, their fabric stretched and frayed, while others hung listlessly from their elastic bands like the strangest of Christmas garland.

“Pongan atención,” El Coyote started off, his voice carrying all the way to where Olivia and Teresa sat. “Not every Coyote can be trusted. There are men who will lead the women out to spots like this with lies or by gunpoint so that they can claim them as their own. Afterward, they hang their underwear off trees exactly like this one, as a reminder that el desierto toma lo que desea.”

“Un montón de mentiras,” Teresa said, flicking some of the toritos that had accumulated around the tops of Olivia’s sock at the crowd’s direction. “Those trees are as real as La Llorona and El Cucuy and at least those two are our own creations.” Anger lined her words, sharp and clear in the night.

Olivia listened to Teresa and watched the crowd snap pictures of the tree, wondering if it or El Coyote’s words would be remembered by any of them as they crossed the bridge back home after the tour.

“Are you still going to look for the gringo?” Teresa asked, looking down at Tommy’s picture on Olivia’s phone.

“I don’t know. A lo mejor.” Olivia rubbed one of the picked-off burrs between her fingers, its sharp hooks pressing against her skin until it broke through and drew blood. She’d told Teresa of her search for Tommy as they’d walked to the tree, describing her time in Juarez hunting down leads and following trails. Showed her the countless text messages she had with his friends, most of whom hadn’t talked to Tommy in the days prior to his disappearance. Olivia hadn’t meant to tell her as much as she did, but halfway through the story she realized how nice it was to let out a whole week’s worth of frustrations.

Plus, Teresa loved it. She was enamored with the idea of Olivia as a detective and even told her she would look good in a trench coat and hat. The only thing Teresa didn’t care for was Tommy himself. Soon as Olivia told her about him being a red hat, she, like Alejandro, thought it was a good thing he went missing.

“Maybe La Llorona took him,” Teresa said.

“Maybe,” Olivia said, thinking at this point that was as good of a theory as any. Silence stretched between them like a cat basking in warm sunlight.

“Okay,” Teresa said suddenly, “we know our Tomás went missing somewhere in this tour, right?”

“That’s what I’d been thinking all along. But now I’m wondering if I was wrong. Who’s to say he didn’t complete the tour and go somewhere else?”

“We should try to see if we can figure out who that girl El Coyote mentioned was. See if she remembers something that Alejandro doesn’t.”

Tilting her head, Olivia asked, “We? I thought you said maybe it was a good thing he went missing.”

“Oh, come on!” Teresa moved closer to Olivia; her lips drawn upwards in a smile. “Solving a mystery is a lot more interesting than this.” She waved her arm around them.

Having finished his lecture, El Coyote clapped his hands together and announced, “You all got five more minutes before we start walking again. Con ganas.”

Staring at El Coyote, Olivia replayed their conversation for what felt like the millionth time, turning and twisting everything he said as she attempted to find a different angle, something she’d missed the first time around. She was so focused on the task that it wasn’t until Teresa shook her shoulder that she snapped and turned to look at her.

“I’ve been calling your name for the last few minutes,” Teresa said.

“Sorry.”

“Did you ever go through all of La Caminata’s pictures on their social media account?” Teresa asked.

“Yeah, I think so. That’s the only one I found of Tommy, though.”

“I went through them right now—the reception here is probably the best it’s been all night—and I think I found something.”

“Another picture of Tommy?”

Teresa shook her head and passed the phone back to Olivia, “No, something else. See.” She pointed to the picture she had up on the screen. It showed a group of tourists sitting cross-legged on the desert ground, while above them, three Mexicans pointed fake guns at them.

“What am I looking for?” Olivia asked.

“Just wait,” Teresa said and slid her finger across the phone, replacing the current photo with a new one. It was a shot of five tourists after having crossed the border. She knew this because in the background there was a large banner that read “UNITED STATES.”

“I still don’t...”

Teresa replaced the photo one more time. This one featured La Caminata’s version of the migra—two men and a woman in black uniforms standing next to a Jeep while a couple of tourists stood in a line, their hands pressed together with zip cuffs.

Olivia was about to say she still didn’t know what Teresa wanted her to find when she saw it. Or thought she saw it. Standing up, she gripped the phone, focusing on the woman playing the role of the border patrol agent. She looked familiar. Heart racing, she went back to the second photo, scanning the group who crossed the border and stopping when she saw the same woman. Back to the first photo Teresa had shown her. Now knowing what to look for, she spotted the woman immediately, this time as one of the Mexicans holding the gun.

It was Veronica. The one who’d been quick to cling to the boy and said it was her first time doing the tours.

“I remember her from the start of the tour,” Olivia explained to Teresa as they walked through the desert, moving away from the path the rest of the group was taking. “She was already working on a guy—Pedro, I think he said his name was.”

She should have spotted Veronica in all those photos when she went through La Caminata’s social media account. Now she couldn’t help but wonder if Veronica had been part of any of the tours Olivia had previously been in. If the girl had gotten close to an American boy every time. Or if she waited until she found the right one. Like Tommy.

“Alejandro told me that Tommy had been speaking to a girl— ‘one of ours,’ he put it. At first, I thought he meant another Mexican. But he meant another employee of the tour, an actor.”

Sure enough. Alejandro had confirmed as much to them. “She’s pretty new,” he’d told them in between trading money for baggies from the kids who came up to him. He’d also told them the last time he saw her; she and Pedro had been walking away from the group in the direction Teresa and Olivia were headed toward. “I figured she wanted to have some fun,” Alejandro had said.

“I think I see someone,” Teresa said and pointed straight ahead.

“Be careful,” Olivia said.

“You don’t think she’s dangerous, do you?”

Olivia chewed on her inner cheek and didn’t answer. As they got closer, a shape split from the black of the desert night and formed a slim figure.

“Hola!” Olivia shouted, raising her hand up toward the figures.

The figure turned, and Olivia recognized the dress and long hair as belonging to Veronica. She held a slim black flashlight on her left hand, her other hand holding on to a small and simple handbag. She stared at Olivia and Teresa as they approached her.

“Hola,” Olivia tried again before adding, “Veronica?”

“¿Quién eres?” Veronica asked, aiming her flashlight up at them.

The light slammed into Olivia and almost made her stumble backward, right into Teresa. Shielding her eyes, she said, “Alejandro sent us to find you.”

“Alejandro?”

“He said something about needing you back at the tour,” Teresa said, using the lie they’d agreed on.

The flashlight turned off, enveloping them into the black of the desert again. After a couple of blinks, Olivia’s vision returned, and she could now see Veronica standing stiffly before them, like a pole planted deep into the roots of the desert. Her dress hung slack off her shoulders and draped down all the way to the ground, the fabric unmoved by wind or motion.

“Who are you?” Veronica asked.

Olivia introduced herself and Teresa. “I’m a friend of Alejandro,” she added.

“And he sent you.” Veronica’s tone of voice was as dry as the air, lacking any trace of the girl Olivia had witnessed sidle up to Pedro earlier that evening.

“Yeah, but he said there were two of you. A boy named Pedro, I think?” Olivia said, peering around and behind Veronica but seeing no one else.

“Ese se fue,” Veronica said, pointing to the direction Olivia and Teresa had come from. “He left and went back to the tour.”

“And left you here all alone? That seems kinda rude.”

“Believe me, it was my choice to see him go. Se puso bien tocón,” Veronica said.

Strange how she didn’t seem to mind him getting all grabby on her earlier in the walk, Olivia thought, then instantly felt regret. Had she just slut-shamed this girl, all because she wanted to find a racist little kid?

“What does Alejandro want me for, anyways?”

“He didn’t tell me,” Olivia said.

“Funny, you think he would, right?” Veronica asked.

“I guess.” Olivia watched Veronica carefully. Something about the way the girl was acting bothered her. She’d changed her act so quickly and seamlessly, like a change of clothes. Out of the corner of her eye, Olivia spotted Teresa bending down and picking something off the ground.

A pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses.

Veronica must have seen it too, because she whirled around and with an unexpected quickness, stepped toward Teresa and grabbed her wrist. Already, Olivia was moving forward, her hand gripping the end of her flashlight and preparing to use it as a baton if she had to. “Let her go.”

“Who are you both?” Veronica asked, still holding on to Teresa’s wrist and twisting her arm as she put herself behind Teresa. “Y la verdad.”

The grunt of pain that escaped from Teresa threatened to blanket Olivia’s mind and bring a field of red with it. “¡Déjala ir!” Olivia shouted again. Her hand trembled, slightly afraid of what she would do if Veronica didn’t let Teresa go.

“Not until you tell me who you are and what you’re doing here.” Veronica’s voice had lost the tilt once more, returning to the more monotone voice she’d been using earlier.

“We told you, Alejandro sent us to get you.” This came from Teresa, who continued to struggle. Veronica had to drop her purse and use her hand to grab Teresa’s other wrist.

“Liar,” Veronica said, twisting Teresa’s arm behind her arm.

“I’m looking for someone!” Olivia shouted. “A guy in a red hat who took this tour a couple of weeks ago. I think you talked to him.”

Veronica eyed Olivia. “Why?” she asked. “Why are you looking for him?”

“Because his family is paying me to.”

“You don’t look like a cop.”

“I’m not,” Olivia said and inched forward, “I’m—” she almost said detective before finishing with, “someone who finds things.”

“Even assholes?”

“Especially assholes. They’re the ones who go missing the most.”

And maybe Veronica agreed, because she laughed. But still held on to Teresa. “He honestly believed everything that came out of his mouth, you know. Told me straight to my face how Mexico was so broken that he didn’t really blame us for wanting to leave it, but it didn’t mean he would allow it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like the guy I’m looking for,” Olivia said.

“That guy from tonight, Pedro, he wasn’t much better. Told me he came here from El Paso because he heard we Mexican girls would give it up for a couple of dollar bills. And he’s not the first. To most of the men, we’re either their sirvientas or whores.”

“What did you do with Tommy?”

“I finally couldn’t take it anymore and told him that if he really felt it was as easy as he was making it out to be, then he should prove it.”

“Please let Teresa go,” Olivia said.

To her surprise, Veronica did just that, taking a step back and shoving Teresa toward Olivia. Teresa stumbled, but Olivia was there to catch her before she could fall to the ground, wrapping arms around the woman and pulling her away from Veronica.

“Are you okay?” she asked her.

Teresa took a deep breath and slowly nodded. Then she glanced back to Veronica. “You sent him out to the desert.”

Veronica smiled at the two of them. “I didn’t send him anywhere. He wanted to go.”

“And him?” Olivia asked, pointing to the sunglasses that somehow Teresa had managed to hold on to the entire time. “Is he out there somewhere too?”

“I already told you, he went back to the tour.” Another smile.

She was lying and wasn’t even bothering to hide it, Olivia realized. Veronica knew they didn’t have anything on her. She wondered how many times she’d done something like this, how many times she found a guy doing the tours who would do anything she said all because of a flutter of her eyelashes and a “por favor.”

“I guess I should be heading back to the tour,” Veronica said. “What with Alejandro needing me and all.”

Olivia couldn't let it end like this. She gripped the flashlight tighter, her mind racing to figure out what she could do to stop Veronica from leaving.

“Olivia, look,” Teresa said, pointing to Veronica's purse.

The purse was laying on the ground between the three of them. Open and on its side, it looked like roadkill taking its last breath. It had spilled its contents around the ground: a lip gloss, a single earring, loose change, and a bunch of small baggies, all full of multi-colored pills—a rainbow of quick highs.

Like the ones Olivia had seen El Coyote sell all night long.

“You didn't just dare Tommy to walk to El Paso. You gave him something first. Probably whatever you could buy from Alejandro. This place is difficult enough with all your senses intact. If you were high and walking at night—”

“He would have never made it,” Teresa finished for her.

“I'm thinking that's what you did with Pedro tonight too. You gave him some of the drugs and pushed him into the night. Maybe told him that if he made it all the way across the border, you would find him and reward him. All while knowing the drugs would make sure he never got there.”

Veronica shifted from foot to foot, ignoring the baggies. Instead, she glanced toward the direction of El Paso and folded her arms. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Bullshit,” Olivia said. “You sentenced them both to their deaths doing that. I want to know why.”

“Let's say I did. Between us girls and the desert, would two missing Americanos really be the worst thing in the world? Especially boys like Tommy and Pedro? Both looking down at us unless they can use us or fuck us. Who cares if they go missing? Maybe more of them should.”

“It's not up to you to decide that though,” Olivia said.

“Why not? Over on their side, you have a bunch of men who think they can do whatever they want with us. Separating families and feeding children to a system that doesn't care for them.”

“Is that why you did this?” Olivia asked. “For revenge?”

“She did it because of La Llorona,” Teresa spoke up and took a step toward Veronica.

Olivia turned to look at her. “Teresa, what are you doing?”

Teresa ignored her and kept talking as she walked toward Veronica. “Lloronas. All of them walking through life, crying for their missing children. And no one seems to give one puta.” Her voice cracked and was unsteady for a moment. “Why shouldn't they feel what countless of us feel?” Reaching Veronica, Teresa placed a hand on her shoulder and asked, “Isn't that right?”

Through Teresa's entire walk and speech, Veronica had watched her, enthralled. It was only when Teresa touched her that the girl seemed to snap out of the trance. She slowly nodded.

“Vete,” Teresa said gently and pushed Veronica in the direction of the tour.

“She can't leave, Teresa,” Olivia said.

“Go,” Teresa told Veronica, this time with more force. “Get back to the tour. Alejandro probably is actually looking for you by now.”

Veronica started walking. She walked right past Olivia, close enough that Olivia could have grabbed the girl and stopped her if she wanted to, but she didn't, instead just looking at Teresa.

"We can't let her get away with this," Olivia said, even as she knew that's exactly what they were doing.

"¿Por qué no?" Teresa asked, not moving from her spot. "How many of them get away with something like this, and worse, every day? Damn it, Olivia, every hour."

"They were still someone's children. We could still find Pedro tonight and bring him back."

"Our flashlight isn't going to last much longer. If we start looking for him, we might be the ones who end up getting lost. Let's go back and end the tour, Olivia. Please."

Olivia's breaths came fast and shallow, her chest tightening as she processed Teresa's words. She thought of the people she'd seen taking the tour today, snapping pictures at the rape tree, giggling through El Coyote's stories of plight and hardship that people, real people, had gone through. And she thought of Veronica, having to do this every day, having to stare at a new batch of people making their way through a fake crossing for a couple of pesos a day, all while dealing with people like Tommy and Pedro.

She looked at Teresa, and then past her, toward the lights of El Paso. The other side. Wondered how far Tommy had made it before the cold of the night or the heat of the day made him stumble and fall. Imagined Pedro doing the same right now, his mind clouded with the drugs.

Maybe Tommy had made it across the border. People did. And maybe Pedro was back at the tour, laughing and bragging at how he got with a real Mexican girl.

"Olivia? Can we go?"

Olivia closed her eyes and listened to the desert, hoping it would tell her what to do.