

Some families have recipes. Others have . . . curses?

# **VIVA LOLA ESPINOZA!**

**Ella Cerón**

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# ¡VIVA LOLA ESPINOZA!

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LOLA  
ESPINOZA!

*Elia Cerón*



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*For Irma, Eva, Araceli, Elba, Lulu,  
Moises, Norma, Diana,  
and Salustia.*

**there's two ways to be a Mexican writer. you can translate  
from Spanish. or you can translate to Spanish.  
or you can refuse to translate altogether.**

José Olivarez, "Ode to Tortillas"

# CHAPTER 1

Twenty-seven minutes before the end of the last study hall period of the spring semester, a folded-up piece of paper landed in front of the book Lola Espinoza was halfheartedly reading.

Okay, she was using the book to hide her phone, so she would be notified the second her grades hit her inbox. It wasn't out of excitement; she just wanted to be aware.

She turned in the direction the projectile missive had come from and found Diego Padilla staring confidently at her. Diego—Padilla, as his friends called him—was one of the most popular boys in school and had been on the varsity soccer team since freshman year. Everyone knew Padilla. This was the first time he had ever indicated that he knew Lola existed, and they'd been in the same class since third grade.

Lola unfolded the note: *My party—u in?*

She read the words, barely legible in their smudged, stick-letter scrawl, again. Was she really being invited to the biggest end-of-semester party in the whole high school? She balked, buffered, and mentally reset. No, this

note must have been for Ana, who always sat one seat over from Lola at the shared library table during study hall. Susana Morris was friends with everyone, a human disco ball refracting her light onto everyone around her. She was also, crucially, Lola's best friend.

Lola glanced at Diego and motioned to confirm that he wanted her to pass on the note. He raised one eyebrow and shook his head.

Ana, who had been furiously shuffling a deck of oracle cards behind the book that served as her shield from Mr. Wesley, saw Padilla's facial expression out of the corner of her eye and snapped her attention toward the piece of paper in Lola's hand. "Is that a *letter*? From Padilla? What does it *say*?" She pushed the deck to the side and grabbed at the note. Her eyes lit up instantly. "You *have* to come with me."

Lola almost laughed at the thought. The last time she'd been to a party with Ana, she'd bopped her head awkwardly in the corner of someone's parents' living room before slipping out half an hour after she arrived. Could you classify it as "sneaking out" if only one person noticed you'd been there? Lola wasn't sure.

"There's no way I'm going," Lola replied. "No, let me clarify. There is no way I would even be allowed to go."

Ana sighed. "Come on! I can't remember the last time you *didn't* bail on a party, and we're going to be seniors next year. And Padilla invited you *personally*. The rules of high school dictate that you are obligated to attend."



Lola grabbed the note back. “Why would he do that? I didn’t even think he knew who I was.”

“C’mon, Espinoza. The two of you have been in the same school since before we were friends. He knows.”

“But Padilla?”

“I don’t get how boys’ minds, or minds of boys on the soccer team work, but sure, why not? You’re cuter than you give yourself credit for. At some point, someone was bound to notice you. It’s calculus or probability or whatever,” Ana said matter-of-factly, picking the deck back up to shuffle it. A girl she’d been on three dates with had given it to her as a gift two years ago, and she’d gotten particularly obsessed with pulling a card before each final exam that semester, predicting how the test would go.

The verdict was still out on whether it worked or not. Grades were due by the end of the day, and Lola’s phone had not yet buzzed, alerting their arrival.

Lola glanced over at Diego again. Though she made the most thorough study guides of anyone in their grade, she did not have a road map for this. Boys didn’t notice her, much less ask her to parties. The probability that they would was almost zero, and had been her entire high school career.

Not like she minded—anonymity gave her time to focus on homework. And while she spent her weekends watching makeup tutorials on YouTube, she always wiped off her handiwork before she left her bedroom. Not being known for her prowess with a cut crease ensured that her

most defining trait at school was being Ana's best friend, as she had been since they'd sat next to each other in homeroom at the start of the seventh grade and Ana had forced Lola into having a conversation.

Their friendship was one of contrasts: Ana was on the cross-country team in the fall, the basketball team in winter, and doubled up on track and swim in spring. She was both the first one to make a joke in the middle of class and to rush to the center of the gym floor at every school dance. Ana lived for the spotlight—it only made her more formidable—while Lola fell to pieces if she had to speak during a group project presentation. During lunch, Lola studied in the corner of the quad while Ana made her rounds, only settling down so she could fill Lola in on whatever new drama their classmates were freaking out over. Lola liked it that way. She had a social life by proxy, with none of the stakes of actually getting involved.

In the four years since they had been friends, most of their classmates only ever acknowledged Lola when they wanted to get closer to Ana. There had been only one person who broke that mold: Christopher Yoon, whom Lola had sat behind in eighth-grade math. He was funny and owned the room the way Ana did; he gave everyone the same megawatt smile, and it made Lola's kneecaps disintegrate whenever she found herself somewhere in its light. He was the perfect boy to have a crush on because everyone had a crush on him—and because the only idea more terrifying to Lola than telling her parents she'd

gotten a bad grade was asking if she could go out with someone. She needed a crush like Chris. A safe one that was meant to be unrequited. That way, nothing could ever come of it, and she wouldn't have to be disappointed.

So when Chris asked Lola to partner with him on a geometry project, she heard herself saying yes even though the correct answer—the safe answer, and the one that her parents would expect her to give—would have been no.

It was that afternoon in the library when Lola learned how dark brown his eyes were, and that holding Chris's attention felt like the most special thing she could ever do. When he leaned over their textbooks and kissed her, her mind went blank . . .

And then she was hit by a wave of nausea so violent that she had to run to the bathroom before she deposited her entire lunch over him.

Her parents assumed she had food poisoning and let her stay home from school the next day, a rarity in the Espinoza house. But she had to go back to school eventually, and she asked Sophie Acosta to switch seats in math when she did. Sitting within even a mile's radius of Chris made Lola's face grow as pink as her least-favorite blush. How could she have failed at her first kiss? Chris hadn't seemed to mind—he and Sophie started dating the following week—but Lola didn't forget so easily.

When she talked to Ana about it afterward, Ana brushed off the incident as bad luck and pointed out that

at least the kiss was memorable in its own way. Ana's first kiss, with Tara Guzman that same year, had been pedestrian by comparison; Lola had a *story*.

Yet Lola couldn't help but feel like she'd somehow been cursed to spend her high school years doing homework in an endless spiral, an academic purgatory with no salvation in sight. She studied so she could sign up for more AP classes so that she could then study for the next test, and the next one. There was no time for mall hangs, or homecoming dances, or parties, or, God forbid, a relationship. None of those things would get her into a good college on a scholarship, her parents often reminded her. And while Lola liked being smart, she also couldn't shake a specific sense of dread that she could be missing out on a world that existed beyond What Her Parents Wanted for Her.

Then again, Lola's identity was so wrapped up in school, she wouldn't even have known how to be anything other than a good student. Who was Lola Espinoza outside of that? She wasn't sure she even existed beyond the pages of her textbooks, or as the weird moon orbiting awkwardly in Ana's solar system. Really, the only logical thing to do was tuck any hopes of a social life—let alone romance—away and focus on her schoolwork.

She told herself she was fine with it.

And most days, she was.

Lola quietly folded up the note, but Ana snatched it out of her hand and scribbled something on it before Lola could put it away. "*Live a little!*" Ana had written below

Padilla's invite, her effortless loops a direct counter to his handwriting.

Lola tried to suppress the small feeling growing inside her. The part of her that wanted to work up the nerve to ask her parents if she could stop by for an hour, the part of her that might actually want to go.

"It's just a party." She sighed.

"Exactly. It's *just* a party. So you should *just* come."

Lola sneaked a glance at her phone. Maybe if her parents thought her grades were good enough this semester, she would take Ana up on an invite or two this summer. Maybe, *maybe*, it would be fun to socialize—at least in a low-stakes, non-romantic, non-distracting-from-studying way.

An email notification from the Oxnard school district appeared on her phone screen.

Lola took a deep breath as she pressed the link.

She stared at the screen in front of her and kept refreshing the page, hoping it would change.

It didn't.



Lola Espinoza was not a C student. Lola Espinoza was not allowed to get Cs, or even Bs, not even an 89 percent. It was As or nada.

Papi would not understand a C. And he would simply not accept a C in Spanish. That was basically like getting an F. And when Papi didn't understand, he grew quieter

and more serious than usual. Mami called it being stoic. Lola called it something else.

Being the reason for his silence was mortifying.

Mami was the one who yelled. She had a knack for seeing each of her children's shortcomings as yet another opportunity to remind them about the sacrifices she and their father had made, and continued to make, so that Lola and her younger brother could one day go to college—and this speech always lumped them into a single unit for some reason, even though they were two grades apart. It was together or nothing. Never mind the fact that they had different friends and liked different subjects (Lola: everything but PE and, okay, Spanish; Tommy: PE and lunch) and that Mami's disappointment in Tommy evaporated much more quickly than when Lola was its cause. She could hear her mother's voice growing increasingly melodramatic in her head: *Hacemos todo en esta vida juntos, o no lo hacemos.*

The last time Lola had gotten a bad grade, it hadn't even been that bad, comparatively—a B- on a particularly tough ninth-grade chemistry test in which the class average had been a crushingly low C. She came home prepared with that information, but her parents didn't care. Everyone else's grade should have been yet another reason for her to excel, her mother had told her. As for her father—well, he barely talked to her for a week, which was a worse punishment than being grounded given that Lola had nowhere to go anyway.

There was no way her parents hadn't already seen her grades—they would have gotten the same email she had, and Papi would have likely opened it instantly, too. She looked at the clock: 2:35 p.m. That meant she had approximately three hours and twenty-five minutes before she was tasked with defending herself, a one-girl stand-in for all of their hopes and dreams.

It wasn't as if Lola hadn't tried to get an A. She had put extra effort into her Spanish study guide—it had the most highlights, the most notations, and the most scratched-out attempts at sentence diagramming of any of her notebooks, and it was also the most dog-eared and flipped-through of all her guides.

And that was saying something, given how the only thing she ever did was study when she wasn't helping Tommy with his homework, or helping around the house so Mami didn't have to do more work, or sneaking a few minutes on YouTube before she dove back into another flashcard session. Other kids had sports or an after-school job. Lola had school.

Maybe that was for the best, because she spent so much time being the good daughter, the one Letty and Thomas Espinoza didn't have to worry about, that she had little time for anything else, even though an extracurricular or two would look good on her college applications. Hopefully, studying alone would be the key to a college acceptance letter and a scholarship rolled into one. Still, the pressure to succeed sometimes felt more like a burden

than the opportunity her parents promised it was.

A ball of dread settled in Lola's stomach. A C in Spanish would mean *consequences*. But what could her parents take away from her at this point?

Lola's hand slipped from where it was propping her chin up, knocking her back to reality. She checked her phone's front-facing camera to make sure the lipstick she'd worn that day, a matte taupe-y liquid formula that would probably survive the apocalypse, hadn't smeared over her cheeks. It was still firmly in place—at least she had that going for her.

"You okay?" Ana whispered, which was ridiculous because Ana was loud in general and always louder than normal precisely when she was trying to be quiet.

"Yeah, sure," Lola said.

Sometimes things weren't worth explaining, especially to people who didn't get it. Even best friends.

Ana and her parents were decidedly more chill about her grades than Lola or her parents had ever been about hers. Ana was smart, too, but she didn't get straight As, and she let Bs and the occasional C roll off her like it was nothing. And not only were the teachers generally kinder to the athletes, but Ana was constantly finding loopholes that allowed her to coast. When they entered high school and signed up for the same Intro to Spanish class together, no one ever checked whether Ana was already fluent and could have skipped straight ahead to the college-extension course.

(She was and she could've, courtesy of a mother who



could trace her family lineage in Texas back twelve generations. But the teachers hadn't bothered to test Ana's knowledge of the subjunctive.)

Lola sighed again, a little too loudly.

"Miss Espinoza, Miss Morris, is there something you'd like to share with the rest of us?" Mr. Wesley asked.

Lola shook her head quickly. Mr. Wesley didn't expect anyone to actually answer him. He demanded silence.

Ana began focusing even more intensely on the oracle deck, which she'd been shuffling under the table. Her interest in such things had been sudden but sincere, and she liked to attribute the things their classmates did to the different planet placements in their birth charts. Lola was skeptical, which Ana said was typical for a double Taurus.

When the bell rang, Ana bolted upright and helped Lola pack up her things.

"So, party?" Ana asked again as they walked outside to the parking lot together. "You in, Lo?"

She was not letting Padilla's note go.

Lola sighed. "I got a C in *Spanish*, A. They're not going to let me go to a party after that. I'm telling you, when my dad finds out, it's going to be bad."

"What's going to be bad?" Tommy leaned against Lola's car, trying to approximate as cool and disaffected a look as he could. Her brother was a lot of things; subtle was not one of them. "'Sup, Susana?"

The Espinoza children had the same warm brown eyes and tan skin, and that was where their similarities

ended. Fifteen-year-old Tommy was frenetic, excitable, quick with comebacks. His favorite thing in the world was roasting someone, but he had a particular knack for delivering his punch lines as a form of endearment. Lola, meanwhile, was quieter, more deliberate, perpetually stuck in her own head, weighing options before each next step. It was nice in her head, mostly. She could think through problems completely. She could plan.

“Your sister,” Ana began dramatically, “has gotten a C in Spanish and is using that as an excuse to skip Padilla’s party tonight. I can’t believe my best friend is such a Taurus.”

“Okay, but . . . when was the last time Lola went to a party?” Tommy shot back, almost as if Lola wasn’t both standing five feet away and his ride home.

She exhaled to remind him of her presence. Her brother laughed and reoriented himself to what was obviously the bigger issue.

“Yo, really? Lola, you got a C in Spanish? Spanish?! Mami’s gonna kill you.”

Lola felt her face getting red under her foundation. “I know. Just . . . get in the car, Tommy, please.”

“Hey, if it helps, you can always tell Letty about the time señora Smith knocked ten points off my midterm freshman year because I refused to call a chamarra ‘chaqueta,’” Ana offered helpfully. “It’s not either of our faults they insist on teaching, you know, *Spanish* Spanish.”

Lola said goodbye to Ana, promised to text her, also promised again to maybe at least think about the party (even if a promise was only a promise if you weren't halfway lying about it), and got into the hand-me-down Prius Papi had given her when she turned sixteen. It was quiet and unassuming, and though Lola had driven it for a year, even she had trouble picking it out of the hundred other Priuses in any grocery store parking lot. In a lot of ways, it was Lola in car form.

She sat in the front seat for a minute as Tommy played with the aux cord, cycling through playlists until he found one he liked.

"For real, though?" he tried again. "In Spanish? Man, even I'm getting an A in Spanish. And señora Smith once called me a human dolor de cabeza. That's a headache, Lorenita. In case you need me to provide you with a traducción."

"Tomás, can we not?" Lola asked quietly, almost pleading. He scowled at his full name but got the hint.

Lola started the car, and together they rode toward home—Tommy to his dinner, Lola to her doom.

## CHAPTER 2

Lola walked into the split-level that had been her home almost her entire life, dwelling on the C the way other people might fixate on a breakup or getting fired from a job. (As if she had experience with either—that would require having a life outside school.)

It wasn't that she couldn't understand Spanish. She mostly could. But she was not being graded on her comprehension of the chisme she overheard on her mother's phone calls to family in Mexico, an ability that did nothing to lessen the sting of her struggle. *Spanish* was the only class she ever really needed to work on to maintain her A, and while each test sank her further into the land of the dreaded B, she could usually do enough extra credit to bump her grade back up.

Not this time. This semester's final had gotten the better of her.

She found her mother working away in the kitchen. It was their standard after-school routine: Lola helped Mami make dinner while Mami gave her a minute-by-minute recap of her day. Letty Espinoza was a manager

at the biggest Target in Oxnard, navigating screaming babies, seasonal decorations, and school supplies. Every few days, though, Mami would spend her dinner-making time catching up with one or more of her siblings instead of with Lola, and today she was FaceTiming with her sister Socorro.

“Mija, clean the elotes for me, please,” Mami said by way of greeting. Some moms greeted their kids with hugs hello, but not Letty Espinoza. No “How was school today,” no “Happy first day of summer.” She handed her daughter a metal bowl filled with ears of corn, and Lola knew better than to protest. Her mother was tiny, five foot one on a good day, but she was formidable.

Lola craned her neck to get into the phone frame to greet her aunt, then got to work cleaning the husks and silk threads off the kernels. Maybe this meant her mother *hadn’t* seen Lola’s grades yet. Or it could be the calm before the storm. It was impossible to tell with Mami.

“Lola! When are you staying with me? Your cousins will love having you around,” her aunt called out from the phone.

It wasn’t unusual for her relatives to mention the fun she would have in Mexico City, but rarely were the plans specific. Lola didn’t read anything into it. As close as her parents were to their siblings, Lola didn’t really know her extended family, and they didn’t visit Mexico City all that much. She had a feeling that asking why was off-limits, like suggesting that she and her mother drive to a mall in Los

Angeles for back-to-school shopping rather than using Letty's employee discount on the already-reduced sale rack.

Lola worked at the corn in silence while her mother talked with tía Coco about various nieces, in-laws, and cousins, and what she thought of their new boyfriends or girlfriends and haircuts and life choices. Mami was the oldest of six, and she often wired money back to her mother and sisters, even if no one asked her to. But Letty also felt like those checks gave her the right to judge everyone and everything.

She called it holding her family to a higher standard. Tía María, who was Letty's youngest sister and only five years older than Lola, called it exhausting—often to Letty's face when it was her turn to endure her sister's video call.

Lola could tell her mother was tired by the way her shoulders sagged a bit as she cooked. It wasn't enough that Mami managed the employees on her shift with the precision of a football coach. At home, she smiled her way through Tommy's newest comedy bits, which he insisted on calling his "material"; their dog, Churro, tracking mud and sticks and sometimes lizards into her otherwise spotless house; and a crackly video connection that made calling her mother almost as frustrating as an instantly sold-out special on Southern California's hottest commodity, sunscreen.

But Letty also loved talking, so Lola would listen to the employee gossip and the tales of demanding customers, as well as her mother's judgments on the rest of the Gómez

family. Lola and the Guadalupe statue that lived in the center of the formal living room were Letty Espinoza's best audience. That statue had been the first and only thing her mother personally moved into their home while the movers had struggled with the rest. Sometimes she lit a candle in front of La Guadalupe. Sometimes she just said it reminded her of her mother's house. Of home.

That day, the special focus of Letty's judgment—and Coco's melodramatic self-pity—was Lola's cousin Juana and the restaurants she owned in Mexico City. While Lola imagined that most families would be proud that someone owned even one restaurant, given how hard they were to keep in business, Letty was of the immovable opinion that two restaurants were twice the risk and therefore twice as impractical.

Lola indulged the gossip—not because she thought Juana deserved it, but selfishly because it bought her time. The more Mami talked about her family, the less Lola would have to talk about her Spanish grade.

“She could be an accountant, you know!” Mami yelled over a simmering pot of mole, several jars of her favorite brand of paste emptied on the counter. The FaceTime with tía Coco had ended, but Letty had more to say. “Everyone needs someone to tell them what to do with money! But she's got this idea of serving your grandmother's recipes for the turistas. They could go to Taco Bell and they'd call it authentic.”

If Lola had Tommy's bravado, perhaps she would dare

offer that sometimes she'd pick those double-decker tacos over any other, more "authentic" option. But Lola wasn't Tommy, so she said nothing.

Anyway, Tommy picked that moment to saunter into the kitchen, a bag of Takis in hand. Mami dodged when her son stretched a radioactive dust-stained claw in her direction.

"What's this about Taco Bell?" he asked breezily.

Mami ignored the question. "Ya no comas eso, te vas a llenar."

Tommy continued to transport fistfuls of chips to his mouth. "Don't knock on Taco Bell," he said through chomps. "You're telling me the Baja Blast didn't come across the border with the rest of us?"

Mami glared at her son, and Lola didn't blame her. Tommy should know better than to joke about immigration with their mother, whose citizenship had only been formalized six years ago. She had been so happy when she got the letter, and so relieved—the Espinozas had heard too many stories of families waiting decades for an answer, or worse, getting the answer they didn't want. Lola could vividly remember the day Letty stood in that austere government building, one hand over her heart, reciting each word with a group of strangers like God or Walter Mercado or whatever higher power up there compelled her to do so.

"Tomás, ya te dije," Mami tried again. "Put those away. You're not going to be hungry for dinner." She took the bowl of shucked corn from Lola and began cutting



kernels off in long, starchy rows, oblivious as always to exactly how often she switched between languages. It made no difference how much Letty spoke to her children in Spanish—somehow, those words had barely imprinted on her daughter's mind.

Sometimes Lola imagined what it would be like for the Spanish words to make sense in her head without her having to translate them. She loved hearing Papi and Mami talk to each other late at night in rapid melody. And while Lola could understand most of their words, she could literally feel the little mechanisms in her brain working to process vocabulary and conjugation and tenses. It was exhausting. One day she'd get it. And even if she didn't, that didn't make her any less Mexican . . . right?

She hoped so.

Of course, she knew that proficiency in a language was not the sum total of her heritage, and besides, there were plenty of first-generation kids who didn't speak their parents' language. In that year's Spanish class alone there had been seven other Latinx kids whose grasp on the language directly contrasted with what both señora Smith and the outdated textbook said. That didn't mean their Spanish was wrong—but it did mean they spent as much time being made to unlearn old habits as they did memorizing new vocabulary. Ana's *chamarra* showdown had been a prime example, and Monica Gutierrez had once petitioned the school to offer Spanglish as a language offering. Lola still remembered the impassioned speech she made in front of

the PTA about how knowing an in-between language didn't make her any less *orgullosa de ser mexicana*. It hadn't worked, but there had been a fun rally on the quad.

"Ey, Lola, did you hear me?" Her brother's voice punctured her mental spiral. "Lorenaaaaa."

"Lola, answer your brother," Mami sighed. She clearly hadn't had a great day. The last time she'd been in a mood like this, someone had spilled an industrial-sized bottle of Clorox across the freezer aisle.

Lola eyed her brother warily. "Anyway, as I was saying," he continued, clearing his throat dramatically. "Do you think it's 'Gordita Supremes' or 'Gorditas Supreme,' like 'attorneys general'? Or 'Gorditas Supremes'? The technical pluralization, I mean."

It wasn't clear if Tommy was walking her into a trap, though it was also entirely possible he had already forgotten about her C. The C she had absolutely not forgotten about. The one that would take her generations to live down, which Papi and Mami would use as a warning for her future children, and their children after them. That is, if they ever let her date to begin with.

Lola watched her mother out of the corner of her eye as she answered slowly. "'Gorditas Supremes,' absolutely. You pluralize both the noun and the adjective. But if you really want to translate it, it would have to be 'Gorditas Supremas,' because *gordita* is feminine."

"You're right." Tommy nodded sagely. "Though the Fiesta Potatoes are really where it's at. Underrated secret

menu item right there.” He turned on his heel to leave the room, and Mami didn’t stop him.

Lola’s phone buzzed ominously in her pocket. And then it buzzed again. She glanced quickly at the screen. Somewhere on the other side of the Instagram algorithm, Ana was tagging Lola in horoscope memes, many of which suspiciously focused on parties and social lives.

Maybe if Lola promised her parents that she would spend her summer applying for college scholarships, it would soften the blow of the C. Would she officially have the least eventful summer ever as a result? Yes—even when compared against her usual summer plans, in which she pored over an AP workbook while waiting for Ana to get out of cross-country practice so they could hop from one air-conditioned café to the next, drinking so much iced coffee their teeth threatened to levitate out of their mouths. But for now, she had more pressing matters to attend to: Mami had told her it was time to set the table.

The Espinoza household plates were made of heavy terra-cotta, the kind found in Mexican restaurants that advertised themselves as being “authentic.” What did that even mean? And who decided it? Lola put the plates down and situated the bowl of jalapeños and carrots closest to Papi’s chair at the head of the table. Almost as if on cue, her father walked through the front door immediately after she let go of the escabeche.

Thomas Espinoza, a solid sun-browed man who was perpetually exhausted by his work at an understaffed law

firm that focused on farm workers' labor rights, shook Churro off him and deposited his keys under Guadalupe. Churro was undeterred by the brusque greeting. He had been a puppy with paws too big for his body when someone found him digging through the trash, and now his only worry was whether his new family would give him bits of their food at dinner. Papi had complained when the Espinoza children begged him to adopt a dog, but he baby-talked Churro more than anyone.

"Lorena, remind me to call the tree cutter tomorrow," he said. Again, Lola mentally clocked, no "Happy last day of school."

When Lola caught her father's eye, her stomach sank.

He already knew. Of course he already knew. If there was one thing señor Inbox Zero could be counted on to do, it was knowing.

Papi surveyed his daughter quietly as Mami bustled around the table and Churro staked out whose food he would be most likely to steal. Lola took her seat and focused intently on the napkin hiding her phone, which was currently threatening to vibrate itself off her lap thanks to Ana's incessant texting.

Other than that, the table was quiet. Too quiet.

"This Mrs. Smith . . . is she a fair teacher?" Papi began.

Lola exhaled. It was the beginning of her end.

She stared at a spot right above her father's ear, at the graying hair he kept cropped close. It was easier to approximate looking at him than meeting his gaze. "Um,

yeah, I . . . Usually I can get extra credit from her, but the final she gives juniors is thirty percent of the grade. So it's . . ." Her voice cracked. "It's kinda hard."

"And did you study for the final, Lorena?"

"Yeah, but . . . it's confusing. It's hard. It's supposed to be, right? To prove we learned instead of coasting through or something." Lola knew she was repeating herself, but her chest was getting tighter, and the only words she could force out were the ones she had already said.

The kindest thing would be for Papi to get it over with, take away her phone, ground her, tell her what she would have to do to make it up.

"And this English literature class, is that supposed to be hard, too? You got an A in that."

Lola looked at her mother, whose face was now as unreadable as Papi's had been when he first came through the door. Later, Lola knew, she would get the speech about sacrifices. She made a mental note to nod at the expected points. Maybe she'd get the condensed version that way. She just had to survive her father first.

"Do you like English more?" Papi continued. Or do you think it's more important than Mrs. Smith's Spanish class?"

"Lorena, why wouldn't you study harder for Spanish?" Mami asked. So she *had* seen Lola's grades, too. No wonder she wasn't coming to her daughter's rescue.

Lola looked at her father, who was winding himself up for another lecture on what it meant to be born in one

country and to uphold the legacy of another. Maybe if she thought quickly enough, she could stop it before it began. Her mind cycled through potential options for a rebuttal: that it wasn't her fault her brain was at war with the imperfecto, or that she honestly considered *¿Dónde está la biblioteca?* to be the single most pointless phrase in her entire textbook. Spanish didn't come easily to her. If Thomas Espinoza considered her a traitor, so be it.

"I don't get it, okay?" she said. "Honestly, I don't. Señora . . . Mrs. Smith is fair, but it's a hard class and I don't get it and I was lucky to get that C. Which, by the way, is a passing grade." She sounded petulant, but she couldn't stop herself. "And look, one single C isn't going to sink my chances at getting into college. I got straight As in every other class, just like I do every semester. I'm sure . . . I don't know . . . Berkeley or whoever will understand."

Papi was silent again. It was setting in, that quiet disappointment that Lola spent so much of her life trying to avoid, the one that felt so absolute.

Mami was stern yet reasonable, but Lola rarely understood her father. That wasn't to say she didn't love him—if she were forced to pick a favorite parent, she'd pick her father, while Tommy would claim Mami. Letty still indulged the baby of the family, but Lola's affinity toward her father probably had something to do with how they were wired to handle stress. They barreled through their problems, hoping the solution would come to them eventually. Why dwell

on one problem when you could multitask on seven others?

Their similarities notwithstanding, there were so many things about her father that Lola didn't get. Why had he chosen to move to Mexico for college, for example, even though he had gotten into several stateside schools? (Ever the king of double standards, Papi had already made it known that Lola was expected to pick a college within the California state limits so she could still come home most weekends.) And while she knew heritage was important to her father, why would he and his wife go to such great lengths to name their son Tomás when his own Thomas was right there?

If Lola remembered correctly, her father's first ever trip to Mexico had been when he moved there for college, and leaving his family must have been a serious culture shock. His parents—whom Lola had always called Papito and Mamita—had lived without papers for decades, almost their entire lives. The three Espinoza boys were the first in their family to be US citizens, and Thomas had moved to Mexico almost as soon as he turned eighteen.

But any time Lola asked him about why he went to school in Mexico, so far away from his family, and what that had been like, he only ever reminded her that it was how he and their mother had met. It was the conclusion rather than the exposition, and a story he often told factually and with little emotion. Papi wasn't often one for theatrics. Even now, there was no drama on his face.

Yet what stung this time wasn't his inscrutability. It

was the unwillingness to hear Lola's side of things. She had tried to get a good grade and even offered to complete extra credit to make up for it. But the final had sunk a tenuous A-, and unlike the Ana Morris of the world, Lola was not expected to treat that as "good enough."

Five painful minutes passed, during which the only sound was Tommy eating. When Papi spoke again, it was to Mami, his voice calmer and more measured than Lola had ever heard it in her seventeen years. "La suegra," he said, "would be good for her."

Her mother nodded. Like this was something they had already discussed and agreed on.

Lola must have misheard him or filled in the wrong blanks. Going to her grandmother's house? In Mexico City? There was no one else it could logically be but señora Rosa de la Bendición Cruz de Gómez, who lived in the same drafty house in which she'd raised her six children—which was exactly the opposite of where Lola wanted to spend the next-to-last summer of her high school career.

"You can't be serious!" she groaned.

Her C had been an obvious warning of danger ahead, but she never imagined this.

Tommy laughed incredulously. "Yoooooooo, she's going to Buela's? Does that mean I can have her room? Or at least her TV? Lola, you won't mind, right? How could you? You won't be here." He happily began helping himself to extra mole, splattering the front of his tee as he did so.

The last time Lola had been to Mexico City was the



summer before her sophomore year of high school, for her aunt's wedding. The trip lasted four days, and she had been introduced to more people than she could remember—so many cousins of cousins and aunts and uncles that she wished for a family tree to understand how they were or weren't technically related. She'd worn an itchy dress designed for someone four years younger and spent the big night in that special kind of fog that happens when you understand what's happening around you in concept but not in reality. It was like everyone remembered a younger version of Lola, one who still answered to nicknames like "Lolita" and who was not allowed to grow up.

By the end of the Espinozas' trip, Lola would have done anything for reliable cell service. That was the other thing: The Wi-Fi in Buena's house was spotty at best, which made tía María complain every time she needed to study at home rather than at her law school's library. But why should Buena worry about that? Her beloved TV antenna, which she used to watch her telenovelas as she cooked, was more than enough technology for her. She didn't want to learn to use anything beyond that, and she didn't want to move. So that house was where she remained, and where the Espinozas stayed on the rare occasions they did visit, often in tiny twin beds that should probably have been replaced thirty years ago.

Lola stared daggers at her brother before trying again with her parents. "Come on, please. That's so unfair."

At that moment, Tommy's phone vibrated on his lap,

because there was some universal rule that a phone would only ring when you absolutely didn't need it to. He brazenly checked his notifications. Papi had once again gone silent.

"There's got to be an alternative," Lola said, this time to no one in particular.

She looked up, and her own stubbornness looked back at her. "No alternative," Papi said. "You come back when you can speak Spanish."



In the safety of her room, Lola's exhale verged on a sob. Churro pawed at her door, but she didn't let him in. He'd get bored eventually and wander back to the dining room, where Papi would complain about the very concept of keeping dogs indoors before ultimately feeding Churro directly from his plate. Mami would admonish her husband, and she'd save Lola's unfinished plate in the fridge. Her family was predictable. Their world was small and known, and Lola liked it that way.

Mexico, though. She didn't understand why that was the first, last, and only choice available to her. *Duh, that's why you're going, because you don't understand*, a small voice in the back of her mind chastised her.

Lola told it to shut up.

Her phone buzzed again, and she looked at the screen. Ana was undeterred in her mission to convince Lola that

going to Padilla's party and celebrating the end of the school year was the right choice for her.

Can't

I'm more than grounded My parents  
are sending me to my grandma's for  
the summer

LOL seriously?

Wait, like as in Mexico?

Are you upset about this? I'm  
sensing you're upset

You should take me with you

I'm sure my mom would say yes

Lo?? You there?????

Lola didn't reply, choosing instead to wallow in self-pity. She didn't want to look at this optimistically. She watched as the text bubble on Ana's side showed up and shorted out one last time, the three little dots signifying that her best friend was trying to figure out what to say. The short answer: nothing.

Ana, mercifully, gave Lola space to stew.

## CHAPTER 3

Lola had been given ninety-six hours after that fateful dinner to prepare for her departure, because when Papi decided something, it was as good as done.

Lola's summer plans? Canceled. Not that she had many to begin with. Even her last-ditch effort to appeal to her mother fell through: Mami had reassured Lola that she had cleaned her house just fine before she brought Lola into the world, and she would manage it again on her own for three months.

"So I start at six a.m. on Saturday, not at seven." She shrugged matter-of-factly. "Your grandmother won't let you clean a single thing, so consider yourself lucky, okay?"

And that party at Padilla's house? Apparently an epic, remember-forever blowout. Of course it was—and Lola found herself lingering a little too long on the photos Ana sent her, as well as on every other post on her Instagram feed. A party was only ever as good as its half-life, and the gossip inspired by this one would last until at least graduation.

The night before her flight, Lola opted to eat dinner

in her room again. It was the most basic form of protest she could think of, and it also meant she could text Ana as much as she wanted while she ate. Her best friend had already reinforced her status as the queen of her cross-country conditioning class and was busy sending so many microupdates about teammate drama that Lola's phone threatened to buzz right out of her hand. If Ana had a flaw, it was her habit of

texting

like

this.

Ana also offered her analysis of Lola's banishment as optimistically as she could: Going to Mexico for the summer would be an adventure. And for someone like Ana, it would have been. But Lola expected a very lonely few months surrounded by relatives who might as well be strangers and a language barrier that would bring any attempt at conversation to a painful crawl—not unlike the buffer plaguing an eyeshadow palette review video she wanted to watch.

Lola heard a knock at the door and a scuffle as Churro came barreling in ahead of Mami. He wasn't allowed on any of the beds, technically, but Lola's was the only room where he wouldn't get yelled at for inviting himself up anyway. He made a nest amid the jean shorts and tank tops that had yet to make their way into the half-packed suitcase lying forlornly on the floor, pleased with himself. When Churro was happy, there was no reasoning with him.

“Mija, are you packed? Are you ready?” Letty asked, looking at the piles of blue and gray and white and black that Lola had divvied up. “Is this really everything you’re taking?”

She sat on the bed and picked up a mess of tanks so she could begin folding them. Lola watched as her mother’s hands smoothed the cotton into neater folds than anything she’d ever mastered in her short life. There was something soothing about watching her mother take on tasks like folding laundry—how capable and pragmatic she was—even if Lola felt a pang of guilt for giving her yet another chore to complete.

After a few minutes, Mami tried again, in her own way. “You should take at least one dress, Lorena,” she said.

There was a finality in her voice, one that cemented the fact that Lola was indeed going to Mexico City the next morning. Letty took Lola’s silence as an invitation to dig through her daughter’s closet—the closet in her house that she let her daughter use, she would say. Before Lola could protest about something like privacy, Letty pulled out a dress Lola had forgotten she even owned.

It was an impulsive mall purchase, and the tags still waved wastefully from their little plastic strings. How did Mami even know it was in there? Her mother folded it efficiently and offered it to her. “Everyone needs at least one dress.”

This was her peace offering?

Lola had been hoping for a reveal that, actually, she

and Papi had thought about it, decided the flight was too expensive, and their daughter could unpack her suitcases. Instead, she got a fashion tip.

“This feels kind of sexist, you know?” Lola countered. “Would you tell Tommy that?”

“Sure. If he wants to wear a dress, why not?” Mami gave Lola a smile, another peace offering that helped a little but not enough. “Your father, he thinks this is important. You know, when I first met him, he had trouble with his Spanish. He kept telling people he wanted to hit the check, not pay it. But going to Mexico meant a lot to him when he was your age.”

Lola contemplated the difference between *pegar* and *pagar*, and nudged her now-silent phone. Twenty-four unread messages, each one from the only person who ever texted her. “Yeah, well,” she said. “I’m not him. It’s not fair for him to think I should have the exact same experiences and priorities that he does.”

“That’s what a family is, Lorena,” Mami said. “Just people who think they know what the people around them should be doing.”

Coming from the woman who considered herself the expert on what everyone in her family should do.

“You could ask him why this is important to him,” Mami tried.

“I know why it’s important,” Lola said. “I’m supposed to get straight As and I didn’t, so here we are.”

“There’s more to it than that, you know?”

“Do I?”

“Try to talk to him,” Mami said again.

“He’ll just ask me to say it in Spanish and stonewall me until I try,” Lola said bitterly.

“Spanish wasn’t his first language, either, but he learned for me. Because it was mine.”

Lola looked away, an apology not quite materializing on her tongue.

Mami took that as a cue to leave. “Think about at least one dress,” she pressed before closing the door behind her. “Even if you don’t wear it.”

Lola packed the dress.



Her flight was at 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, and she was supposed to meet Papi outside the house at 2:00p.m. sharp. He had taken the afternoon off work to drive her and had texted his very terse directions that morning. Neither he nor Lola had spoken since his decision, and they only sent texts when they absolutely needed to. Tommy had somehow found the silent standoff to be hilarious, while Mami had grown more and more exasperated. It had been her idea that Thomas drive his daughter to the airport, and Lola had a feeling it was a last-ditch effort to get them to say something—anything—to each other.

She wasn’t going to be the one to cave first.

At least she wouldn’t in English. She had wondered



aloud to Ana whether her return at the end of August speaking flawless Spanish would be a moment for her to gloat or a reinforcement that her father had made the “right” decision. Lola had a sinking feeling about the latter, but optimistic Ana had pressed for the former: Her father would be shocked at her mastery and apologize for his hard-line approach. Even señora Smith would be forced to acknowledge Lola’s fluency. Until then, the real-time Lola couldn’t think of anything in particular that her father needed to hear from her.

Yet by the time they reached the drop-off curb, she had definitely considered saying something to cut the tension in the car. That this was, in a way, her fault? That she was also disappointed in herself for getting anything less than an A-? Or should she offer a reassurance that she really was going to try to learn Spanish? Every possible opening was a concession in her head. She didn’t want to give Papi the satisfaction of thinking he was right about this. So she picked the stubborn option instead: say nothing.

Lola leaped out of the car and yanked at her suitcases so she could head into the terminal and get the entire summer over with. She heard a gruff cough; Papi was asking her something. Was this the end of their standoff?

She turned to find him with his hands shoved deep into the pockets of a leather bomber jacket that was maybe as old as Tommy. “You have your passport?” he said again. “And what about your ticket?”

Lola lifted the backpack she’d repurposed from school

accessory to travel essential. “All here, along with your written consent to let me leave the country and basically every other form of identification in case I get lost or decide to abscond to Europe and start a new life or whatever.”

Papi’s sense of humor was difficult to pin down, and Lola could count on both hands the number of times she’d heard her father really laugh. It was usually during a rare game of charades, when his brothers and their wives were over for Christmas and her younger cousins had all passed out from the excitement of so many presents. Lola loved those moments, when the stress levels in the house plummeted—toward the asymptote, according to her math study guide—and she could actually breathe for once.

This was not one of those times. Lola and Papi looked at each other for seventeen and a half awkward seconds before either of them spoke again.

“Well, text me when you land, and when you’re with María,” he offered, though he didn’t move to hug her. There were men of few words, and then there was Thomas Espinoza. Lola wondered if he had ever spoken more than twenty words consecutively in his lifetime. Or if he had ever admitted to anyone that he overreacted or got things wrong. There was so much about her father she couldn’t piece together, and that reality felt most awkward of all.

She turned away before she could say anything. It hurt too much to admit she resented her father in that moment, and she was afraid whatever she could think to say would have tipped him off to that.

—

Lola spent the three-hour flight reliving every moment of that agonizing car ride, applying a consecutive round of sheet masks in her tiny economy seat, and trying to ignore the white couple sitting next to her. They were busy planning their weekend vacation by plotting out the photos they wanted to take for Instagram, and the girl kept pronouncing Xochimilco with a hard ex-oh in the front. (Lola worried, for a moment, what words she herself mispronounced with her own rudimentary accent.) Eventually, she drowned them out by speeding through a Spanish lesson on the language app she had downloaded two days prior in a moment of defeat. She mouthed along as the conjugations for the imperfecto lulled her into a trance until the flight attendants announced the plane's descent.

She passed customs, found her suitcases, and pushed her way through the exit, where a flood of people waited for other passengers, for the people they loved. For a second, Lola felt invisible, which was comforting in a familiar sort of way. She wasn't anonymous for long. Her tía María swung into view, waving her down excitedly.

"¡Lolita!" she exclaimed, using the nickname Lola had tried to outgrow the day she turned eleven. "¡Lolita, ya llegaste!"

Lola hugged her aunt as people milled around them. "Sola . . . solo Lola," she tried, cringing at how difficult

such a simple word felt on her tongue. She had to try to use Spanish. If she didn't put in the effort, she'd be in Mexico forever.

"Okay, okay, solo Lola," her aunt replied, grabbing one of the bags and leading the way out to the car. "So tell me, how was the flight, how are you, look at you! ¡Ay, que guapa! Oh! Did you text your dad? He has sent me fifty texts in the last hour." The minute María switched to English, Lola felt her whole body exhale, even if the topic was her father. But her aunt didn't stop there. "¿Y el novio?"

María Gómez Cruz spoke as rapidly and as forcefully as her older sister did everything else in life. Lola kept grabbing sideways glances at the young woman who looked like Letty in every possible way. They had the same dark hair, identical sheets of black that Mami had also passed on to Lola. But where her mother was deliberate and self-contained, María crackled with an energy that her niece liked to imagine Mami had once had, too.

"There are no boyfriends, Tía María."

Her aunt laughed.

"¡Tía! Ay Dios, I forgot I'm your aunt. From now, I'm Mari, okay? Better sister than mi sobrina."

Lola relaxed into that. There were so many years between the oldest and the baby of the family that for as long as Lola had known her, Mari had felt more like a cousin than an aunt. Mami sometimes talked about the ways the baby was allowed to follow the biggest dreams because the older children worked to clear the path.

For Mari, that dream was to be a prosecutor, which she described as a desire to hunt down the bad guys who inspired her favorite *SVU* episodes, but which was really rooted in a serious hunger for justice. She was in her last year of law school, and there were textbooks and notepads piled up in the back of her car because school was school no matter where you were.

They loaded the bags into the trunk and got into the car. Up above, the sky was hazy and gray around the edges even though it wasn't cold. Mari messed with the dashboard until she found a station she liked, turned up the hip-hop, and expertly merged into the sea of traffic that defined the city's streets. As she drove, she shout-talked in two languages to fill Lola in on how Buela refused to set foot in Juana's restaurants and barely tolerated Regina's boyfriend and the at least eight ways in which tía Sofia's newest baby made Mari feel comfortable with being an aunt for the first time in her life, which was funny because she had technically been one since before she was born. The way Mari sped through everyone's big milestones made the world feel like it was going a million miles an hour.

They turned at an exit whose most defining characteristic was the auto repair shop at its corner, and made their way down the narrow streets to Buela's house and the faded pistachio walls that immediately brought a rush of happy memories back into Lola's still-bitter brain. Rosa's house was one of the few on the block

with its own outdoor courtyard; it doubled as a parking garage and was marked by a metal gate that only opened by force. Lola hopped out of the car on Mari's request and struggled with the rusted door before shoving her shoulder into it. It was the most athletic thing she'd done all year. The gate's creaking gave way to music and laughter coming from inside the house.

"¡Ay!" Lola heard someone yell. "¡La gringa!"

She took a deep breath and tentatively went inside. Several aunts and her uncle, each of whom looked startlingly like Mami, were waiting for her. Tío Chuy was the tallest and held himself even taller, while tía Coco was squat and more cheerful than anyone else in the room. Tía Paty was Mari's senior by seven years but could pass for her twin; she wrapped Lola in a hug before heading toward the car to help her sister with the bags.

"Mira, Lola," she offered with a wink as she went. "La Señora está en la cocina."

Her grandmother's kitchen was old and showed wear if you looked close enough. On their last trip, Papi had offered to pay for a full renovation, but Buena hushed him and said it was well-loved. Rosa was busy stirring a large pot on the stove, but she immediately switched her attention to Lola, the oldest child of her oldest child. That was a special distinction in its own right, even though Gabriela, the first of tía Coco's twins, was her oldest grandchild—by a total of three and a half minutes, as Gabriela often reminded her twin, Juana.

“Lolita, ¡ven acá!” It was going to be an uphill battle to get her family not to use that name, her grandmother most of all.

Buela was the kind of tiny that proved sturdier than people gave her credit for, and the warmth of her skin contrasted starkly with the solid white roots she hadn’t yet been able to dye cinnamon-red. She had barely changed since the last time Lola had seen her, down to the apron guarding her neatly pressed slacks. Her mannerisms were the same, too. Without even asking Lola if she was hungry, Buela ladled something into a nearby bowl, topped it with a tortilla that she pulled from a pile wrapped in a cloth on the counter, and handed it to her granddaughter. Lola took it wordlessly. The rule was: Accept Buela’s cooking or risk her wrath forever.

But before Lola could settle in, the house began moving again. There was a honk outside, and a rush of cousins and strangers that must have been their friends came pouring into the house. They laughed and yelled as they carted various boxes into the kitchen, and Lola recognized one yell in particular: Juana’s cackle was unmistakable.

“¡Loli—!” she began.

Lola cut her off, preparing herself for the inevitable. “Solo Lola, ¿okay?” she pleaded, greeting Juana with a kiss on the cheek.

“No, I’m thinking I like Loli mejor,” Juana replied with a wink. “Ey, Rocío, Loli is here!”

Juana's reserved girlfriend, a redhead with fair skin and knowing eyes, stood among a group of five other people, including tío Chuy's middle daughter, Regina, and her boyfriend, Adrián—the one Mari had said Buena wasn't fond of. She eyed him briefly, trying to figure out why her grandmother didn't like him.

The answer was most likely the simplest one: Adrián was a teenage boy.

Over the next twenty minutes, more and more family members arrived, eager to greet the person they kept calling *la Gringa*, a nickname that chafed at Lola every time they said it. There was Juana's twin, Gabriela, and their little sister, Carmen, who together made up tía Coco and tío Zuma's three daughters. They were tall and looked like their father, a lanky Black man who taught economics at one of the city's universities. They also immediately put Lola at ease in the way Regina and her sisters, Cristina and Antonia, did not.

Those girls were each a year apart in age and often drove tío Chuy to ask the saints what he had done to deserve such worries. The Gómez y Gómez sisters showed up in coordinating Zara outfits and hardened, white-tipped nails—textbook telenovela villains. Cristina in particular kept eyeing Lola up and down. She was eighteen, the oldest of tío Chuy's girls, and clearly believed she was special. Lola rarely had to deal with girls like that at school, and she didn't intend to start now just because they were related.

Instead, she focused on greeting her tía Sofía and Sofía's



husband, Josué, who were busy trying to corral two of their three children, nine-year-old Yolanda and seven-year-old Xóchitl. Tía Paty had taken over the handling of Sofia's youngest, three-year-old Ava, who laughed wildly as her aunt played *la araña pequeña* on her belly. This was a small gathering by Gómez standards, though there was no telling who else might show up in the course of the evening.

Buela soon called everyone to the large table that took up almost every inch of her dining room. The family gathered around, passing the various bowls and plates of Buela's endless *guisados* and *sopes* as they chatted loudly. Lola took in the scene from the most inconspicuous corner seat, but the conversation was fixated on her.

"Lola's stuck with *la Señora* for the summer, so everyone be nice," Mari said, her comment directed toward Juana and her sisters.

Carmen scoffed. "We're the nicest. Aren't we, Lola?" she asked, sitting down next to her cousin.

"Ey, Lola, so what are you doing here this summer?" Rocío asked in English so crisp, it momentarily took Lola by surprise. In the same instant, however, she kicked herself mentally for anticipating anything else—the tourists on the plane weren't the only people who needed to check their privilege.

"I'm working on my Spanish," she said. It wasn't a lie, even if it was against her will.

Rocío smirked. "Entonces hablamos nada más en español."

“Yo prefiero un . . . un poco de inglés,” Lola replied, and everyone laughed, though the conversation mercifully moved on from there.

As the meal went on, Lola took in her relatives one by one. Tío Chuy had zeroed in on his middle daughter because, from what Lola could gather, Juana had caught Regina and Adrián sneaking off into the back room at one of the restaurants. The speech needed no translation—his tone was proof enough that her uncle was not happy. Lola listened quietly as she loaded carnitas into a tortilla and spread some of Buela’s many homemade salsas on top.

Mari, who was seated on Lola’s other side, explained that Regina only landed her job as a waitress because Juana’s worst business instinct was her firm belief that family and friends made good-enough staff. And while that meant service was sometimes slow, there was plenty of entertainment. “I don’t know,” she added. “Maybe it works out. Her friends are fun to look at.”

Lola almost choked at Mari’s boldness and contented herself with watching her grandmother offer one of several dishes to anyone who wasn’t entirely stuffed. The primary topic had turned to Paty, who was currently living with her mother and sister, and whose divorce was so legendary, everyone felt entitled to mention it whenever they could. Rosa’s children did not get divorced; they muscled through their misery in case the archbishop dropped by for coffee. Sure, that visit was about as likely as Lola’s father saying sorry about anything, but the hyperbole had

been enough to make Paty try to make her marriage work for a year longer than would have been healthy.

Rather than rehash her most disappointing daughter's love life, Buela chatted at Lola as she continued to serve everyone, and while her words were in Spanish, her cadence so closely mirrored Mami's that Lola already felt at home. But Buela's rules came fast and swift. Lola picked up that she was expected to sleep in the same room as Mari, whose bed split into twin mattresses, and that she wasn't allowed to so much as walk to the corner store without someone going with her. She was also supposed to adhere to a curfew, which felt redundant, given she needed a chaperone to go anywhere in the first place.

"Ey, Loli," Juana interjected conspiratorially. "If you ever need to get out of here, you can come work with us."

"Don't you mean, 'for me'?" Rocío asked.

Juana pushed her girlfriend playfully.

"No importa. *We're* building the next Pujol! The new location is in La Roma, so you can handle the gringo tourists, Loli. Don't worry; it's not where these two work," she added, looking pointedly at Regina and Adrián.

The word *gringo* punctuated the air, a small reminder that Lola and her cousins were separated by more than distance alone. But rather than respond immediately—or even react to what she knew Juana did not mean with any ill will—Lola thought about what Mari had said: that Juana's penchant for mixing business and family often resulted in drama. If nothing else, working at La Rosa wouldn't be

boring . . . though the idea of speaking Spanish to complete strangers, professionally, filled Lola with dread. “I’ll think about it,” she said. Juana smiled.

By the end of the night, Lola was exhausted—from the long flight, from the whirlwind of her family, and from trying to keep up with the conversations as they overlapped. No one could talk like the Gómez family could, and she was more than ready for bed.

As she walked upstairs and settled into the creaky twin bed that would be hers for the summer, Lola was struck by how happy she was to be surrounded by her cousins, aunts, and uncles, and that their joy at having her could hardly be contained within that warm and lived-in house. Sure, she’d probably have to share the Wi-Fi with Mari while one studied and the other streamed social media posts, and she would certainly need the help of a cousin to get around, but she would figure those details out later. She didn’t want to jinx it, but as Lola closed her eyes, she threw a vague wish at anything in the universe that might be listening to intervene and keep this from becoming a long summer—or at least not a quiet one.

## CHAPTER 4

If Thomas Espinoza had meant for the trip to Mexico to be a punishment, Lola was delighted to find that her first few days were anything but that. Buela simply refused to let anyone else in the house cook—she'd jump to so little as pour a soda for her granddaughter and routinely offered to make a four-course meal if Lola suggested that she was hungry. And where Mami often brandished the Swiffer at both Lola and Tommy to shame them into helping her clean, Buela scoffed at Lola's offer to help her with any of the chores she completed daily.

The only thing she expected Lola to do was join her in prayer in front of a painting of La Guadalupe that hung with reverence at the top of a wall of family photos in mismatched frames. She kept a bowl of salt and a white candle on a small side table next to where she knelt every day, and while Lola wasn't sure what those were about, she knew asking would result in an hour-long explanation full of phrases that had no translation at all. So Lola didn't ask, and Buela was contented to complete her rituals with a companion, but without interruption.

Because the Gómez matriarch didn't drive and said she was too old to start learning, everyone came to her, often with groceries or other necessities. Tía Coco, who lived six houses down, regularly brought plenty of gossip and pastries, including Lola's all-time favorite, orejas, whose small ice caps of sugar she would pick off as she listened to her aunt complain about anyone and everyone. It wasn't iced coffee with Ana, but it was an escape all its own.

The biggest downside to Buela's house was the Wi-Fi, a shaky system that was so unpredictable it made streaming tutorials nearly impossible. Practical Mari was too impatient to fight with it, so she would turn her phone into a hotspot when she was home—which, thanks to summer classes and a part-time job at a law firm, was almost never. Lola didn't dare imagine what kind of roaming charges she'd rack up on her dad's cell phone plan if she did the same, so she spent the bulk of her days reading and trying to complete exercises on her language app in offline mode. Whenever she was able to turn her Wi-Fi back on, she was inundated with texts from Ana, who was busy running cross-country drills, stressing about a Stanford scout attending practice, and keeping Lola updated with gossip of her own. It was the same routine they would have had if Lola had stayed home for the summer—except this time, she was two thousand miles away.

But even she had to admit this was an extreme version of living life from her usual sidelines.

For once, being boring was, well . . . boring.

It was after three days of staying inside Buela's house and sporadic texting with Ana that Lola remembered Juana's offer. She texted her cousin shortly after Mari came bursting through the door, mercifully bringing the Wi-Fi hot spot with her and on a particularly colorful tear about the traffic.

¿Puedo trabajar contigo todavía?

That's how you say it in Spanish, right? Anyway, let me know if I need to submit a formal application or whatever.

In return, Juana sent more GIFs than even the hot spot could keep up with, clearly not caring to honor the line between eagerness and spam. It was settled: Lola would go to the new La Rosa on Monday for training. Mari would drive her over. (Lola made sure to ask her aunt for the ride only after she calmed down from whatever debacle she'd dealt with on the road that day.)



Though it had been less than a week and a half since classes had let out for the summer, Lola had already gotten used to sleeping in—so that first morning, she woke up only when a pillow made contact with her ear.

“Lola, ¡ya!” Lola stirred awake to the sound of her aunt rushing around the room.

“Mari, what—”

“Late! We’re late!” Mari grabbed a pair of jeans that were hanging haphazardly out of Lola’s suitcase and threw them her way. Lola would have to talk to her about this habit of turning household objects into projectiles, no matter how soft they were. “Tengo un examen hoy. We need to go.”

Lola rubbed the sleep from her eyes as she watched Mari finish getting ready, but then it dawned on her: She had somewhere to be, too, and if Mari was late, that meant she was late. She bolted out of bed, threw on the jeans, and hunted around for her phone. Three texts from Ana and an Instagram message from Mami, none of which Lola had time to respond to. Her link to home would have to wait.

She rushed through her teeth-brushing and hair-combing in order to meet Mari in the car, where her aunt spent the whole drive muttering to herself about some legal theory that Lola didn’t dare try to translate in her head. Instead, Lola poked at the face that stared back at her in the mirror, trying to make the puffiness of sleep disappear with her fingers. There had been no time to put on any makeup, and Lola didn’t dare apply mascara while Mari was driving so erratically.

Within twenty minutes, Mari deposited Lola outside a small building nestled on a quiet street in the colonia Roma, with the words *La Rosa* painted above its front door. At that first family dinner, Rocío had explained that



the name was in honor of la Zona Rosa, where the first La Rosa stood in la colonia Juárez, and for the matriarch who had ironically never visited.

Was it an act of defiance, then, for Juana to name her life's work after her grandmother, or an extreme show of deference?

Obvious and unspoken homages to Rosa filled the restaurant's main room, from the photo of her as a young girl that greeted Lola when she walked in, to the wall tiling that matched the ceramic work at her house, to the smell of dried chile and coffee that permeated the space. It was what Buena smelled like, and it was a comforting mix.

The space was only half-lit, and Lola's eyes adjusted to the semidark as she took in the plants and portraits that filled every corner. Of particular importance was a painting of Felipe Gómez, her grandfather, who stared somberly down from over by the bar. He had died almost two decades ago, when Mari was barely old enough to walk. It struck Lola that she had never heard her grandmother talk about him.

Lola stopped in front of the portrait and tried to imagine knowing this grandfather, whose memorial was far more serious than the crinkly-eyed memories she had of her Papito. Mami rarely spoke about her father, (though Lola had a hunch that tía Coco would tell her stories if she asked). How strange it was to be related to someone you didn't even know, she thought, before

realizing that the not-knowing was perhaps her fault for not asking more questions. She searched his face for any resemblance to her own; from certain angles, he looked like a sterner version of tía Paty. But similarities didn't tell you how a person's mood changed when they were tired, or how they preferred their eggs, or what their favorite song was when they were sad. Anyone could be related or look like someone else. It took something more to be close, to be family.

The entire building was quiet and amplified the rare sounds that came from further within the restaurant.

“¿Buenos días?” Lola called out tentatively.

A boy stepped out of a back doorway. He beamed at her the way only strangers can smile at other strangers, his curls partially obscured under a beanie. Several organs in Lola's body threatened to flip themselves inside out.

“Tú eres la prima de Juana, ¿no?” he asked.

A crash sounded in the room behind him—the kitchen, Lola suspected—but the boy didn't turn his attention away. He was the most beautiful boy Lola had ever seen up close. He had high cheekbones and dark eyebrows that framed green eyes, which were distressingly locked on Lola.

She gulped away her sudden nerves and nodded. It could barely be considered encouragement, yet it was enough for him.

“¿Qué haces aquí?”

“Lo . . . lo siento,” she offered, trying to avoid his gaze.

She didn't want to risk what would happen if they made eye contact. "Mi español es . . ." The plaster walls bounced her unsteady pronunciation back at her tauntingly.

He only smiled wider. "Ah, she's an American."

A beat, and then: "Well, we all are. But you are the kind that calls yourself one. A gringa."

The comment momentarily snapped Lola out of the shock that a boy that looked like *that* would talk to *her*. She glowered before she realized what she was doing and immediately wondered if it was possible to disappear on the spot. Hadn't they invented an app for that yet?

He laughed. "Okay, she doesn't like 'gringa,'" he observed, and straightened himself. "Hi, American. I'm Gregorio, but you can call me Río. I'm training you today. Is this your first time at La Rosa?" It was like he could crank his friendliness up at will, and his voice balanced on the tightrope between recitation and sincerity.

"I, uh," she paused, trying to think about what would sound breeziest.

*What would Ana say?*

*Probably not something that required an inner monologue to coach yourself through.*

*Answer him, Lola!*

"Estoy aquí para el verano," she offered, wincing as she did so. Would he really care that she was only here for the summer? "Estás . . . Are you good friends with Juana?"

Río laughed and glanced at the clock. "Sí, algo así," he said. "But I didn't know Juana had a pretty American for

a cousin. Better friends would share that, no?"

"So you're enemies, then; got it," Lola said automatically, trying not to let the fact that he might have just called her *pretty* short-circuit her nerve endings.

Río laughed again. He carried his beauty with confidence, the way Padilla and the soccer boys sauntered down the hallway, secure in their place at the top of the social order.

"Okay, so first lesson," he said, standing upright. He was tall and younger than Juana, maybe eighteen or nineteen. "Come on, American, let's get started."

With that, Río began giving her a tour of the restaurant. Lola fumbled with her hair and was suddenly very aware of the mechanics required to walk. She immediately regretted not picking a cuter top that morning, even in the rush of being late and even though Juana had told her the uniform was black jeans and black shirts. She was struck with a desire to know what Río thought about her specific black T-shirt. Were there differences in black T-shirts? Did he even care? Then it dawned on her that this boy was talking to her and, worse, expected her to reply.

"Y aquí tenemos mi oficina," he said, gesturing expansively at the bar. Lola made a mental note to never mention him to Buela. Her aversion to Juana's restaurant, boys in general, and probably the combination of boys and alcohol, too, meant Río was 100 percent off-limits.

Río motioned to turn a corner toward the kitchen. "So you are in Mexico for the summer," he said, echoing her

weak explanation for existing here at this moment. “Why?”

One look at this boy, whose shirtsleeves were rolled up and who beamed at her expectantly for some witty comeback, compelled Lola to be honest. “My dad sent me here to learn Spanish. I got a bad grade in class, and . . .” He laughed. “I mean it! I got one C, and ta-da: Mexico.”

“Well, it’s good you learn,” he offered.

“I guess. It felt a little . . . extreme, you know? I’m usually not the kind of girl to get a C.”

Río raised an eyebrow. “What kind of girl *are* you?”

Lola felt her words stick in her throat. What kind of girl was she? An introvert? A shy girl? A girl who wouldn’t know how to answer that question had anyone asked her, let alone a cute boy?

When she didn’t reply, he began talking enough for the both of them, his body nudging close to hers as a way of guiding where they walked.

Río talked quickly and easily, and more about himself than the restaurant’s routines. English had been his favorite subject in school, he explained, and now wasn’t he lucky that he had the chance to practice with Lola? But before she was able to respond, he launched right back into the story of who *he* was, and it was easier for Lola to listen quietly than risk letting her nerves spill out in front of this stranger who suddenly didn’t feel that strange to her.

As Río told it, he was an actor; he also worked at a Starbucks in the colonia San Rafael because he liked

being near the theaters and because sometimes he'd book workshops in the area, so it was convenient that he hadn't been fired from the Starbucks yet—apparently they thought he was *too* friendly with the customers when he was trying to make conversation, but that was what happened when you were one of five kids, which also made it hard to live at home given that so many other people lived there, too, so he made coffee and bartended here and there for rent money, but Juana's restaurants were his favorite—his friend had gotten him the job, which he supposed was more proof of his good fortune.

It was a long and winding monologue, but one he delivered good-naturedly . . . and without ever taking his eyes off Lola. They now had only thirty minutes before La Rosa was supposed to open, and more and more staffers began filtering through the space and preparing it for lunch.

“Mira, American,” Río said, grabbing a napkin from a nearby table and pulling his pen from a back pocket. “Ya tienes mi número. If you ever have a rough day and I'm not here, call me. ¿Tienes WhatsApp?”

Lola tried to make sense of the fact that this beautiful not-quite-stranger had really given her his number.

“Um, thank you?” she asked, and he laughed again.

Just then, Juana walked through the front door and made a beeline toward her cousin. “Loli, ¡aquí estás!” Lola cringed at the nickname. Either Juana was ignoring the face Lola made, or it had goaded her on. “Ready to work?”

“I . . . think so?” she said nervously. She didn’t dare tell her cousin that she was now fighting a weird kind of fog surrounding her every thought, as if her brain were swimming through clouds.

“Let’s see if Linares here did his job right for once,” Juana said, pulling her away from Río and giving the boy a knowing wink. “Gracias, amigo.”

“De nada,” Río said, and Lola felt her stomach do that weird lurch again. “I’ll see you around, American.”

Lola followed Juana, sneaking one last glance at Río before any actual training made her too busy. She almost walked into a table as a result. Río was watching her, his smile bigger than ever. And it was a smile meant expressly for her.



Where Río had given Lola a crash course in Río Linares 101, Juana was much more focused on the intricacies of La Rosa, up to and including the story of how she and Rocío had decided to open their own restaurant to begin with. (It involved a terrible night at the restaurant where they first met and a contract written in eyeliner on the back of a grocery store receipt at three a.m.) Juana also wasted no time before grilling Lola on the menu and why it was special that their tortillas were made in house and what to do if a patron didn’t speak Spanish and couldn’t decipher the menu, and why it was crucial that she highlight the chapulines to every

table she could the second she seated them. Lola tried her best to commit every rule to memory. This was Juana's restaurant, and she was graciously giving her an excuse to get out of her grandmother's house. Whatever Juana said about the menu was law.

The next few hours were . . . well, to call them rocky would be an understatement. On top of trying to ignore her growing nausea, Lola was mostly shadowing Dani, an Asian man around Juana's age with dark hair and shirt-sleeves rolled to show off biceps the size of Lola's thigh. He usually split his time between the La Rosa in Juárez and Roma location. "I have two rules for my hosting desk," he told Lola matter-of-factly. "Don't eat while you're up here, and remember that my bartenders are supposed to smile and flirt with everyone . . . including you."

As simple as the instructions were, the actuality of Lola's tasks were daunting. When a couple stopped her on the way to the kitchen to ask a question, she had to call Dani over to translate, and she had to guide not one but three parties back up to the front so she could study the map more thoroughly when she misheard the number of patrons in their groups. And she truly could not understand the body language that indicated whether people were looking for a table or simply trying to edge their way into the popular bar area.

Still, she hadn't dropped anything, or visibly offended anyone, or caused any irreparable damage in the variety of ways her imagination ever-so-helpfully supplied. She



might not be a natural, but at least she proved she could learn.

Lola was only supposed to work the lunch shift that day, so after the restaurant closed to prepare for dinner, she stood around awkwardly, trying to find something to do and to stay out of the way of the more seasoned staff until Mari picked her up. So when Río beckoned her from behind the bar, she tentatively sat down across from him. (She couldn't get in trouble for sitting there, could she?) The nausea she had felt for hours was now a steady hum in the background of her body. Maybe Buela could make something to soothe it later.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to serve you alcohol—or tell anyone you drank on the job," Río offered as he wiped down a glass. Lola felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment. He thought she was a child. "So how was your first day?"

"Uh, I survived it, so I guess . . . ¿bien?"

"See? You are . . . How do you say it? Natural."

Río beamed and Lola felt herself relax, a tiny copy of his smile creeping onto her face.

Just then, someone behind Lola caught Río's eye, and he waved. "¡Jovenazo!" he called. "Aquí viene el príncipe de Nuestra Señora de la Rosa."

Lola turned around to see a boy around Río's age heading toward them. He was slightly shorter than Río, and his skin was a deeper, more golden brown—though, really, that wasn't difficult; Río was as fair as Regina and her

sisters—and he looked as bored as Río looked engaged.

“This is Javier de Ávila e Idar. He’s a server here, but we used to go to school together,” Río said. “Javi, this is Juana’s secret cousin. She’s an American.”

The boy and Lola made eye contact for half a second. There was something instantly judgmental in the way he looked at her, which she liked even less than Cristina’s queen-bee shakedown from a few days prior.

Ever the master of timing, Juana picked that moment to swoop in with a platter of tostadas, demanding that Lola and Río taste-test them for Rocío. She greeted the other boy warmly and said something that sounded to Lola like a confirmation of work hours, before turning back to Lola expectantly.

“Well, are you not going to eat?” she asked. “I feed you, I pay you, and when I ask for your help making this menu perfect . . .”

Lola grabbed a tostada, and Juana beamed, placated. The boy, Javier, grabbed a seat next to Lola without a word. She hoped he wouldn’t pick up on the discomfort that was now radiating off her.

Juana certainly didn’t, because she switched topics with the authority of a news anchor. “So, Loli. What are you doing this weekend?”

Lola imagined herself sitting around in her grandmother’s house, texting Ana and half-watching Buela’s telenovelas. “Nothing, I don’t think,” she said, feeling

deeply uncool to admit it. At least she had left out saying *Same as always*.

Juana scoffed. “What do you mean ‘nothing’? It’s your first month in Mexico. We can’t let you do ‘nothing.’”

“You know what I haven’t seen in years?,” Río offered. “The pyramids.”

Lola had been to Teotihuacán once before, with her parents. She remembered how massive they were to her little-girl brain, and she wondered what it would be like to experience them now. Back then, she had been too tired to walk any more down the Avenue of the Dead, and Papi had to carry her at least two-thirds of the way.

The idea of marching up and down a sacred historical site delighted Juana, whose very curls shook with their endorsement. “We’ll make the cousins come with us—even Regina, who won’t go anywhere without Adrián,” she said. She looked at Río and Javier. “Y ustedes también, obvio.”

“Sí, claro,” Río said. “Fue mi idea, ¿no?”

Lola smiled at him automatically, which turned into a blush when he returned the grin. Javier, by contrast, looked somewhat put off by the prospect, though Lola also noticed his face held an intensity that matched Río’s beauty. Whereas Río’s floppy curls and openness were straight from a boy-band template, Javier’s buzzcut turned his facial features—from his cheekbones to the lines of his mouth—into something almost artistic.

Río nudged her, and the square inch of her shoulder he had made contact with suddenly felt more alive and alert than every other body part combined. “And we have the best tour guide in the city! Javier will give you the best tour you’ve ever had. You should have seen the way this man answered every question in our history classes. He loves those things.”

Javier grimaced but said nothing. Lola looked from one boy to the other and back, trying to puzzle out how someone so open could be friends with someone so standoffish.

But that might be how some people at school thought about her and Ana, she realized, and began instead to study her cuticles in silent embarrassment.

“¿El sábado?” Juana asked.

Lola stole one more glance at Río as she weighed her options. If she felt this nervous around someone she had met mere hours ago, how would she survive an entire afternoon with him? *What would Ana do?* she asked herself.

Ana would take the risk.

“Sí, ¿cómo no?” she tried. “Let’s do it.”

Juana smirked at Lola’s response for a moment—it was a flash of amusement that only Lola saw, but it didn’t make her feel any less self-conscious that maybe she had gotten such a simple response wrong. Rather than tease her cousin further, Juana changed the conversation, diving into updates about a romantic saga featuring people

Río and Javier knew. Because if there was one thing Juana loved, it was drama.

Her cousin's Spanish was almost too quick for Lola, but she tried her best to keep up. Javier contributed the least to the volley, focused more on refilling the salt-shakers that waited at the end of the bar than getting sucked into Juana's chisme, but Lola began to tune his energy out. It wasn't her fault if someone else was going to be sour about . . . about what? Her mere presence?

By the time Mari showed up to take her home, Lola was too full from the tostadas—which featured a fried squash flower that oozed cheese pleasantly when you bit into them—to move quickly. She said goodbye to Juana and Río, who smiled and said he was excited for Saturday, which, he added, couldn't come fast enough. (Javier had disappeared into the kitchen by that point.) She and Mari climbed into the Toyota, precariously placing plenty of leftovers on the already-cluttered back seats.

“Did you have fun today, Lola?” Mari asked.

Lola nodded. The day hadn't gone perfectly, but it had been fun anyway—a benchmark for satisfaction she wasn't sure she had experienced before. She was still nervous, about the job and about seeing Río again. But she decided that the uneasy feeling in her stomach was the good kind, for once.

Back in her and Mari's room, Lola flopped down on her bed with her phone. Ana had sent a few dozen texts, roughly half of which were concerned with whether or not

she should take her mom up on a grand tour of colleges on the East Coast later that summer.

It would be nice to get away from  
800 repeats for even a day

Or maybe I should check out  
schools in Texas, get in touch with  
\*my roots\*

Bet my mom would love that

Go Horns, etc

Wait, it's hook 'em horns, right?

Better than Boston, I guess

I don't think I could do Boston  
winters

Anyway, how's CDMX?

Lola involuntarily shuddered at the idea of below-freezing temperatures. One of the primary perks of living in Southern California was the almost-comically pleasant weather, which was only marred by a heat wave or six every year.

She began typing out her feelings about Ana's collegiate prospects—it was easier to have an opinion there, where her own future wasn't involved. And after logically pointing out that Ana would have at least one coat should she indeed go to school in a city where winter dipped below sixty degrees, she took a deep breath and started typing again. For the first time in a long time—maybe

ever—she had her own news with which to report back.

You're gonna be so proud of me, A

I met this guy who also works at my  
cousin's restaurant today . . .

In response, she received approximately one thousand  
!!!!!!!s, as well as a few upside-down exclamation points for  
good measure. Even señora Smith would have to give Ana  
points for that.