

December 30th

-Sixteen-

I love the smell of cardboard boxes. I don't really know why. Maybe it's the feeling that cardboard boxes bring, the feeling of new beginnings and elsewhere's and adventures to be had. Kind of like the scent in the air when the seasons change, musky, damp, full of surprise. It reminds me that nothing is set in stone. That even the leaves must fall to the ground, even the stars turn to dust.

The last few days have been filled with nothing but cardboard boxes; first it was helping Abuelita the moment she signed the lease the day after Christmas for her *botanica*, a small space with the front of the shop divided from the back of the shop with only an arch, sandwiched between a Mexican café called *Tia Maria* and a Chinese fast food restaurant called *Tastee Goodee*. As the first order of shipments arrived at the shop, I helped unpack boxes of incense and statues of *Santa Maria* and *Diana* and *San Maximon*, of soaps and candles and posters of *Olodumare* and blessed oils and bamboo sticks.

When the last of the shipment was unpacked, I helped with Jack's boxes, as they had finally arrived two days ago. In that time, I've been helping him unpack in his studio off Alamitos and 10th, just five blocks away from Abuelita's shop. Surprising, really, though I know it shouldn't be; I've always known this tiny, beach town to be too close to everything.

I'd always imagined Jack to be like me in that all my life's contents can fit into a suitcase and a duffel bag, ready to fly with the wind at a moment's notice, but he seems to be the exact opposite. For him, his life comprises of the couch he bought when he first moved to New York from Seattle, and since he didn't have enough money for a mattress or blankets, slept on it for a

week straight with only jackets and sweaters covering him and serving as pillows. It comprises of the pots and pans he won in a raffle competition at the Harlem Community Center, with various dents and markings from spoons too aggressive and burner flames too high. It's full of Picasso posters that he purchased from the MoMA, cubic and abstract, the only art that his mechanical brain can wrap around.

It's the bike that he built himself from the ground up over the course of two years, finding various parts, trading wheels, improving the suspension and the brakes, giving it two coats of paint. It's the mug I bought him from a thrift store in Bedstuy with a rabbit telling his bear friend 'I made us a healthy dinner,' and the bear telling the rabbit, 'I had a really bad day,' to which the rabbit responds with 'Don't worry, I made us a backup dinner,' and he takes the boxes out of the large bag to reveal pizza.

I hold the mug up to him now as I ball up the newspaper he wrapped it in and smile. 'You kept this?'

He looks up from the Ikea table he's in the middle of constructing and nods, before turning back to the manual. The table is just in pieces at the moment, with bags of screws and plastic wrappers littering the floor around him as he crouches low, like a bird perching on a telephone pole. 'Of course, I did, Luc. Why would I throw it away?'

'Well,' I say, frowning as I set the mug on the floor. The whole studio is covered in boxes, save for the futon that has yet to be unwrapped that sits in the corner, and a few frames that lean against the wall in the back by the entrance to the bathroom. 'You could've put a lot of this stuff in storage.'

‘I did. I put a lot in storage. I didn’t take any of the books that May gave me. It’s like, thirty pounds of books.’

I smile at that. May, with dark, wide-spaced eyes and dark hair and a cock-browed smile, loved to read. She probably reads more than me, now that I think of it. She’d give him *Atlas Shrugged* and *War and Peace*, everything that Sylvia Plath has ever written, even her journals, first edition copies of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Save me the Waltz*. Cookbooks, lots of them, as May wasn’t the biggest fan of cooking but Jack was, and he’d bring over those cookbooks by Anthony Bourdain and Martha Stewart and we would mark them up with our own additions and cook together and binge-watch *Weeds*. And May would be there, too, watching us cook and prepare things like peeling the garlic and dicing onions.

‘I think I still have a few of those cookbooks at home,’ I say, not thinking. I catch his look of surprise, before it turns into a wry smile.

‘You took them?!’

‘You decided to leave *Appetites* lying around and you know that Anthony Bourdain is my spirit animal.’ What’s mine is yours, and vice-versa, Jack.

He laughs and throws an empty box at me. ‘I hate you sometimes.’

Today is the only day that we’re seriously unpacking; all the other days consisted of me coming over after work, opening one box, stacking books and knick-knacks along a brand-new shelf he built, and then taking a rest-of-the-day break, full of cigarettes and whiskey on his roof, floating in a pool of the setting sun. From that vantage point, we watched the neighborhood, familiarizing ourselves with the voices from the houses and the people entering them and leaving and which cars were being driven and which households tended to rely more on Uber or Lyft.

The *paletero* comes around two in the afternoon, and an ice cream truck circles the neighborhood slowly at just after six in the evening, when the sun is already dead and the stars attempt to shine past the smog and the light pollution. There are tons of Cambodian families that settled here after their civil war, and as a result, the Southeast Asian vibe is distinct, and has created its own little community within Playa de Oro, full of grocery stores, shops, cafes, a few restaurants, churches and sacred houses of worship. From my childhood, I know that once a year the streets are brightly lit with decorations heralding the Cambodian New Year Festival, with people marching on the street, dressed in red and yellow and purple silk, and beads and the smell of coconut rice strong in the air, sounds hammering away on drums to the procession of the marching beat. It isn't just Cambodians, either; the other neighboring pockets, Vietnamese, Pacific Islanders, even some of the Chinese, show up for the festivities. It's no wonder that Playa de Oro is one of the country's most diverse cities.

'It's a good thing there are bodegas on every corner here,' Jack told me when we first walked around the neighborhood. 'We won't have a need to drive somewhere far for milk.'

We. I look down the street and it's like I can see us riding bikes with tall cans of Arizona Iced Tea in our hands, the day growing dim as Winter passes over and the streetlights spring to life. Waving hello to their neighbors, knowing the children that play in the street as we watch them chain smoking on the corner, like guardians of the night, until they retire peacefully into their homes, being thanked by their parents with a solid nod from across the street.

'I think we've done enough for the day,' says Jack, as we look back at our progress. Most of his bathroom is unpacked and set up, shampoo bottles on the rim of the tub and a soap pump along the sink next to his toothbrush. A post-it sticks to the mirror with the reminder '*towels*'

scrawled in his chicken-scratch handwriting. In the living room, the table is assembled, and we nervously survey the extra screws, wondering if we did something wrong or missed a step, and at any moment, one of us will lean against the table only for it to fall apart as we collapse to the floor in roaring laughter. The kitchen is almost done, with all his plates and pans and cutlery stowed away in mostly empty cabinets. Another post-it is stamped to the front of the fridge.

Food. Good food. But cookies first.

All that is left is the bookshelf, hanging up his clothing in the nearly-embarrassingly tiny closet, and the frames that need to be hung. We sit back and crack open two *Stella*'s, wiping the sweat off our faces, breathing heavily, as though we've both run marathons.

'Cheers to your new home,' I say, clinking the green bottle to his.

'Cheers,' he says, looking around. 'To my new home.'

I haven't thought about Roberto since I last saw him pulling out of *Cantina Joe's* the other night; it's still a bit too bitter of a pill to swallow. That hasn't stopped him from trying to reach out to me, however. Through text messages and two in the morning missed phone calls, I've slowly pieced together that his brilliant reasoning behind leaving me stranded and stuck with the two hundred-dollar bill without a word has something to do with his brother, Nando, and a car accident. Roberto had to leave immediately, of course, to make sure his brother was okay, and then, instead of taking him to the hospital to assess injuries, he drives Nando home.

I have half a mind to call Nando and ask him if he is okay and that I heard about the accident because I know he'll be honest with me. I've always liked Nando, the younger, more open brother of my step-dad, eyes always half open from the long hours he works as a tow truck

driver to support his common-law wife, Concepcion, and their two kids, Danny and Nando Jr.; I remember Nando always smiling, generous with sneak pours of alcohol into my soda when I was younger, always done with a wink, talking about anything and everything, with an opinion that although veered to a conservative slant, he'd always be warm and kind. Familial. Everything a stepdad should be and more.

'Where are you?' asks Jack, at my side.

I realize I've been silent for a while, since we left Jack's studio and began walking. I sigh, looking out into the darkened street, and pull my jacket tighter. 'Where I usually am. Overthinking.'

'You're thinking about Noah?'

I realize that I haven't thought of Noah, either. How many shitty people can let down one guy in less than a week? *God*, Noah. I never saw that coming. As we approach our destination, I can already hear Abuelita's voice in my head, telling me that I should've been reading my cards daily, that I should be practicing capnomancy, scrying with smoke, feeling the changing wind. That *I* should've known what would happen, that Noah was too good to be true, that he would go back to his boyfriend. And, she would add, am I or am I not a witch? Am I or am I not branded with the mark of the Jaguar?

I wouldn't say that, but she wouldn't understand.

Noah. He stopped peppering my phone last night, and I haven't heard anything from him all day. I haven't responded to any of his calls or texts either. And, to be fair, we never said we were anything exclusive. We only made out once along the beach at night, and we never texted each other all day, and I rarely saw him anyway and...

‘You made it!’ comes a voice, and as I look up, it’s Abuelita, standing at the corner of her shop entrance, smiling. Her red silk covering ties her thick, curly hair up, but most of it falls to one side, and her eyes, though bright and snappy, look like they’re nearing exhaustion. ‘*Aye, mijos*, we were just about to call you. The delivery van is pulling up right now and we need your male muscle strength.’

Inside the half empty shop, lined with floor to ceiling windows and a glass door, Mother stands, hammer in her hand nailing a bookshelf to the wall. I can see that scarlet purple veils hang in the archway, being the only splash of color in contrast to the stark, white, undecorated shop. A newly installed sign, in bright red neon letters, reads ‘*Abuelita’s Botanica*’, and cans of unused paint stack in a pyramid at the front of the shop in the display window.

‘I don’t know about muscles,’ says Jack, lazily. ‘But I have bones. Does that count?’

Abuelita laughs, her eyes squinting, her crow’s feet wrinkles carving themselves deeper into the corner of her eyes. ‘I’m sure that’ll do just fine.’

The delivery van, with the orange and black logo faded significantly, pulls up to the green ‘temporary parking’ space in front of the shop, and we are greeted by a frail, ebony-skinned older man with a toothless grin and a clipboard in his hands.

‘How y’all doin’ this evenin’?’ he asks, looking at all of us. ‘Now which one of you is Miss Maria del Socorro *Har-Kwin*?’

‘I’m Maria Jarquin,’ says Abuelita, smiling as she takes the clipboard.

‘You the owner of this shop?’ he asks, taking a look at it.

She smiles wider as she scribbles her signature on the page. ‘*Si, senor.*’

The boxes were smaller than they were a few days ago, but heavier, and there are a little under thirty of them that I counted. We piled them in pillars around the shop according to Mother's directions; it seemed apparent that there was some kind of rhyme and reason to the outline of the shop, which was good. At the moment, it just seems like a mess.

Furniture was next, a large, green loveseat with a matching ottoman that me and Jack could lift and carry to the back of the shop, past the purple veil and over by the window in the back room, which was joined later by a beautiful, round, oak table.

'For readings,' said Abuelita, as we adjusted the furniture.

I counted a few more large, antique looking bookshelves, glass counters that Mother arranged to form a register section, and two more sets of wooden chairs that matched the oak polish of the reading table, that we were able to load off the delivery truck, and as quickly as the driver came, he waved to us goodbye and began walking away.

'Wait!' cries out Abuelita, as dashes into the shop, rummages through a few boxes, and then returns to the truck. 'Take this!' Into the driver's outstretched palm, Abuelita drops a small, handstitched purple sachet, looking gorged on unknown ingredients.

He brings it to his nose and smells, and a smile creeps around his face. 'Lavender,' he says, sniffing it again. 'Sage. And there's something else...'

'Rose and nettle,' says Abuelita, nodding. 'For luck.'

His smile grows wider as he hops into his truck. 'Thank you, Miss *Har-Kwin*. I really appreciate that.'

'Thank you,' says Abuelita, stepping back. 'I hope to see you once the shop is running.'

‘You will,’ he says, and then the engine revs to life and he takes off into the sun kissed streets, seemingly driving away from the impending night.

‘We are in the business of wish granting, are we not?’ says Abuelita to us, nodding kindly. ‘This is what we do.’

Mother put me and Jack in charge of paint duty, coating the white walls in azure blue, while Abuelita focused on sorting the contents of the boxes.

‘We may need another order of oils,’ she says, more to Mother. ‘We have enough but I’d like a backup supply.’

Fragrant oils, of sandalwood, mimosa, pine, orange, *Jamaica*, rose, sit in the box at her feet, packaged in tiny glass jars that look almost like the *confitures* that I remember lining the walls in every *boulangerie* I’d visit in France.

‘Whatever you say, *patrona*,’ says Mother, looking over the clipboard. For a moment, she’s accented with solemn blue, and I can feel a sense of worry grip at my chest...but fear of *what*, Mother? What are you afraid of? I don’t need to feel her thoughts to know the answer, though. It is not death that she fears, but rather the thought of losing *us*, of not being there for us. To be forced to part with her loved ones, her little chickens. *Palomitas*, she’d say, smiling. Ready to fly with the wind at a moment’s notice.

It’s been two weeks since she left the hospital and she looks like she’s doing okay. She’s up on her feet all the time, she’s going for walks with Galadriel. Even now, she’s mounting the third side-to-side, floor-to-ceiling bookcase, to the wall, full of hope. Hope that maybe if this place is successful, she may even be able to cut back on her hours at work, maybe relax a little.

Maybe.

By the time the sun had set, Jack and I couldn't do much more painting. We had coated two of the four walls with the blue, and all we could do now was let it dry overnight and continue in the morning.

'I think we did a great job,' says Jack, wiping his brow and accidentally streaking blue paint across his forehead.

I laugh, looking at my own paint-smearred hands, careful not to repeat his mistake.

'You're an ass,' he says, and then suddenly, he throws the plastic bin with the wet roller at me, coating my forearms and bits of my neck and ear in the paint. 'There. Now we match.'

'Be glad you're not getting paid for this,' says Abuelita, smiling mischievously. 'Otherwise you'd be fired.'

And then, we hear the windchime by the door, the notes clinking as an evening breeze passes through, at first gentle and kind, only to pick up with strength. I stand up slowly and walk towards the windchime to admire it, even as the wind grows steadily more aggressive. It's a beautiful windchime, strung up on a nail, with a silver crescent moon carved from stone, and a multi-pointed star, almost resembling the sacred symbol of Islam.

'Something is wrong,' says Abuelita, her once smiling face now twisted with emotions I don't recognize. Not quite fear. But not quite confidence.

Mother emerges from the back of the shop, cutting through the purple curtains, her eyebrows scrunched up. 'What do you mean?'

The windchime at this point is almost flying horizontally like a flag. And the wind, the fierce wind, reminds me of the breath of a scorned God. A cold draft from the east. An ill omen.

'Something is coming,' says Abuelita, standing up from her cross-legged sitting position.

And then, the wind dies instantly, and a figure, silhouetted in the glow of the streetlamp against the dark night, appears in the middle of the road. A woman, from the looks of it, though for that moment, she could've been something else entirely.

'La Cegua,' whispers Abuelita.

'What is that?' asks Jack.

'A witch,' I say, quietly. I can feel everyone's eyes focused squarely on the figure, and beneath the shadow of it, I can feel its own eyes on *us*, scanning, sizing up the shop, waiting. 'Or – a horse headed demon, I think.' The mythical huntress of men, the monster of the dark night. In Egypt, they called her *Ammit*, Goddess of the Dead, eater of hearts, devourer of souls. In Nicaragua, she is *La Cegua*. Fear, herself.

'But that – '

'I'll explain later, Jack,' I say. Anxiety rips through my sternum, and I feel my palms begin to sweat. Who is this figure? Why is she staring at us? 'Hello?' I call out.

The figure doesn't reply. Instead, she steps into the light, revealing her mousy, brown hair, tied up with a scarf, her pale face, and those wide set eyes.

Pepper. The witch from the shop down the street.

'Hi there!' she says, her voice straining in cordiality. She begins walking towards the shop, her heels going *clak-clak-clak* against the pavement, her smile looking like a plastic mold the closer she gets. 'I remember you two. You were in my shop just a few weeks ago, right?' She glances over at me. 'I sold you your first pack of cards.'

She approaches the doorway, and I turn to see everyone. Mother stands next to Abuelita, whose eyes are as wide as silver dollars; I can feel the nervous yellow and the pallid tones of grey shift around her. I've never seen so much of Abuelita. Not like this.

'Hi,' I say, still standing in the doorway. 'We're not open yet.'

'Yet?' she asks, staring up at me. Her eyes are almond shaped, and they almost look feline. Then, she smirks. 'You're opening up a witch shop, right?'

'It's a *botanica*,' says Mother. 'It's a bit different than a witch shop.'

Pepper's eyes glaze over from me to Mother, then to Abuelita, and then over to Jack, who is still sitting on the floor. I can feel her eyes paw over our paint-stained clothing and the debris against the floor. 'Right,' she says, looking back to me. 'A *botanica*. Kind of like everyman, folk magic, right?'

'What do you mean by *everyman*?' asks Abuelita, seemingly finding her voice. It is cracked, though; not as strong as the words she once commanded.

'Oh,' says Pepper, shrugging as she waves her hands about. 'You know, like cute little native charms and the like. Artsy, domestic crafts. Touristy, gimmicky things. You know what I'm talking about.'

'I'm not sure I do,' says Abuelita as she approaches the doorway.

Pepper, her smile widening, as though playing a game, tries to peek around me and into the shop. 'Well, aren't you gonna invite me in?'

'He said we're not open,' says Jack, suddenly. He's never one for intervening if it has nothing to do with him. This is a first. 'Maybe you should come back at the beginning of the week when we are.'

Pepper's smile is unfazed, and she turns her attention back to Abuelita. 'I'm curious, what do you think you're trying to do by opening up another witch shop in Playa de Oro?'

Abuelita clears her throat. 'I think I'm doing precisely that. Opening up another witch shop in Playa de Oro.'

'But we already have one. Mine.'

'This is a free country, right?' I ask, rhetorically. 'You know, free market and all? What's it to you if it's a bakery or a donut shop or another witch shop?'

I can see that this barb manages to land squarely on her. She shivers. 'Right,' she says, her smile returning. She looks almost like a doll with that permanent, snotty smile plastered to her face. 'I forget you guys are from a place where dictators rule. Nicaragua, right?' She doesn't let us answer. 'No matter, I'm glad to see you integrating into the American way of life though! Starting up your own business,' she says, whistling as she shakes her head, and she lets out a simpering laugh. 'What a big step. I'm curious, do you even have a business plan? Do you know anything about running a business?'

'I know enough to be successful,' says Abuelita, crossly.

Pepper nods, as if she understands. 'Of course. Alright then, I thought I'd just drop by like a friendly neighbor. I'd wish you luck, but, I'm sure you can wish it yourself. We're all witches here, aren't we?'

'Sure,' says Abuelita, with a note of finality.

'Thanks for the visit,' I say, carefully studying Pepper. 'I'm sure Playa de Oro is big enough for both our shops.'

Pepper lets out a laugh that sounds like the screeching of violins or chalk on a board as she begins to walk away. And then, over her shoulder: ‘We’ll see about that,’ she grins, before stepping back out into the night.

It’s been hours and I can still hear her laugh in the angry wind pounding against our windows, and even now, as I stare in the dark while I’m awake on Jack’s futon as he snores lightly, I can still see her silhouette under that streetlamp, the image of *La Cegua* temporarily revealing herself under the neon glow of our sign.

Witch.

I know one thing is certain: we aren’t leaving this town. Not anytime soon.

We will not admit defeat.