



July 4, 11:30 P.M.

*Vico*



VICO WOKE UP with a start, his body bathed in sweat, his heart beating faster than it did when he was high. While he slept the darkness had returned, a feeling that had followed him like a shadow for years, disappearing whenever he whipped around to see what was there. He pulled on a shirt and his shoes, grabbed the backpack from under his bed, and headed out into the night.

A chill moved through his body as he drove down the dark, narrow cobblestone streets of Old San Juan, his SUV barely squeezing by the parked cars that lined either side. He looked over at the backpack in the passenger seat. To all appearances it was a worthless, beat-up school pack. No one would guess the fortune of cocaína it held inside. He patted it as if it were a dog. He had to clear his head. This deal was too important to blow. He drove up Calle Norzagaray, the street that ran along the edges of El Rubí, the barrio where the deal would go down. His car buzzed by the restored Spanish villas on the left, where wealthy young families tucked their children into bed, their homes snuggled among the sixteenth-century fortifications that surrounded the island's tip. On the right-hand side, over

the waist-high wall, and down a fifty-foot drop lay El Rubí, where children went to bed with hand-me-down clothes and short futures.

He parked his car a few blocks away from the wall, his electronic lock beeping farewell at his back. His ride was too good to park close to El Rubí. He'd worked hard to build up his reputation *and* his bank account. He was the youngest player in the city, bought his first Cadillac Escalade at sixteen, his own condo in the Condado at seventeen. Now, on the eve of his eighteenth birthday, he was about to make the biggest deal of his life. His lieutenant, Keno, should have been with him, but at the last minute he got a call from Vico's sister, Marisol, Keno's on-and-off girlfriend, and backed out. Vico chuckled. Cabrón let himself be led around by his nose like a castrated bull.

He slung the backpack on one shoulder and lit a cigarette in front of the pink house that stood across from the entrance to El Rubí. The moon was rising high over the surf beyond El Morro as he crossed the street, the inky sky pushing it up over the buildings behind him. The dark night made it hard to see the crumbling stone steps, but he could've run them blindfolded. Vico had been going to El Rubí his whole life, since when he was little to visit his grandmother, but after he turned thirteen, to buy drogas with his friend Izzy, and now to sell them. Pana had to earn a living in the tanking economy.

He loved the way the decaying cement and wooden shacks were painted in bright colors. And the smell: salty ocean with notes of frying plantain, beer, garbage, and urine. Life. To him El Rubí was teeming with it, unlike his old neighborhood, where families stayed locked up in their gated homes, pretending everything was fine. Pretending fathers weren't laid off, mothers didn't die, and kids came right home to do their homework. In El Rubí everything was out in the open: fights, love, drugs . . . no worries about what the neighbors might think.

By the time he reached the bottom step, the moon was completely cut off by the buildings above, the only light the warm glow of his cigarette floating in front of him in the dark, and from the shadow under the stairs came a scraping sound. He turned around and peered through the dark. Nothing. He shrugged and threw what was left of his cigarette on the ground. *I'm just jumpy*, he assured himself. *Half a mil riding on this deal. That'd make any pana nervous, verdad?* He chuckled and turned back. With the money from this score he was going to throw one hell of an eighteenth birthday party tomorrow. Just then he heard a rumbling sound and a stone flew past his foot as if kicked. His chest filled with heat, his hand automatically reached in his pocket, the yellow skulls on his switchblade glowing even in the dark.

“¿Quién está ahí? Show yourself, pendejo, and maybe I won't cut your heart from your chest!” Vico's voice sounded more secure than he felt. Damn Keno! He should be here. Not that he couldn't handle himself, he'd proven that again and again, but there was something about the sound that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He squinted into the dark and saw the glow of two yellow eyes. Vico stumbled backward, his pulse pounding behind his face. But just as quick they were gone. He shuddered. He must have imagined them. They'd been so strange and yet . . . familiar. He forced himself to turn around and continue walking, blade out just in case.

He hadn't taken more than a step when a growl came from behind him. He wheeled around as a street dog with one ear and matted fur streaked out from the shadow beneath the stairs and took off down a side street, tail between his legs, ears pinned to his head. He let out a deep breath and chuckled. “A stupid sato. Scared of a mutt, ay Vico? I need a vacation, man,” he said as he folded his blade closed and tucked it away. He grabbed another cigarette from his shirt pocket. Maybe he *would* take a vacation after this. Head to Miami for a few weeks, lay low.

His lighter flared to life just before something big hit him like a linebacker from behind, knocking the air from his lungs. The backpack with all those neatly wrapped bricks of white powder slipped from his shoulder. He tried to reach for it but he was pinned upright. His left hand held the still flaming lighter, and he ran his right over his chest. When he pulled it away it felt sticky, wet. He looked down and, in the glow of the flame, he saw red on his palm and watched his shirt grow dark. Another shove hit him from the back. A long serrated claw emerged from his chest, as if it had pushed through from his nightmare. He was numb, his eyes wide, his mouth open in a silent scream as he realized his feet were leaving the ground, his sneakers dangling as he hung as if mounted on the claw. The lights of El Rubí faded as he was dragged backward. Ludovico tried to scream as he heard the sound of jaws snapping behind him. Then everything went dark.



July 6, 12:50 P.M.

*Lupe*



“BUT TÍO, I can take a cab. I’ll go straight to your place, promise.” First her father had waited until they were at the airport to tell her he wasn’t going with her on their annual trip to Puerto Rico to see *his* family, and now that she’d landed, her uncle was suggesting further humiliation.

“Absolutamente no. I’m sending a squad car. It’s not safe for a young woman to travel around the city by herself.”

Lupe harrumphed. He’d made up his mind, so there was no arguing with him. The man hadn’t become police chief by being a pushover. “Fine.” She hit End and waited for the other passengers to move so she could exit the plane. At least without her father along she didn’t need to hide a dozen tiny empty Bacardi bottles that he’d scatter around their seats like insect husks.

The clunk of her Doc Martens echoed in the airport’s linoleum-lined artery, suitcase rolling obediently behind. She’d never come to Puerto Rico without her father, never walked to baggage claim without struggling to keep up with his long impatient stride. She smiled. This was her first trip *as an adult*. Okay, so sixteen wasn’t adult, but she was off leash. She

swallowed down a momentary feeling of panic as strangers rushed by her on either side. It wasn't like she was in a totally new place. She took a deep breath and felt the press of familiar ground against her feet. It was a teeter-totter feeling of familiarity and not belonging. But she was used to that. Lupe held her head a little straighter, walked a little taller.

She could handle this.

When she pushed open the glass doors to the loading area, the hot, humid air hit her. Year after year, she was shocked when she walked into the heat from the air-conditioned airport. Particularly compared to the still cool, early July morning breezes back in Vermont, the sultry temperatures held trouble in the moist air.

Waiting in the cabs-only section of the pick-up zone was a police officer in full midnight blue, handgun on his hip, dark sunglasses hiding his eyes, holding a sign that read SEÑORITA LUPE DÁVILA.

Oh. Right.

Lupe ducked her head. She considered walking by the policeman and calling Uber on her father's dime. Her father had given her the keys to her uncle's house; she could just let herself in. Yeah, it'd be rude and her uncle would be pissed but, as her father liked to say, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Instead she pulled on her own sunglasses, walked up to him, and whispered, "I'm Lupe Dávila."

"Bienvenidos, Señorita Dávila. I'm Officer Ramirez," he said in a way-too-loud voice. She followed him to the double-parked cruiser and felt the heat of stares from the other travelers.

So much for being off leash.

After popping the squad car's trunk, Ramirez tried to wrestle her suitcase from her.

She swung it into the carpeted trunk. "I'm pretty used to taking care of myself." He looked almost dejected that she hadn't

let him help her. “So, my uncle dragged you away from some important police work to chauffeur me around, huh?”

He slammed the trunk, the midday sun glinting off the shiny black paint. “Your tío asked me to bring you to his house. He can’t get away and your aunt is in Humacao today. And I hear your father couldn’t get away from work either.”

Lupe snorted. “Yeah, that’s what he told me, too.” He stood holding open the door to the backseat, but Lupe edged around him, opened the front passenger door, and slid in. No way she was riding in the back like some kind of perp. Though it was probably against the rules, this experience was already humiliating enough. In the side-view mirror she watched him pause for a moment, then close the door and walk around the car with a defeated look. She smiled. Lupe often reduced adults to this look of defeat. But humiliation or not, she was glad she wasn’t driving. She couldn’t wait to use her newly minted driver’s license at home, but driving on the island was another story: it was beyond aggressive. Her father liked to joke that this was where they trained New York City cab drivers.

As they made their way along Highway 26 she was struck as she always was by the billboards. They were illegal in Vermont, so she was unaccustomed to the barrage of colors and pithy messages. Thirty-foot-high women in tight dresses begged her to drink Medalla beer with open crimson lips; handsome unshaven men held minuscule cell phones to their story-high ears.

“So where’s tío that he couldn’t pick me up?”

“He’s at a crime scene in El Rubí.”

She perked up at this. “You mean the drug dealer who was eviscerated on the fifth?”

Ramirez looked at her with one substantial eyebrow raised.

“I mean, I saw it on *El Nuevo Dia* online.”

He nodded. “Yes, a terrible thing.” He made a quick sign of the cross, kissing his thumb at the end.

Lupe had always wanted to see her uncle on the job. *And* to visit her uncle on the job. Her father had shipped her off to the island, so why shouldn't she finally do what *she* wanted to do? She usually dreaded coming down and being dragged from relative's house to relative's house, heat and clouds of mosquitoes surrounding her like a gang. Maybe this trip she'd have a chance to see the real Puerto Rico. As she watched the bright green palm trees file by, she formulated a plan.

"Oh, no!" She put her hand to her mouth in faux surprise.

"What's the matter, Señorita Dávila?"

"Lupe. Call me Lupe, please. It's just . . . the keys to Tío Esteban's house, my father was supposed to give them to me this morning, but I guess he forgot." She put on a concerned face as she lay her palm over the outside pocket of her backpack as if he could see the keys hidden in its depths.

Ramirez grimaced. "Ay, we'll have to call your uncle then. I'm not sure what he would have me do." He pulled over to the highway's shoulder and put on the flashing lights.

She had to admit. She loved the lights.

He pushed a speed-dial button and Lupe could hear her uncle's booming voice on the other end, barking in rapid Spanish. Ramirez listened, nodding as if the chief could see him. "Bueno. Sí, jefe."

Lupe watched him tuck the phone away in his shirt pocket. "Well? What'd he say?"

Ramirez pulled back into traffic and flipped off the lights. "He wants me to bring you to the crime scene. Your aunt is two hours away."

It worked! Lupe had to restrain herself from pumping her fist in victory. She'd seen thousands of crime scenes on television, had talked to her uncle about them since she was twelve, and now she was going to a real one? Not your typical tourist attraction and that was perfect. If her father didn't like it, too bad. If he'd been with her this never would've happened.

“So, m’ija—”

Lupe loved the way adults addressed her on the island: *m’ija*, as if she were this hardened police officer’s daughter as well. Considering her challenged luck in the parental lottery she’d take any decent parental-type figures she could get.

“—are you excited to be back in Puerto Rico?”

She shrugged. “I guess.” She thought about the crime scene they were about to visit. “I mean, Vermont’s pretty boring.”

They chatted about the difference in weather, driving conditions, usual small talk, then Lupe decided to see if she could get some information about the case, especially since now she was going to the scene of the murder.

“So this murder, it’s interesting, huh?”

The smile bled off of Ramirez’s face. “Interesting, yes.”

Lupe glanced at him out of the corner of her eye as he drove, his fingers tightening around the steering wheel. But he didn’t say anything more. She was going to have to work a bit harder.

“Do you have any leads as to who the murderer is?”

“No,” he said, and made the sign of the cross again.

Lupe watched him through narrowing eyes. All the signs of the cross, avoiding the conversation, even the news article was spotty . . . something was up with this murder, and she was going to find out what.

Seemed like the summer wasn’t going to be a total loss after all.

They drove the rest of the way in silence, passing her favorite fort, San Cristóbal, then uphill along the sea wall. It wasn’t hard to find the spot; dozens of emergency vehicles crowded the narrow street, the red and blue lights flashing against the sides of the buildings like some kind of goth disco. The colonial stone buildings ran the gamut from abandoned and graffiti-covered to pristine and elegantly appointed, all in one city block. Ramirez parked in front of a pink house from the latter category and they made their way to the steps down to El Rubí.

Lupe was beyond excited: she'd always wanted to visit El Rubí. The neighborhood was famous and infamous. She read about it, watched videos of raids online and music videos that were shot on the neighborhood's streets.

Until today Lupe thought she would have to be satisfied with viewing its color-wheel buildings and gritty streets from the safety of the battlements or on Google Earth, but here she was, walking down the crumbling staircase. She followed Officer Ramirez down the last few steps and her uncle came into view. He stood among broken glass and what looked like brown paint but must have been dried blood.

Lupe swallowed.

"Lupe! Over here, sobrina."

She thanked Officer Ramirez and made her way to her uncle, skirting the police tape and picking her way around milling uniforms.

Her uncle kissed her on the cheek and gave her one of his typical bear hugs. Esteban held her at arm's length and smiled into her face, his dark mustache accentuating his wide grin. "Ay, m'ija, you're getting so grown-up."

Lupe smiled back into her uncle's face. New gray streaks had appeared at his temples. It seemed like he'd aged five years in the year since she'd last seen him. "You look tired, tío." She didn't like seeing him so worn-out. He was the Dávila rock, the human equivalent of a building's foundation. Her father seriously depended on him.

He sighed. "We have spent thirty-six hours here trying to figure out what happened to this young man."

She looked around and compared the crime scene to the ones she'd seen on *DOA Newark*. But this wasn't a television show. These were no perfectly made-up pretty actors in tight pants and high heels. No rule-breaking female lead. The police officers' faces were ordinary and tired, washed gray above the blue

of their uniforms and contrasting with the electric blue of the cloudless sky and the brightly painted buildings that surrounded them. And there was trash heaped up against the walls; the salt air was heavy with the smell of urine. It didn't bother her though. It felt even more real. It was on her skin, in her nostrils, not trapped in a flat screen. She rubbed her hands together. "What do you have already? I mean, clue-wise?"

Someone appeared at his left elbow and asked a question in rapid-fire Spanish, and Esteban answered with a raised finger that bought them a minute. "Phone conversations about my cases when you're tucked away safe in Vermont are one thing, but this?" He gestured around to the hive of activity that surrounded them. "I'm sorry you have to see this, Lupe. I shouldn't be surprised that your father forgot to give you the keys, but he always disappoints me."

*Welcome to the club*, Lupe thought, but a feeling of guilt for the deception haunted her. Well, for a few seconds, anyway. She was at a real crime scene! It was worth the white lie.

"I'm afraid I still have about an hour of work left." The lines around his eyes seemed deeper as he glanced around.

She smiled at him while duplicates of herself smiled back in the lenses of his sunglasses. "It's okay. Anyway, you know I love this shi . . . stuff."

He looked at her reproachfully, then sighed. "Yes, well, I have to figure out how to tell your aunt about all this shi . . . stuff." He pulled out his phone.

Lupe paused. "Why would tía care?"

He dialed as he spoke. "The young man who was killed was her nephew Izzy's friend."

"Cousin Izzy?" Wait. "He isn't mixed up in the murder, is he?"

"I don't think so. But he and Vico, the boy who was killed . . . they were like brothers."

Lupe nodded solemnly. She didn't have a friendship like that, but she often wished for one. What must it be like to have it . . . then lose it? Her eyes fell on the bloodstain. And like this.

Esteban let out a breath. "Well, don't worry about that, *niña*." He held the phone to his ear, forced a smile, and put his large hand on her shoulder. "You're on vacation! Just sit over there and wait for me." He pointed to a brightly painted picnic table by the wall, the kind at which a child would eat out of their lunchbox. "I shouldn't be long."

Lupe made for the bench as expected and sat perched on the edge. Images of her wild cousin ran in her head like a digital slideshow. They had been inseparable when they were little and she used to count the days till summer when she would see him again. But even then he made her nervous. Izzy was the kind of kid who enjoyed taunting death. Skateboarding down Calle Santa Cruz while holding on to a car's bumper, leaping from concrete pillar to concrete pillar whenever the adults looked away. He was like a kite you could barely hold on to, the string vibrating with its need to break free. She loved him for that.

She'd get more details later.

The sun baked her from overhead and she wondered if eyeballs could boil in their sockets.

Just behind the police tape an old woman dressed in a long-sleeved black dress, her head covered in black lace, stood staring into the center of the police activity, at the bloodstain on the steaming pavement. She looked so out of place among the shorts-and-T-shirt-clad spectators.

The old woman made the sign of the cross and stepped back, the crowd filling the gap she'd left like the tide coming in.

Lupe got to her feet.

She glanced over at Esteban, who was absorbed in a phone conversation. If Izzy and his friends were in some kind of trouble, she was going to help. Which meant she had to listen to her

instincts and at the moment they were telling her this old woman was connected.

When her uncle was out of sight, she stood up cool and calm-like and strolled down the street. As she walked and looked for the woman, Lupe took everything in: the colors, the sounds, the smells. There were people scurrying along the roads, not even paying attention to the police activity in their backyard. It made her think that this was a regular occurrence.

She sped up as she made her way down a main drag, looking for the black-clad figure. She couldn't have gotten far. Lupe felt like Detective Leah Carlson, the rule-breaker on *DOA Newark*.

A few people looked up as she rushed by as if she were some sort of oddity, her ridiculously pale Irish skin (literally the only thing her mother had given her before skipping town) standing out. Music spilled out of houses as she passed by, the sizzle of frying grease, and the sounds of babies crying carried on the hot afternoon air. There was no doubt in her mind that this place was a home. A real and true home.

Lupe reached the end of the main drag. No sight of the woman but she thought better of heading down the side alleys. She'd been so busy looking, she hadn't noticed the catcalls that trailed behind her from a group of men standing against the buildings. They wouldn't have dared do it if she'd been walking in her father's large shadow like normal. Blood rushed to her cheeks. Maybe she'd better get back to her uncle.

As she turned back she saw the old woman on a corner up ahead. Activity bustled around her but she was still as stone, her black dress moving only slightly with the torpid afternoon air, ruffling like the feathers of a raven. Lupe approached with caution. The woman was worrying a set of brown wooden rosary beads in her wrinkled hands, her lips moving in a constant trickle of prayer.

The woman looked right into Lupe's eyes and she froze. Well? What could she possibly say to this lady? *Sorry to stalk you, but you looked suspicious in your black lace and orthopedic shoes?* But as she turned to walk away, a tremulous voice called out to her.

"It was not our fault."

Lupe froze. "I'm sorry, Señora?"

The old woman's hazel eyes were covered with a hazy filter of age but were intense nonetheless. Lupe's skin tightened.

"Mi nieto, his death." She pointed back toward the stairs and the hive of police activity.

*Nieto.* Lupe sorted through her half-assed and rusty Spanish vocabulary. Then it clicked. "The boy who was killed, he was your grandson?"

The old woman nodded, her eyes never leaving Lupe's face. "My daughter. It was not her fault. They didn't know he would really come."

Lupe took a step closer, the old lady's scent of talcum and roses reaching for her with delicate fingers. "They didn't know *who* would come, Señora?" She spoke quietly, coaxing the woman to continue. A voice in her head told her to take off and run for the safety of her uncle. Another voice, the stronger one that sounded like Detective Carlson and usually won out, wanted to hear what the old woman had to say, to poke at the feeling with a stick and see what happened. "Señora, your grandson was friends with my cousin Isadore. Do you know Izzy?"

She pointed a crooked finger at Lupe. "Isadore is a good boy. A good boy. But he'd better andar con cuidado, be careful, or *he'll* come for him, too. He'll come for retribución."

Lupe's heart started banging against her ribs. "Retribution? For what? I'm sorry, Señora, but who exactly will come for Izzy?" This was getting real.

The woman just shook her head, her eyes shining with un-

shed tears. "May God forgive us." And with that, she turned and started back down the street, her shoulders hunched and appearing to age with each step.

Lupe stood frozen to the spot, watching the woman shuffle through the people on the sidewalk. Finally she willed herself loose, and ran after her.

"Señora? Wait, Señora!" she called, catching glimpses of her white hair weaving among the midday street traffic. She thought she saw her down one of the side streets, so she bolted toward the corner, her breath coming in shallow with the heat. Lupe came to an abrupt stop, chest heaving as her gaze swept the street. There was no one there. She spun around and searched the faces, but the grandmother was nowhere around.

She stood in the street, feeling alone, adrenaline cooling like when she sat in the tub and let the bath empty around her, sitting there as the cold air replaced warm water.