

WOLVES OF NO WORLD

2 BOOKS IN 1

LOBIZONA & CAZADORA

ROMINA GARBER



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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LOBIZONA

Manuela Azul has been crammed into an existence that feels too small for her. As an undocumented Argentine immigrant on the run from her father's crime family, Manu is confined to a small apartment and a small life in Miami, Florida. But now, her surrogate grandmother has been attacked, lifelong lies have been exposed, and her mother has been arrested by ICE. Without a home, without answers, and finally without shackles, Manu falls into a secret world buried beneath her own. A world straight out of Argentine folklore, where the seventh consecutive daughter is a bruja, a witch, and the seventh consecutive son is a lobizón, a werewolf. A world where her unusual eyes allow her to belong.

CAZADORA

Manu and her friends cross the mystical border into Kerana—a cursed realm in Argentina—searching for allies and a hiding place. As they chase down leads to a mythical resistance that might not even exist, the Cazadores set up traps to capture Manu. Soon, Manu and her friends are rescued by the resistance, and she realizes they need a revolution as much as she does. But is she the right one to lead them? And after running this far, for this long—how much farther can Manu go before she stops to take a stand?

LOBIZONA

BOOK 1

For all our children caught in the crosshairs of nationalism.

Y para mamá, mi ídola, por absolutamente todo.

Debajo de tu piel vive la luna.

— PABLO NERUDA

The moon lives in the lining of your skin.

— PABLO NERUDA,
AS TRANSLATED BY NATHANIEL TARN

PROLOGUE

The morning takes a deep breath. And holds it.

A shadow stains the sunny horizon. A black SUV with blue lights flashing.

Don't come here, don't come here, don't come here.

The air grows stale as the vehicle stops outside our building. The street is so still, it could be playing dead.

Five men in bulletproof vests jump out. That's when I react.

I storm into the stairwell and race down from the rooftop. Ten stories below, the agents thunder up.

I'm out of breath by the time I burst into the apartment.

"ICE is here!"

Ma leaps to her feet and tosses all the food she just made, stacking the utensils in the sink so it looks like the dishes have been piling up. There's pounding on a door one level beneath us, and a man's voice bellows out, *"We're looking for Guillermo Salazar!"*

We rush to Perla's room, where Ma drops to the floor and rolls under the bed. When it's my turn, I look at Perla and say, *"They can't come in without a warrant—"*

"You don't know what they can't do."

The horrors Perla left behind when she came to this country darken her glassy gaze, and I realize she never got away. No matter how many borders we cross, we can't seem to outrun the fear of not feeling safe in our own homes.

Screaming starts.

Followed by scuffling.

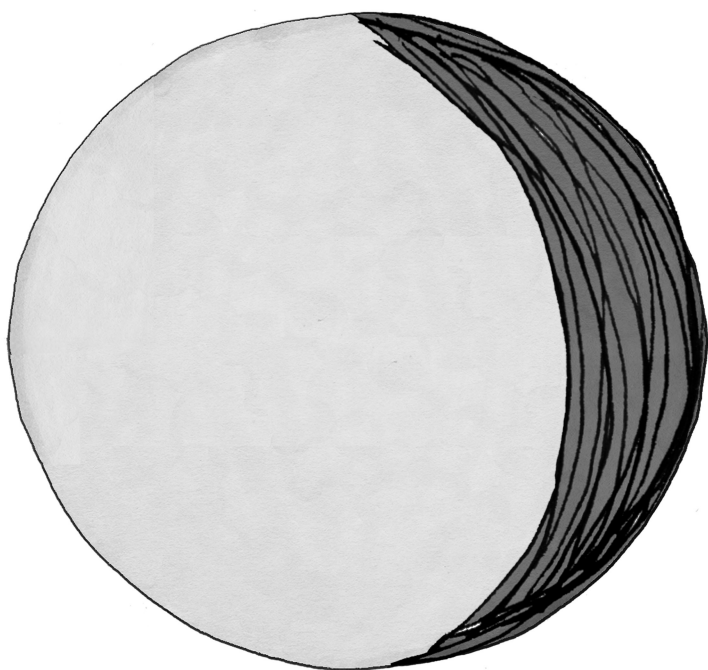
There are other people shouting now, and I recognize the voices

of those neighbors whose papers are in order, yelling at the officers in Guillermo's defense. Everyone else is probably hiding like us.

I have to pee and my leg has a cramp, but we stay under Perla's bed for forty-five minutes. Ma and I don't even speak until we hear the SUV drive away.

When the morning exhales, the street looks untouched.

But it's not.



PHASE I

1

I always bleed on the full moon.

Ma blames the lunar cycle for hijacking my menstrual cycle, so she calls my condition *lunaritis*—a made-up diagnosis that depending upon inflection can sound like English or Spanish.

“Comé bien que en una hora empieza lunaritis,” Ma reminds me as she shuts the oven door and places the seasoned carne al horno on the table to start carving.

My mouth waters with a whiff of the meat’s smoky aroma. “Obvio,” I say, agreeing to eat my fill. Even if this weren’t one of my favorite meals, I’d still need sustenance for my sixty-hour fast.

I feel a quiver of discomfort in my uterus, and I pry my sticky thighs from the plastic chair to readjust my legs. The apartment’s ancient air conditioner has a hard enough time battling the Miami sun, but it can’t compete with the heat of Ma’s cooking.

“Cuando te despertés seguimos con *Cien Años de Soledad*,” says Perla as I’m squeezing salsa golf over my roasted potato wedges. Ninety-year-old Perla has been homeschooling me since we moved in with her eight years ago, so she’s used to lesson-planning around lunaritis.

“Sí,” I say as I slice into the tender oven roast and spear my first bite of succulent pink meat. A delicious warmth fills my mouth and body as I chew, and I fleetingly feel sorry for Rebeca from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, who would only eat whitewash and dirt. Sucks that I won’t get to finish that book until lunaritis ends.

A tremor shoots up my belly, and my hand clenches around the red-and-white checkered tablecloth—a warning shot that soon I’ll be

in excruciating agony. I stop chewing and close my eyes to focus on my breaths. When I open them again, three bright blue pills line the outer rim of my dinner plate.

I meet Ma's concerned brown eyes.

The first few nights of my period are so painful that I can only endure them sedated. These chalky tablets plunge me so deep within my mind that it takes me nearly three nights to climb back out—long enough to miss my gut-contorting menstrual cramps.

I cup the pills in my palm, and for the first time I notice a faint Z etched into their center. Strange, since the blue bottle they come in says they're called Septis. Maybe the Z stands for the zzz's they provide.

I pop the meds in my mouth and chew them with the meat and potatoes.

"Maldita luna," says Ma, glaring out the window. *Damn moon*. Perla follows up Ma's declaration with a spitting sound, as if saying *luna* out loud could invite bad luck.

They think the moon cursed me, so they run through this ritual every month. Only, unlike them, I don't dread lunaritis.

I count down to it.

I chase the food and pills with water and gaze out the window at the dusky violet sky. Any moment now, the shift will happen, and I'll be transported to the only place where I don't have to hide. The one world where it's safe to be me.

I come alive on the full moon.

2

I awaken with a jolt.

It takes me a moment to register that I've been out for three days. I can tell by the well-rested feeling in my bones—I don't sleep this well any other time of the month.

The first thing I'm aware of as I sit up is an urgent need to use the bathroom. My muscles are heavy from lack of use, and it takes some concentration to keep my steps light so I won't wake Ma or Perla. I leave the lights off to avoid meeting my gaze in the mirror, and after tossing out my heavy-duty period pad and replacing it with a tampon, I tiptoe back to Ma's and my room.

I'm always disoriented after lunaritis, so I feel separate from my waking life as I survey my teetering stacks of journals and used books, Ma's yoga mat and collection of weights, and the posters on the wall of the planets and constellations I hope to visit one day.

After a moment, my shoulders slump in disappointment. This month has officially peaked.

I yank the bleach-stained blue sheets off the mattress and slide out the pillows from their cases, balling up the bedding to wash later. My body feels like a crumpled piece of paper that needs to be stretched, so I plant my feet together in the tiny area between the bed and the door, and I raise my hands and arch my back, lengthening my spine disc by disc. The pull on my tendons releases stored tension, and I exhale in relief.

Something tugs at my consciousness, an unresolved riddle that must have timed out when I surfaced . . . but the harder I focus, the

quicker I forget. Swinging my head forward, I reach down to touch my toes and stretch my spine the other way—

My ears pop so hard, I gasp.

I stumble back to the mattress, and I cradle my head in my hands as a rush of noise invades my mind. The buzzing of a fly in the window blinds, the gunning of a car engine on the street below, the groaning of our building's prehistoric elevator. Each sound is so crisp, it's like a filter was just peeled back from my hearing.

My pulse picks up as I slide my hands away from my temples to trace the outlines of my ears. I think the top parts feel a little . . . *pointier*.

I ignore the tingling in my eardrums as I cut through the living room to the kitchen, and I fill a stained green bowl with cold water. Ma's asleep on the turquoise couch because we don't share our bed this time of the month. She says I thrash around too much in my drugged dreams.

I carefully shut the apartment door behind me as I step out into the building's hallway, and I crack open our neighbor's window to slide the bowl through. A black cat leaps over to lap up the drink.

"Hola, Mimitos," I say, stroking his velvety head. Since we're both confined to this building, I hear him meowing any time his owner, Fanny, forgets to feed him. I think she's going senile.

"I'll take you up with me later, after lunch. And I'll bring you some turkey," I add, shutting the window again quickly. I usually let him come with me, but I prefer to spend the mornings after lunaritis alone. Even if I'm no longer dreaming, I'm not awake either.

My heart is still beating unusually fast as I clamber up six flights of stairs. But I savor the burn of my sedentary muscles, and when at last I reach the highest point, I swing open the door to the rooftop.

It's not quite morning yet, and the sky looks like blue-tinged steel. Surrounding me are balconies festooned with colorful clotheslines, broken-down properties with boarded-up windows, fuzzy-leaved palm trees reaching up from the pitted streets . . . and in the distance, the ground and sky blur where the Atlantic swallows the horizon.

El Retiro is a rundown apartment complex with all elderly residents—

mostly Cuban, Colombian, Venezuelan, Nicaraguan, and Argentine immigrants. There's just one slow, loud elevator in the building, and since I'm the youngest person here, I never use it in case someone else needs it.

I came up here hoping for a breath of fresh air, but since it's summertime, there's no caress of a breeze to greet me. Just the suffocating embrace of Miami's humidity.

Smothering me.

I close my eyes and take in deep gulps of musty oxygen, trying to push the dread down to where it can't touch me. The way Perla taught me to do whenever I get anxious.

My metamorphosis started this year. I first felt something was different four full moons ago, when I no longer needed to squint to study the ground from up here. I simply opened my eyes to perfect vision.

The following month, my hair thickened so much that I had to buy bigger clips to pin it back. Next menstrual cycle came the growth spurt that left my jeans three inches too short, and last lunaritis I awoke with such a heightened sense of smell that I could sniff out what Ma and Perla had for dinner all three nights I was out.

It's bad enough to feel the outside world pressing in on me, but now even my insides are spinning out of my control.

As Perla's breathing exercises relax my thoughts, I begin to feel the stirrings of my dreamworld calling me back. I slide onto the rooftop's ledge and lie back along the warm cement, my body as stagnant as the stale air. A dragon-shaped cloud comes apart like cotton, and I let my gaze drift with Miami's hypnotic sky, trying to call up the dream's details before they fade . . .

What Ma and Perla don't know about the Septis is they don't simply sedate me for sixty hours—*they transport me*.

Every lunaritis, I visit the same nameless land of magic and mist and monsters. There's the golden grass that ticks off time by turning silver as the day ages; the black-leaved trees that can cry up storms, their dewdrop tears rolling down their bark to form rivers; the colorful waterfalls that warn onlookers of oncoming danger; the hope-sucking Sombras that dwell in darkness and attach like parasitic shadows . . .

And the Citadel.

It's a place I instinctively know I'm not allowed to go, yet I'm always trying to get to. Whenever I think I'm going to make it inside, I wake up with a start.

Picturing the black stone wall, I see the thorny ivy that twines across its surface like a nest of guardian snakes, slithering and bunching up wherever it senses a threat.

The sharper the image, the sleepier I feel, like I'm slowly sliding back into my dream, until I reach my hand out tentatively. If I could just move faster than the ivy, I could finally grip the opal doorknob before the thorns—

Howling breaks my reverie.

I blink, and the dream disappears as I spring to sitting and scour the battered buildings. For a moment, I'm sure I heard a wolf.

My spine locks at the sight of a far more dangerous threat: A cop car is careening in the distance, its lights flashing and siren wailing. Even though the black-and-white is still too far away to see me, I leap down from the ledge and take cover behind it, the old mantra running through my mind.

Don't come here, don't come here, don't come here.

A familiar claustrophobia claws at my skin, an affliction forged of rage and shame and powerlessness that's been my companion as long as I've been in this country. Ma tells me I should let *her* worry about this stuff and only concern myself with studying, so when our papers come through, I can take my GED and one day make it to NASA—but it's impossible not to worry when I'm constantly having to hide.

My muscles don't uncoil until the siren's howling fades and the police are gone, but the morning's spell of stillness has broken. A door slams, and I instinctively turn toward the pink building across the street that's tattooed with territorial graffiti. Where the alternate version of me lives.

I call her *Other Manu*.

The first thing I ever noticed about her was her Argentine fútbol jersey: #10 *Lionel Messi*. Then I saw her face and realized we look a lot

alike. I was reading Borges at the time, and it occurred to me that she and I could be the same person in overlapping parallel universes.

But it's an older man and not Other Manu who lopes down the street. She wouldn't be up this early on a Sunday anyway. I arch my back again, and thankfully this time, the only pop I hear is in my joints.

The sun's golden glare is strong enough that I almost wish I had my sunglasses. But this rooftop is sacred to me because it's the only place where Ma doesn't make me wear them, since no one else comes up here.

I'm reaching for the stairwell door when I hear it.

Faint footsteps are growing louder, like someone's racing up. My heart shoots into my throat, and I leap around the corner right as the door swings open.

The person who steps out is too light on their feet to be someone who lives here. No El Retiro resident could make it up the stairs that fast. I flatten myself against the wall.

"Creo que encontré algo, pero por ahora no quiero decir nada."

Whenever Ma is upset with me, I have a habit of translating her words into English without processing them. I asked Perla about it to see if it's a common bilingual thing, and she said it's probably my way of keeping Ma's anger at a distance; if I can deconstruct her words into language—something detached that can be studied and dissected—I can strip them of their charge.

As my anxiety kicks in, my mind goes into automatic translation mode: *I think I found something, but I don't want to say anything yet.*

The woman or girl (it's hard to tell her age) has a deep, throaty voice that's sultry and soulful, yet her singsongy accent is unquestionably Argentine. Or Uruguayan. They sound similar.

My cheek is pressed to the wall as I make myself as flat as possible, in case she crosses my line of vision.

"Si tengo razón, me harán la capitana más joven en la historia de los Cazadores."

If I'm right, they'll make me the youngest captain in the history of the . . . Cazadores? That means hunters.

In my eight years living here, I've never seen another person on this rooftop. Curious, I edge closer, but I don't dare peek around the corner. I want to see this stranger's face, but not badly enough to let her see mine.

"¿El encuentro es ahora? Che, Nacho, ¿vos no me podrías cubrir?"

Is the meeting right now? Couldn't you cover for me, Nacho?

The *che* and *vos* sound like Argentinespeak. What if it's Other Manu?

The exciting possibility brings me a half step closer, and now my nose is inches from rounding the corner. Maybe I can sneak a peek without her noticing.

"Okay." Her voice sounds like she's just a few paces away.

I suck in a quick inhale, and before I can overthink it, I pop my head out—

And see the door swinging shut.

I scramble over and tug it open, desperate to spot even a hint of her hair, any clue at all to confirm it was Other Manu—but she's already gone.

All that remains is a wisp of red smoke that vanishes with the swiftness of a morning cloud.

3

The aroma of sizzling bacon and eggs snaps me from the mysterious Argentine's spell, and after picking up Mimitos's bowl, I find Ma and Perla at the kitchen table, huddled over the caramel-colored calabaza gourd.

They stop talking as soon as they see me, and I wish I'd been paying more attention. It's too late to eavesdrop now.

"Welcome back, baby," says Ma as she refills the mate with hot water. She hands the drink to Perla.

"What's up?" I ask, looking from one to the other.

"You, apparently." Ma gets to her feet and plants a kiss on my cheek. Then she walks barefoot to the stove to check on the food.

She wasn't always this casual about sedating me for three nights. At first, Ma would do a full workup when I awoke—pulse, blood pressure, temperature.

My period started on the first full moon after my thirteenth birthday. I don't remember much about that cycle because by nightfall, my body was in such raging agony that I slammed my head into the bedroom wall hard enough to leave a dent, and knocked myself out. The dent is still there, concealed by my poster of Jupiter's moons.

I was still in pain when I came to, and Ma offered me the blue pills. She knew about the sedatives from her days as a nurse in Argentina, and she had Perla request a rush prescription from her doctor. They're so potent that just one tablet can knock a person out for twenty hours—which is why I take three.

"What'd I miss? Has there been any news?"

Ma keeps her focus trained on the eggs. I look to Perla, but she

just stares back and sucks on the mate's metal bombilla—a straw with a strainer at one end that filters out the yerba leaves. Her glassy eyes may be a blink away from blindness, but her gaze still feels as invasive as a microscope.

I sidle up next to Ma and set Mimitos's bowl beside the fat blue glass filled with water that Perla changes out every day. She says it's to ward off envy.

Ma seems smaller to me today, and I wonder if I grew taller this lunaritis. The thought leads to the same question I've been asking myself for months—*Does Ma notice the changes in me?*

She *has* to . . . but then why doesn't she say anything? Should I ask her? Will she think I'm losing it?

Am I losing it?

I stare at her root line as she flips the bacon, tracing the graying locks layered in among the darker ones. And on an impulse, I tip my face down and kiss her head.

We usually only kiss each other in greeting, so Ma's eyebrows arc up as she meets my gaze. "What was that for?"

The shock sugaring her voice makes me feel like a neglectful daughter. "Nada," I mumble, cooling my warm face in the fridge as I pull out an almost-empty carton of orange juice and tip my head back to swallow whatever sweetness remains.

"¿Y esa porquería?" demands Perla in her gravelly voice. She's as disgusted by my drink as I am by hers. "¿Por qué no probás un sorbito de mate?"

I make a face at the mate she's offering me, and Ma goes over to refill the hot water again. "And you call yourself my daughter," she says as she brings the metal bombilla to her own lips.

I seal up the bag of yerba on the counter and make my best effort not to cringe at the bitter herbal smell of the drink that's as sacred to Argentines as dulce de leche. Then I join Perla at the table and pick at a bit of dried sauce on the checkered tablecloth. I can still smell the spaghetti Bolognese they must have had on my second night of lunaritis. Last night, they made milanesas, my all-time favorite meal;

when I opened the fridge, I saw they left me a couple of breaded filets of meat for lunch.

Ma turns off the burners and tips the bacon onto a plate, along with two sunny-side up eggs. She places the meal in front of me, then pours a dollop of coffee into my chipped Virgo mug and fills the rest with milk—my favorite drink.

Ma says in Argentina it's called a *lágrima* because it's just a *teardrop* of caffeine. Perla says it's not so much coffee as coffee-flavored milk.

The pans hiss at Ma as she gives them a quick rinse, then she joins us at the table and fills the calabaza gourd with more water. She says she likes to make me the kind of big breakfasts she cooks for Doña Rosa's kids, but she never tastes any of it herself. According to her, Argentines prefer light breakfasts.

I take a bite of crispy bacon, and its crunch is louder than usual, like someone chewing ice in my ear. I wince, and to distract myself I flip through the pages of the local Spanish-language newspaper that's open on the table until I get to the sports section.

"Ganó River," says Ma, her voice flat with annoyance.

"Ugh." I drop my head in shame at our loss.

Ma and I share the same passion: fútbol. We're long-suffering fans of an Argentine team called Racing. River is our biggest rival, and we mourn their every victory.

Ma and Perla trade the mate between them, and since they usually fill every atom of air with words, today's silence is deafening. The tension grows so taut that I shovel down food quickly from nerves and keep riffling through the paper's pages until a headline jumps out at me:

**EL PRESIDENTE ARGENTINO SERÁ
PADRINO DEL SÉPTIMO HIJO VARÓN
DE UNA FAMILIA DE CORRIENTES**

I scan the text, skipping over any words I don't know. I can't pinpoint exactly when my default language switched, when I started thinking in English and subtitling Spanish.

"Wait a moment," I say through my mouthful of eggs. "*Ley de padrinzgo presidencial*—by *law* the president of Argentina becomes god-parent to the seventh consecutive son or daughter in a family? How the hell did that become a thing?"

"*Language*," warns Ma. She hands me a napkin to wipe the yolk trickling down my chin.

The seventh child . . .

That reminds me of a story Perla used to tell me when I was little to make me feel better about my alien-looking eyes.

She would say I was born in a secret city that's home to magical creatures, and every time a seventh son or daughter is born in Argentina, they have to make their way to that land to claim their werewolf or witch powers. Whenever I'd point out I'm an only child, she'd say that's what makes me special: I'm the first of my kind—a non-seventh child born with magical powers.

I can't remember the city's name.

"La ley está basada en la leyenda del lobizón," says Perla in her rattly voice.

The law is based on the legend of the werewolf.

I stare into Perla's wrinkled face, her foggy eyes like dusty crystal balls, and I wait for her to crack her sardonic smile. But it never comes. "¿Qué?"

"The lobizón is the South American werewolf," she explains in her academic tone. "It's a mix of European mythology and the legend of the luisón, a different creature rooted in the stories of the Guaraní, people indigenous to South America—"

"Wait," I interrupt. Perla was a middle school teacher before home-schooling me, so I'm used to taking her lessons seriously. Only I can't with this one. "What do werewolves have to do with Argentine *law*?"

Ma brings the bombilla to her lips and nudges my plate, which I abandoned as soon as Perla said *lobizón*.

"There's a superstition in Argentina that says the seventh consecutive son in a family will become a werewolf," says Perla, her soft g the only sign that English isn't her first language. "I used to tell you about it when you were little. They say that a long time ago, people

really believed it, and to stop the abandonment of these children, the government enacted this tradition-turned-law.”

Ma makes an impatient noise as she sets the mate down, and I let my fork fall to the plate, its clang underscoring my disbelief.

I’m no stranger to a good superstition—Perla thinks describing a nightmare before breakfast will make it come true, and Ma is adamant we keep three salters at the table, one for each of us, because it’s bad luck to pass the salt hand-to-hand—but I’ve never heard of a *government-sanctioned* superstition before.

“Why is it still in practice *today*, when we know better?” I demand. “And if the myth is about seventh *sons*, why does the law also apply to daughters?”

Yet even before I finish asking the question, I know the answer. It was in Perla’s story.

“Because seventh daughters become—”

“*BASTA!*”

Ma’s outburst is so abrupt that even the kitchen seems to suck in its breath, leaving little oxygen for the rest of us. She picks up the thermos, and for a few long seconds the only sound in the apartment is the hot water rushing into the calabaza gourd as she refills it.

Perla brings the mate to her lips when Ma hands it to her and doesn’t speak again.

“None of that is true,” says Ma, her voice rough. “The law started as a tradition brought over by Russian dignitaries who were visiting Argentina. They asked the president to be godfather to their seventh son because it was customary in their country, so we adopted the practice. *That’s all.*”

Our discussion has been innocuous enough that Ma’s anger must have to do with something else . . . I think back to when I first walked in, how she and Perla seemed to be discussing something, something serious enough to silence them, and fear hardens into a rock in my gut.

I force myself to finish my food, even though my appetite’s gone. When my plate is clean, I bring everything to the sink and pick up Mimitos’s bowl to start washing.

“Leave it, Manu.”

Ma's voice breaks the tense silence, and when I turn to look at her, she says, "Quiero charlar con vos."

There's a difference between a *charla* and a *conversación*: The first is a chat, the second is a *talk*. Even though Ma said she wants to charlar, by her face and tone, I know she actually wants to have a conversación.

The last time we had one of those was over a year ago when Guillermo from 2B was deported to Colombia. This morning, her forehead is creased with the same worry lines.

My gut is heavy as I follow her out of the kitchen and into our bedroom. When she shuts the door, my throat closes with it.

"I don't want you leaving El Retiro for any reason today."

My chest deflates. I was planning to visit the library to get the newest book in the Victorian fantasy series I'm devouring. "But what if Perla needs me to check something out for our lessons?"

The librarians know Perla from her teaching days, and they think I'm her granddaughter. They love her so much that they don't even give me a hard time for keeping my sunglasses on indoors.

"You'll have to use what's here." Ma scrutinizes my lopsided stacks of books, which she's constantly asking me to tidy up.

"I promise to be quick and discreet—"

"A sixteen-year-old girl out alone in the middle of the day is never discreet," she shoots back.

"A) It's Sunday, and anyway it's summer, so no one's in school. And B) I'll be seventeen in two weeks."

Still, I know the real reason she's worried. I may not have friends, but I spend my days consuming books and television shows, so I'm aware there's a word for someone like me. Someone who looks too different.

(*Freak.*)

"Ma," I say in what I hope is a reassuring tone. "I swear to keep my sunglasses on *at all times*, even in the *bathroom*—"

"Manuela, *suficiente*."

The sharpness in her voice means this is the kind of conversación where she talks and I listen.

"I heard from Doña Rosa that random immigration sweeps will be

happening in our area to meet this administration's deportation quotas. If they ask for your papers, your mirrored lenses won't be enough to shield you. ¿Entendés?"

Ma works as a maid for a wealthy Cuban family that seems to be pretty plugged into the government because they always know when something's coming down. Despite the stifling Miami heat, my fingers feel frozen. For Ma and me, deportation is death.

We came to this country a dozen years ago because we couldn't stay in Argentina. My father was heir to a powerful criminal organization with hooks into the police and government, and his own people killed him for trying to run off with Ma and start a new life. His family blamed Ma for what happened, so she had to run—and when she discovered she was pregnant, she knew she could never go back.

Only we're not safe yet.

Ma says she filed our visa request with her employer's sponsorship, and we're still awaiting an answer. She and I have a deal that she's in charge of our finances and our residency, which means I'm not allowed to stress about either. I don't know the process's particulars, but what I do know is that until our papers come through, we're undocumented. And since Florida banned sanctuary cities, we're always at risk of discovery—so there's a single guiding principle we exist by:

Visibility = Deportation.

And my face is entirely too visible.

Ma is still waiting on a response from me, so I nod my submission. "Good," she says. "Now why don't you go shower, then we'll play a game of chinchón?"

"*Seriously?*" It's been forever since Ma's had time to play cards with me.

"Doña Rosa told me I could come in an hour later today."

I nod eagerly, my mood improved. But as she's leaving, I can't keep from asking, "Any news?"

Without slowing down or twisting to look at me, she says, "Yes, we're citizens now, and I just forgot to tell you."

I perch on the tub's porcelain ledge, waiting for the shower to warm up. I'm still chilly from Ma's warning about ICE sweeps—US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The white noise is soothing, and after a while, I let my eyelids droop as the sound of the running faucet fills my head.

My mind drifts back to my dreamscape. Usually after being awake a few hours, that world sinks away. But today, I've felt a pull to get back there all morning, as if I left something behind in my subconscious that I need to retrieve.

I shut my eyes—

Daytime has dimmed to dusk.

I'm racing through a field of wild grass in the same golden dress I always wear in my dreams, flexible but formfitting with a pocket for stashing small weapons. The Citadel looms on the horizon, its black stone as impenetrable as outer space.

The scent of jasmine infects the air, a warning note that night is near. And it's hungry for me.

Shadows stretch across the landscape, veiling the foliage in silver, and I'm sprinting so fast, I stop feeling the ground. The moonlike opal doorknob grows larger, but something flickers in the fringe of my vision, and I stumble.

A puff of red smoke rises from beyond the black wall.

It looks just like the smoke I saw in the stairwell. Did I drag the memory here, or are pieces of my dreamworld now invading my reality?

A flash of green snaps me back to action. The Citadel's spiky veins of ivy uncoil, baring thorns as sharp as shark teeth. They rear up to strike, and I hunch my shoulders to pounce—

But I edge away, feinting left. The armored tentacles mirror my movements, and as soon as the doorknob is unprotected, I leap up, jabbing my hand out—

And my fingers brush against cool, smooth stone.

I gasp, and my eyes fly open.

I'm back in the steamy bathroom, the dream replaced with the realization I just dredged up to my mind's surface.

Last night, I touched the Citadel for the first time.

4

When I step out of the shower, the mirror is completely fogged. I wrap a towel around myself, and I brush my thick hair as gently as I can, so I won't keep losing hairbrush bristles.

A mosquito buzzes onto the glass, and I squash it dead with my palm. The reflex is so immediate that it only registers when the sting reverberates up my arm. I drop my hand into the sink to rinse off the dead bug, and when I look up, there's a clear spot amid the condensation, leaving everything blurry but my eyes.

Unbidden, the memory unfurls . . .

I'm eleven, and it's my first time at a birthday party. I met Ariana at the local playground, and she doesn't mind that I always wear sunglasses—in fact, she even asks her parents for her own pair because she thinks I look cool.

Ma tells Ariana's mom I have something called photophobia so I can't take my glasses off. When I get to her house, I've never seen so many kids my age in one place. It's instantly the best day of my life—until it becomes the worst.

A blond boy Ariana has a crush on thinks it would be funny to toss me into the pool even though I can't swim. I scream as his arms wrap around me, and Ariana's mom runs over to tell him to put me down. The boy shoves me so hard that I fall to the floor, and my sunglasses slide to my chin.

It feels like the whole world stops.

Ariana's mom is the only person close enough to see my eyes, and I watch as her outrage at the boy rearranges into shock at me—which is quickly followed by revulsion, and the inevitable question:

"What. Are. You?"

I shake the memory loose from my thoughts as I change into shorts and a tank top, then I meet Ma in Perla's plant-riddled living room. The mingled aroma of eggs and bacon still permeates the apartment, so I throw open a window, ushering in hot air that's webbed with conversation—songbirds' shrill cries, buses' boisterous bellows, construction's discordant crashes.

I join Ma on the worn turquoise couch, which despite its fraying fabric still manages to be the loudest part of the room. The high velvet seatback is rippled like a seashell, and it's tall enough to cushion our heads. When I was ten, it inspired me to spin a fairy tale about Perla—the first story I ever wrote. She keeps it framed on her nightstand.

"Perla has one of her migraines, so I put her back to bed," says Ma as she doles out seven cards for each of us—plus an extra one for me, since I'm up first—and sets the rest facedown on the cushion separating us. Next to the stack is a notepad with two columns: *M* for Manu (me) and *S* for Soledad (Ma).

The game begins when I discard my spare, so I get rid of my heaviest card—the king of clubs—and am left with seven. Ma picks up a new card from the facedown stack and drops the jack of hearts. To win a round, we have to fit all seven cards into two groupings that can be a set of at least three cards of the same number and/or a sequential run of at least three cards of the same suit. Any leftover cards in your hand count as points against you.

"She says you should finish reading *Cien Años de Soledad* and be prepared for a quiz when she wakes up," Ma goes on as I pick a card from the stack. It's the seven of diamonds, so I slip it between the pair of sevens I'm already holding—one grouping down—and drop the nine of spades. The only seven I'm missing now is clubs.

"¿Te gusta Márquez?" she asks as she picks up a new card, and I nod in assent. I've been trying to read Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece as slowly as possible so I can relish the writing, but it's so good that I'm already two-thirds of the way through.

Ma discards the eight of spades, and I groan; I should have held

on to that nine. But my mood improves when I see my new card—*ace of hearts*. I already have the two and three of hearts, so with the ace, that's my second sequence.

Now I just need the four of hearts or the seven of clubs if I want to end the round with a perfect score.

"Does that mean Márquez has the honor of going on your favorites shelf next to Shakespeare and Wharton and Dickens?" Ma prods as she shuffles her cards around like she's also just completed a grouping. "Or are we talking *top shelf*, next to your sainted *Pride and Prejudice*? I realize the Buendías aren't rich like the Bennets—"

"The Bennets aren't rich—"

"But it wouldn't kill you to read more Spanish books."

I roll my eyes, but my gut tightens at her taunting. My love for the Bennet sisters has nothing to do with nationality or social status. I love them because they're the kind of big family I wish I had, and Longbourn is the loving and chaotic home I crave. Only I can't admit this stuff to Ma because she's given up everything for us, and I don't want her to think all she's sacrificed isn't enough for me.

That *she* isn't enough for me.

"Are you going to keep ignoring me?" Ma demands.

"No, but if you're going to make fun of something, you should know what it is. Maybe if you tried reading *Pride and*—"

"Name one Latino character, and I'll read it."

I'm too weighted down with other worries to play two games at once, so I pull another card from the stack, hoping it's the four or seven I need . . .

Queen of diamonds.

Damn.

"¿Qué te pasa?" Ma doesn't take her turn until I lift my eyes and meet her excavating gaze.

A rare breeze blows in through the third-story window, wafting her almond scent toward me, and I flash back to my younger days, when curling into her neck could make anything better. Something hard dislodges from my chest.

"Even if we get our residency," I hear myself say, "what's going to change? Between my eyes and lunaritis, I'll *never* fit in."

Ma knits her brow, and she stares at me for a long moment. Undeterred, I stare back.

She used to be beautiful. There are still hints of that beauty in her plump lips and high cheekbones and long lashes. But the past few years have stolen most of her youth away. Her skin has lost its glow, her hair has gotten thin, and her curves have deflated with her shrinking frame.

"I guess we'll just have to get healthcare so we can afford your eye surgery!" I love when she's in a good mood because she becomes an obstinate optimist. "And take it from me, there are worse chronic conditions to have than lunaritis. When you see a real doctor, they'll give you an actual diagnosis and a *cure*—"

"*You* could be a real doctor, Ma," I can't help pointing out. "When we're legal, you could get certified as a nurse again and go to medical school."

"Sí," she says distantly, but she doesn't sound like she believes it. Then she breaks our gaze to take her turn.

Conversación over.

Her eyes light up when she sees her new card, and I fear what's coming next—

"¿*Cortaste?*" I ask incredulously as she slaps a card facedown, ending the round.

She triumphantly bares her full hand to me. She's holding the four of hearts *and* the seven of clubs, so I was never getting the cards I was waiting on.

"¡Menos diez!" She announces her score and starts shuffling the deck for me to deal the next hand. I pull the notepad toward me and write *-10* in her column and *1* in mine, my gaze lingering on my score.

I am that leftover ace of diamonds.

I don't fit into any of the groupings around me, and the things that make me different always seem to count against me.

For the millionth time, I wonder about the person I might have become if we hadn't left Argentina. If my dad's parents and profession had been normal, and I could have been raised with my family, would my differences still alienate me? Ma sets the deck down, and I ask, "What's Buenos Aires like?"

I was only five when we left, so I don't remember much of my homeland. Just impressions that feel more like paintings I saw once in a museum.

"The old-world architecture is breathtaking," she begins, and I ask this question often enough that I could mouth her answer along with her. "Assuming you can manage to appreciate it under all the graffiti. The sidewalks change from brick to cement to cobblestone for no particular reason, and they're covered in every variety of dog poop that Argentines wouldn't dream of picking up—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I say, interrupting her. "You always give the same answer."

"You always ask the same question."

I roll my eyes. "What does it *feel* like to be in Buenos Aires?"

"It's the most alive city in the world . . . Days start late and nights are never-ending. You sleep so little that life begins to feel like a waking dream—"

"Okay," I say, cutting her off again. She's said this before too, so just to stump her with something unexpected, I ask, "What's it *smell* like?"

"Coffee and leather," she answers without missing a beat. "I used to like visiting high-end stores just to sniff the jackets and handbags. And . . . paper," she adds, her voice growing distant like she's not seeing Perla's apartment anymore. "Buenos Aires has more bookstores per person than any city in the world."

I sit at attention. It's the first new bit of information she's given me in a while, and I thread the detail into the tapestry in my head. "What are the people like?"

"Warm." Her voice dips a few decibels, and I lean forward in anticipation. "Even if it's your first time there, you're not a stranger because everyone treats you like they've always known you, with smiles and

hugs and kisses. The salesperson, the cab driver, the hair stylist—with one conversation, they're instant friends."

She must be burnt out because I haven't heard her this unguarded in a long time. So I chance a question that usually shuts her down, in hopes that today she'll give something up.

"What was Dad like?"

The light dims in Ma's brown eyes as the glaze of nostalgia melts into that dark, faraway look she gets whenever I mention him. All I've managed to work out is that he was probably white, since my skin is a lighter shade of brown than Ma's.

I'm not even sure she's told me his real name because when I looked up *Martín Fierro* on a computer at the library, a fictional gaucho from classic Argentine literature came up. She's so terrified of me finding out anything about him that sometimes it feels like he's still around.

"He was . . . passionate," she says, her voice uncharacteristically tender. "Unpredictable. Charming," she adds with the ghost of a smile. "*Hopeful*. He was determined to leave his mark on the world. Sometimes when we went out together, he would carve an *F* somewhere—a table, a door, a tree. He said he wanted to make sure the place was changed by our presence."

She meets my gaze and her face softens, but I know I'm not the person she's seeing.

Ma says I have my father's eyes.

It's the only thing about him I know for sure.

She claims they're the reason she fell in love with him, yet she's always making me hide mine. I know it's just a precaution we need to take, but it makes me feel like they're shameful or repulsive or *wrong*.

It's only natural to be drawn to the unnatural, Ma always tells me—but attention breeds scrutiny, which is dangerous for us because:

Visibility = Deportation.

This equation—plus Ma's fear of my father's family discovering I exist—is why she makes me wear my sunglasses everywhere. Why she

won't take me to see a doctor for my lunaritis. Why I'm no longer allowed to have friends . . .

Because you can't be invisible when your irises are yellow suns and your pupils are silver stars.