

## Sanctuary City

Esme thought she'd been lucky, racing down the stairs against the first outpouring of commuters and making it onto the train. The car was crowded, but she wedged her way along the aisle, past the bulk of winter coats and handbags, into a pocket of space near a center pole. At rush hour, even this was something to be grateful for.

She stood expectant, anticipating the ding and the doors to close. But the seconds stretched on and she felt her palms moisten inside her gloves. A bitter wind had swept through the city, bringing snow, then a hard pelting of sleet, but here, underground, the train car was warm and airless. Esme pulled off her gloves, then unzipped her jacket.

More riders slipped on. There was a slight shuffling and the space around Esme disappeared. On all sides, she was hemmed in. She shifted her weight, and the motion sent a shooting pain into her lower back. *Ay, ya . . .* She wished she were home already, but then there'd be Junior, who was probably stretched out on the couch right now, and the excuses he'd make, or worse yet, his phony acquiescence. Someone's sour breath caught in her nose and she swallowed, lifting her chin. The doors shuddered closed.

Then, with a lurch, they were moving. Esme clung to the pole as riders swayed, bumping each other like fish on a string. The shoulder of a tall blanquita just inches from her face, Esme turned, looking up at the advertisements that lined the car. A subway advisory caught her eye. "*It's nothing, you think. But can you be sure?*" In the photograph, a backpack was framed beneath a row of empty subway seats.

Esme glanced around the car. She saw only body parts defined in relief: an arm extended, the sweep of dark hair, a tired face whose eyelids hung low and flickered in sleep.

Someone was playing a game with the volume up, *ping, blip, bleep*. No one told the rider to turn it down. No one said anything. She didn't

see any backpacks, except one, on the car floor, sandwiched between a pair of trouser legs. A hand went into the pack and pulled something out. Esme couldn't see what it was, but a crumpled brown bag dropped to the floor next to the man's feet. Esme tsked, *Pendejo*.

She spent eight hours a day cleaning up after people. Pulling hair out of drains in the girls' and boys' locker rooms, reaching her hand into tepid, grey water to unclog sinks, scraping wads of paper towel from the ceiling. The mopping, the wiping, the emptying of things into other things.

She thought of Miss Perrell sitting behind the security desk in the school lobby, her portable TV on CNN, murmuring to herself: *Mm-mm-mm, can you believe it? It's a sickness, it is. These days. Can't go anywhere.* Miss Perrell liked to keep up with the news, her West Indian accent clipping pieces of her thoughts into the world. *All those innocent, blood spilt, a travesty, it is. Travesty, tragedy.* Esme never fully understood what she meant, her own English still imperfect after all these years in the United States. She'd shoulder the Hoover to her back and plug in. Miss Perrell glancing from the bank of monitors to images, terrible images, on the TV, as the vacuum whined and Esme worked the corners of the room.

Sometimes Esme took her breaks with Miss Perrell, but lately she'd been working steadily through her shift, a distraction from her own troubles. Three weeks ago, word spread that Mr. Duke, the manager of Building G where Esme lived, had been fired, replaced by a stranger whose name no one could pronounce. All her neighbors were whispering, *Watch out, cuidado, they're checking leases, paperwork de todos.* Already, the Guerreros from upstairs had been given notice, and Esme didn't know if they were going floor by floor or alphabetical, or whether she needed to worry at all, the whole situation a slow-burning fuse in the pit of her stomach.

And before that, on a rainy December night, Esme came home to find her daughter, Yesenia, unrecognizable, her lip split down the middle, one side of her face a swollen, bruised mess, and Junior on the couch, reeking of mota, playing a game on his phone. "She was jumped at school," he said without looking up, as if it was no big thing, an aside in life's grand scheme. "Cállate pendejo," Yesenia screamed, slamming the bathroom door.

A woman's handbag nudged against her arm. Esme looked up. They'd pulled into a station. Passengers exited. More riders stepped on, shaking the chill from their shoulders. The train doors closed and they were in motion again, the car rocking gently from side to side as they picked up speed. Esme found her balance, then searched her purse for her phone. She knew there'd be nothing new, but dug it out anyway. She pressed the message icon, scrolling to find the text from her son.

It read: *I be there.*

But he hadn't come during her lunch break as he promised. She'd stood outside the back entrance of the school, waiting in the cold, watching the town cars come and go along East 63rd, but no Junior.

Four times she called, texted, no response.

She tried Yesenia.

*tu hermano alli*

*He went out.*

*donde*

*No se*

*digale llamame*

*Mama, he ain't here.*

Carlos had teased her. *Maybe he's got a girl, Esme.* Esme was too furious to answer. She'd parked her cleaning cart next to the floor waxer, smoothed her hair into a ponytail, and stepped into the open doorway of the director's office.

"Excuse me, Mr. Denworth, my son, I'm sorry, he called me sick, I bring him to clean on Monday, it's okay?"

The school director was seated behind his large wooden desk. He glanced up from his computer and looked out at Esme.

"It's only a temporary position, Esmeralda. I need that mold gone now. What did Carlos say?"

He was a friendly enough man, but Esme did her best to avoid him—something in their exchanges left her anxious and cross, feelings which then shadowed her throughout the day.

But now hearing mention of Carlos, the crew foreman, Esme felt emboldened and stepped further into the office.

"Carlos, he say it's okay. My son come on Monday."

Mr. Denworth stood, moving around the desk with one arm lifted, reaching toward Esme, who pivoted to let him pass. But his hand landed on her shoulder, and he left it there as he led her out of his office and down the hall.

"We have a ticking clock here, Esmeralda. No mucho tiempo. We need those rooms mold-free ahora."

"Ahorita?" he added, looking at her for approval.

"Si, ahorita, you correct."

He nodded, patting her shoulder. "Ahorita, yes. Otherwise, I'm going to have a lot of angry parents on my hands." He chuckled. "And they form committees. *Comisiones!* Esmeralda, if anything goes wrong."

In the hallway, Mr. Denworth stared at the floor waxer, then looked around. "Now where did Carlos go?"

That evening, as she was about to clock out, she heard Carlos call to her from down the hall. "You want me to drop by, take a belt to him?"

Even though his voice was playful and they were alone in the basement, Esme turned sharply, "No, shhh, Carlos." She stepped into the closet where the cleaning supplies were kept and searched for her time card in the metal rack. She found it and punched out. Carlos leaned against the door frame, watching her put on her scarf, then gloves.

"¿Pero qué te dijo Mr. Denworth?" she whispered, looking up at him with worry. "It's okay to bring him Monday?"

He was smiling, unaffected by her mood, and reached to touch her face. She flinched, stepping back, and he raised his hands.

"You have something," he said, pointing to his cheek. She brushed at her face and a piece of lint came away.

They stood for a moment without speaking, then he said, "you know I got you, Esme, just bring that malcriado on Monday." He had nice eyes, good teeth, nice hands, she noticed his hands, but she would never. No matter how much she wanted him, no matter how often she thought about the way he looked at her. To feel his hands on her body, to slide onto him, the sudden thrust of his hips against hers . . .

She felt a throb of longing and gave a quick glance around the subway car. No one was paying attention. Esme tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She hadn't been able to look at him as she brushed past, saying only, "Gracias Carlos, ya me voy."

At the next station, the woman and her large handbag departed. Esme straightened, stretching her back. She felt the same stab of pain in her lower muscles. She hated the Hoover. Barely thirty-eight, and already she felt old, like a bruised piece of fruit. She rolled her neck, working at the knot, and she noticed him then, the boy seated in front of her. His legs spread wide, an elbow jutting into the empty seat next to him. A knit ski cap covered a long kinky afro which had been pulled back into a loose ponytail.

She pictured Junior, slumped that morning in a sleepy daze, his face puffy with sleep. She'd almost reached over and hugged him. Instead, she slid three dollars across the table, saying, "Don't be late." Someone guffawed loudly and ski cap boy turned, tilting his chin toward a stream of *nigga this*, and *nigga that*. Esme glanced over and was surprised to see it was a Chinese boy talking. Leaning one foot up against the subway door, a smattering of coarse hair on his upper lip. Another boy wedged himself in front of her, forming a triangle with the others. Esme stared at his narrow back. His striped cotton underwear pooching out, *SUPREME* written across the waistband.

*... always instigating some shit  
can't stand that nigga  
saying soft  
who soft, Farragut nigga got capped.*

The word punched the air. *Capped*. These hard boys, someone shot, what story do they tell? Her eyes swept the car. Was anyone else listening? She wanted to move, stand somewhere else, but the train was accelerating through the tunnel, racing down beneath the river, and Esme was forced to hold on. The boys' talk grew louder.

*Nigga came at me . . .  
I said . . .  
But then . . . leathe stra—  
pulled it out . . .  
Went to cut me here and here.*

Esme glanced at Ski Cap's outstretched arms. These boys talked the way her own son did: out the side of their mouths, lips barely moving, a

suppression of syllables. You had to lean in to understand, or as she'd do, get right up in Junior's face and say, "Open your mouth when you talk, how're you going to get somewhere in this world?" Junior, who'd dropped out of City College before the semester ended, telling her: "It's not for me, Ma. *Stop pushing.*"

Esme had long given up trying to follow the ever-shifting rivalries. The cause of each aggression, the need for dominance. She'd seen it plenty from her kitchen window. Fights breaking out, spilling into the middle courtyard, the *bweep bweep* of sirens, the thunder of running feet. Her own daughter sucker-punched. But not really, Esme thought. It'd been instigated. They'd *gathered*. They held their phones up like tiny flags, to record the moment, proof of her subjugation.

Yesenia had begged her not to go, but Esme went anyway, marching into the guidance office, carried on a wave of feverish incredulity, *Have you seen her? Did you seen her face?*

The school counselor unblocked the YouTube site and clicked play. It lasted twenty-three seconds. It was unbearable. The audio over-modulated and scratchy. The frame jammed with jittery faces, but it was clear what was happening: a loose circle ringed the fight, Yesenia center stage, or maybe it was the other girl and her fist that swung over and over, punching her daughter until she'd gone down in a heap.

Shame and helplessness flooded her chest, and for a moment Esme felt herself splitting in two, as if part of her had been tipped into a deep, bottomless well. The counselor told her it was her right to press charges, to seek further reprisal, but the thought of the police, the questions they might ask, and her own subversion—she'd paid a small fortune for her social security number—kept her quiet.

That afternoon she lay with Yesenia, their legs twined together, and Esme had rocked her. It was not often she thought of Enrique, the children's father. But she thought of him now, and somehow this assuaged her guilt, her uselessness. At least she was here, comforting their child, while he was *nobody*, not even a speck on the horizon. Esme stroked Yesenia's hair, but her daughter flinched, crying out, "Ay, stop mami, me duele."

"Sorry, mija. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Shh, shhh, shhhhh."

The subway doors opened. Someone jostled past, and Esme stumbled, bumping the boy in front of her. He turned, giving her a quick look, and she saw the wash of bright pimples on his forehead, he was no older than Yesenia, a child.

*Qué ridículo.* She was a grown woman, pues. Her legs stiff with fatigue, back aching, what was she doing standing. And with that, she stepped past the boy and sank into the empty seat.

It had gone quiet, the train idling in the station. Ski Cap pulled his legs together to keep from touching Esme, and the boy with pimples straightened, looking at a point above her head. He pulled out a short-handled brush from his pocket and began working it through his afro.

Yesenia used to swing her long, dark hair. She'd twirl and sway in front of the windows, the panes of glass turning to mirrors as night fell. She'd sing as she swayed, watching her reflection dance. Now, she kept to her room.

They were moving again, the train snaking out of the tunnel, rising above ground to find the night, and the city, far across the bay, was no more than a faint drift of luminescence.

. . . *nine dollars an hour*, the Chinese boy was saying.

*the one by Jay Street*

. . . *black pants, but to your waist, black shirt, button-up.*

The one with pimples said, *what, like church clothes?* His own clothes hung loose over his thin frame. Esme noticed a tiny hole where the waistband had come unstitched from his boxers.

*Gotta be black, to the waist.*

*You get a discount?*

*LeBron, KDs, Kobe . . .*

*That's tight.*

*Word, I got church clothes.* The boy with pimples snapped his fingers from the wrist and the action was near enough to Esme's face that she looked up, seeing his smile and the braces that caught the light.

On the video, the ring of boys had swelled, then broken apart. One of them lunged into the space where Yesenia had stood, his mouth open with laughter, silver teeth flashing before the image cut out.

Esme stared at the boy, studying his face, and there was something in his expression right then—she saw it and knew. There was no doubt, and without thinking, she reached out and tugged the boy's coat.

"Xcuse me. You. Yes, you." He straightened, brushing her hand away, frowning at the strange woman who was glaring at him.

"You know my daughter?" Esme said. "Yesenia Nunez?"

His brow furrowed. He didn't answer, but she could see his mind working, sifting through a catalogue of responses.

She pressed on. "You were there, by to John Jay High School, when my daughter was beat up. I saw you on the YouTube."

A look of guilt flickered across his face, but just as quickly his face went flat with emotion.

She didn't like that he was standing over her, that her words had evaporated into air.

"Mamón, I'm talking to you," Esme said. "Yesenia Nunez. It was diciembre, I know. I saw you on the YouTube."

The riders were listening now.

The Chinese boy tittered, "She talking to you, son." Ski Cap laughed, "YouTube, you famous, nigga."

"Diciembre? Fuck I know about diciembre."

You was there," Esme insisted. "I saw you."

"Nigga's crazy, fuck she talking about," he said loudly, stepping away from her and crossing to the doors.

The train was pulling into the Smith/9th Street station. She glanced around the car. No one met her eye, but she knew they'd heard every word, their faces awakening as if nudged out of a dream. Ski Cap sprang to his feet and stood with the others, all of them adjusting and preening, oblivious to her now, as if something special awaited them outside these doors.

Esme's mouth had gone dry. She tried to swallow, but couldn't, her neck hot, her whole body stiff with indignation. The doors opened and the boys ambled off. She tracked their passage through the windows, then came to her senses, realizing this was her stop too. She shouldered her handbag, and ran for the doors, slipping through just before they slid closed.

She followed them along the icy platform, her heart pounding in her ears, down the long flight of stairs.

Out on the street, the inky darkness was startling and Esme felt momentarily disoriented. She braced herself against the wind, wrapping her scarf around her chin and mouth, her eyes on the boys as they cut through the drifts of snow toward Hamilton Avenue.

Junior used to wait for her on this corner, beneath the awning of Meep's Deli. He was eleven when his father left them. It was a routine he'd established without her asking, sprinting up through the inner courtyard of the projects to Garnet, Garnet to Smith, Smith to 9th. *Don't worry, Ma, I got it down to a science.* He prided himself on how quickly he could move, mindless of the dangers that might befall him.

Esme hadn't known Enrique was leaving them. He was meant to return in two months, three at the most. The border was fluid then. He was going home to San Andres, where they'd grown up, to visit his mother who'd become ill. But he hadn't returned when he was supposed to. Instead, Esme learned he'd taken up with a local girl. For months Esme was beside herself with jealousy and rage. But when he begged her to take him back, to be a family once more, she'd folded, sending him money to return to her. Then nothing. Not a word. One month, two went by, then a full year.

Two summers came and went before he called from Nogales. He'd just been released from a detention center, he told her, but she didn't know what to believe. All the days and months of uncertainty, the sheer loneliness . . . how could she be sure? Now he was in Ciudad Juarez breaking concrete, he said. Saving money. But how could she know for sure? It broke her heart.

Esme's head was bent against the driving wind, her boots crunching through ice and snow. Up ahead, the boys were no more than dark shapes moving in tandem. Black pants, up to the waist, black button-down. Hours of overtime, she'd saved and saved. Risked everything to fill out the financial aid forms, paid his remaining tuition, and still he refused. A job handed to him, but no, he refused her. Where did he go, what does he do, nineteen years old and she'd lost him.

She passed the recycling plant where men navigated their heavy carts up the ramp, and deep in the belly of the yard, a crane swung its claw, scooping scrap metal from a mountain of aluminum and steel. They didn't notice her, another bulky shape pressed against the night.

The boys were jaywalking across the wide expanse of Hamilton Avenue, forcing cars to slow, then brake completely, taillights splashing red across the slick, wet ground. And further still, beyond the avenue, Esme could see the white glare of stadium lights the NYPD

Command Unit had set up across from her building, a light so potent she could no longer open her shades.

At the corner, the boys were splitting up, Ski Cap and El Chino going in one direction and the boy with braces—the one who'd jeered, egging on Yesenia's beating, he was turning down another. Esme quickened her pace, hustling across the avenue.

It was a bleak, narrow block, absent of light, lined with shuttered warehouses, a methadone clinic, and a corner deli where a gold neon Modelo sign sputtered on and off. Esme was mid-block when the boy cut across the street and entered the store. She hurried forward. A figure stepped from the doorway. Esme froze, realizing it was Junior, his head down, looking at something on his phone. What was he doing over here, wandering around with his head down, his head always down?

She started forward, tugging the scarf away from her mouth. "¿Dónde estuviste?"

He looked up, startled to see her, and she watched him hide his surprise in a quick shrug. "Here, home."

"What do you mean, 'here, home?' I left you money for the subway."

"I got hungry."

"Hay comida en la casa, stupid. I lied for you, me entiendes? Al director. He was ready to hire you and you treat me like this?"

"I told you, ma, I ain't no janitor."

She smacked him hard against the ear, once, two times. "Oh, no? Qué entonces. Quién entonces." She could feel her palm throb as he glared at the ground, silent. She shoved her hands into her pockets, hunching against a sudden gust that cut and swirled the night air.

She shivered beneath her jacket, then turned toward the store. "You know who's in there?"

Junior glanced back, looking through the plexiglass.

"Remember when they beat up Yesenia? That boy inside, he was there, watching. Laughing."

The boy stood in the center aisle, holding a bag of chips. He was reaching into his pocket, his pants drooping still lower as he withdrew a dollar and dropped it onto the counter.

Esme paced in front of the door.

"What're you doing, Ma?"

"Following him," Esme said, "that's what I'm doing. Following him to where he live. His mother, she needs to know."

Junior shook his head. "But a girl beat up Yesenia. Everyone knows that."

"So. She can know what kind of son she has. Who watches and does nothing."

"Mira, here he come now." The boy stepped out the door into the cold, his breath clouding the air, and he nearly collided with Esme who'd made up her mind not to move.

The boy frowned, but she felt no sense of recognition, none at all. *Oh, you don't know me*, Esme thought. And as he went to step around her, she put her body in front of his. She heard Junior say, "No lo haga, ma." But she could feel the boy's energy change, his eyes turning to daggers as he slammed her with his shoulder. Then Junior was between them, saying, "back the fuck up, nigga," and she wanted to shove him too, shove both of them, *You touch me, cabrón, eh? You tough guy?* But as quickly as the boy rose to fight, he backed down, his eyes on something behind her as he hitched his pants and stepped away. She glanced at Junior, then turned to see what the boy was looking at. A police car crawling toward them, its front wheel sinking into a pothole, the car bouncing

on its shocks, then, without warning, a bright beam cut through the darkness and enclosed them in a cone of light.

Esme lifted her hand to shield her eyes. For a moment, she thought, *Yes, the police will deal with this boy, not me. It is my right.* She would take Junior and go. Yesenia was waiting. She reached for her son and felt him standing stiffly by her side.

Her whole body flashed with heat. The spotlight snuffed out, and she was momentarily blinded, white dots lifting and falling across the darkness. She heard the doors creak open, then close with a dull thud. She spun around, *where was the boy, that malcriado . . .* And she saw him there, just behind her, backlit in the frame of the deli window. But something was wrong, something in his posture—the slump of his hip, the way his hands were already raised, his fingers spread against the neon glow.

"Junior," she whispered.

"Junior," she said again more fiercely.

And her heart, oh, her heart. Because they were coming, stepping over the icy ridge of snow, saying, *IDs, IDs, IDs.*

