

## CHAPTER SEVEN



“Okay, Mami. I’ll meet with Mr. Zambrano. I don’t know if I’m up for doing an interview with him, but I’ll meet him and we can talk off the record. Then I’ll decide what to do from there.”

“Buena, hija. You want him to come here?”

I look down quickly at the worn rug, the dulling walls. “No, not here.”

“At the Wheelers?”

The last thing I want is to have Charlie Wheeler around or involved in any way. “No.”

“Mr. Wheeler said you could use his law office if you like. Maybe tonight, around seven. I can pick you up. We’ll have Sele watch the little ones while we’re out.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” I say, figuring most people who work at the law office will be gone for the day by then. I don’t want to do this, but it’ll be even harder if others are around, watching me, listening to me.

“I’ll tell them. Okay, hija?” She leans over to kiss my cheek before she goes to say goodbye to the others.

**M**ami and I leave Sele, Javi, and Ceci in front of a Disney Channel movie before heading out to Mr. Wheeler’s law office. Mami doesn’t say much to me on the way. I know what she wants me to do—give Mr. Zambrano the interview. She has reasons that are probably very meaningful to her, but she doesn’t share them with me. Mami has a way of silently telling us her wishes. She doesn’t have to say something aloud for us to know exactly what she expects of us.

The office parking lot is nearly empty. Mr. Wheeler’s silver Mercedes is in his marked spot, and Mami pulls our Toyota Tercel right next to it. His office is across from the children’s hospital, and the sound of an ambulance fills the air as we walk toward the glass entrance of the dark brown brick building.

Mr. Wheeler opens the door and leads us into the large waiting area. Red fabric-covered chairs are lined up against one wall. A dark-haired Latino man emerges from the conference room in the back. His smile widens as he walks toward us.

“Hi, Mrs. Vargas,” he says, shaking Mami’s hand. “And you must be Millie. Hi. I’m Oscar Zambrano.” He’s wearing a black

button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He reaches out his hand, and I shake it.

“Hi,” I say, knowing that the flatness of my voice will sound rude to Mami, but it’s the best I can do.

“You can go on into the conference room,” Mr. Wheeler says, pointing. There are windows along the entire back wall, with wood blinds pulled all the way up.

“Okay,” I say, eying the large windows, feeling like I’ll be on display.

“Want me to come with you?” Mami asks.

“No. It’s okay.”

“Bueno. I’ll wait out here with Mr. Wheeler.”

Inside the conference room, I sit down across from Mr. Zambrano in a black leather swivel chair. For just a moment, I think about what Javi would do in a chair like this. He’d swing it all the way around and probably roll it across the wood floor.

Mr. Zambrano’s black hair is gelled up a little and he’s wearing dark-rimmed glasses. I was expecting him to be older, but my guess is that he’s not quite thirty. He sits on the edge of his chair and leans in toward the long conference table, which is empty except for a closed laptop. “Thanks, Millie, for coming to meet me. I know the past few days have been a bit stressful for you.”

“You could say that.” I hope I don’t sound belligerent. I adjust my tone as best I can. “I’m still not really sure what you’re after, Mr. Zambrano.”

“Well, I talk to a lot of people your age. Last month, I went down to Mexico and met several boys who wish they were sitting right here where you are. Luis is sixteen; he left Guatemala and was working his way from southern Mexico to Mexico City. He and some boys he met along the way ride on top of

boxcars through the interior of Mexico just to make it to the border. One of the boys, Rafael, fell off a boxcar, and the train rolled over his legs, leaving him unable to walk. They don’t really know what happened to him after that. He had to stay behind, and they left to make their way here. I don’t know if they’ve made it. I don’t know if they’ll ever make it.”

I look away from him, down at the table, the space between us, and I stare at the dark wood, but I don’t say anything. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at another train car without thinking about this exact moment.

“Last summer, I went down to Potrillo, which is just north of the Rio Grande, to report on a case where people had crowded into a freight truck to cross the border. Twenty-six people died of heat exhaustion and asphyxiation. That’s the kind of risk every undocumented person faces in crossing the border. I want to interview you because, frankly, I think your parents are heroes. They endured so much to bring you here, to give you the kind of life that Luis and Rafael and those twenty-six people want or wanted.”

His words cut to the very center of me. My eyes sting. “Then why didn’t you ask to interview my mom? Why do you want to talk to *me*, specifically?”

“I actually did talk to your mother for a few hours yesterday, and she told me her story. I don’t know if you understand, I don’t think *I’ll* ever understand the extent of her sacrifice for you, for your siblings. The difficulty of getting here, the time they spent living in fear while their asylum case was under review, the very high chance that they would be denied asylum and sent back to Guatemala—the uncertainty they lived with right up until the day they finally received their green cards. They gave you an incredible gift. A gift that people are dying

for. And I'm not saying these things to make you feel guilty or make you cry."

His last sentence provokes increased crying, and I wipe my nose with my sleeve. Mr. Zambrano stands up and brings over a box of tissues. I grab one and wipe my nose and eyes simultaneously.

"I cry about this too, because it's a very emotional issue."

I wish he would stop. I wish I could get up and leave because other than making me cry like a baby, I still don't understand why I am here, what he wants from me.

He's quiet for a moment, magnifying the sounds of the sobs that keep escaping me. I look out of the large window separating the conference room from the waiting room. Mami and Mr. Wheeler are sitting in two chairs across from each other. Mr. Wheeler is saying something to Mami, but her eyes are on me. She is watching me, and I feel fresh shame for crying. Whatever hardship she's had, whatever fears Mr. Zambrano has been talking about, she is stronger than tears, and I know she expects that of me too.

She smiles at me, encouraging me. I manage to smile back and turn to Mr. Zambrano.

"Millie, the reason I wanted to meet you, interview you, is because you've taken the opportunity your parents gave you and done so much. Your mother told me you've never brought home a B on a report card. All As. Do you have any idea how proud she is of you?"

"It's what I'm supposed to do."

"That's what I want to show the world, Millie. That there are millions of people coming to this country for the same damn reason the Pilgrims came here—to make a better life for their families. Those are the kinds of stories we need to tell if we're

going to combat the fear, misinformation, and downright racist attitudes about people like you and your family." He pauses. "I feel like I'm talking too much. I'm sorry."

"I understand what you're saying. But, again, why me?"

"Why not you, Millie?"

"Because I'm sure you've met a lot of other people." Anyone, anyone but me, I want to say.

Mr. Zambrano leans back in his chair, placing both arms on the armrests. "Well, there's Gabriel from Brownsville, Texas, who's the quarterback of his football team. He's shattered every football record at his high school. I've seen him play—he could be in the NFL one day. I'd love to do a story on him, but the problem is that he's undocumented; his family is really scared of being deported. Then there's Manuel, who just served a two-year mission for his church in Laredo, but can't get a job here because he has no papers. And Susana, who was going to be the valedictorian for her high school, but had to move because her family heard they were going to get picked up by ICE. So right now she's not even going to school."

I crumple the tissue into a ball, squeezing it in my fist to make it as compact as possible. "And I'm a citizen, so I'm at less risk than they are."

"That's right."

"I understand that. But I'm just not sure. I don't really want people to know everything about me."

"I know, Millie. And I respect that. Really, I do." He leans back in and spreads his hands on the table between us. "But I want to make things better for Gabriel and Manuel and Susana. And the only way to do that is to change public opinion, and especially the opinions of legislators, about undocumented immigrants. I want to show them you, Millie."

You are the face of the young immigrants who will make this country even better.”

I cross my arms in front of me and stare down at the table. “Mr. Zambrano, I want to help, but . . .”

“What about this: We do the interview right now, and afterward you tell me how you feel. If you want me to go ahead and print it, I will. If you don’t feel good about it and you want me to throw it out, I will.”

I wipe my nose and look through the window again. Mami, tired after a long day of cleaning the Wheelers’ house and this office, taking care of Caroline, making dinner for the Wheelers, is sitting on the red fabric chair waiting for me. Why? Because it’s important to her. What I am doing in here, talking to Mr. Zambrano, is important to her.

I nod and whisper, “Okay.”

“Okay, well. I’m going to tape our conversation, if that’s all right, because I want to make sure I quote you right.” He opens the laptop on the conference table and shows me how he’ll record me. “So, Millie. Can we start with you just telling me a little bit about yourself?”

“Okay. I’m eighteen years old. I have a younger brother, Javier, and two younger sisters, Selena and Cecilia. I’m a senior in high school.”

“Your mother tells me you love the ocean.”

I feel myself relax for the first time since I walked into the conference room. “Yeah, I do.”

“Tell me about that.”

I resist the temptation to look away from him and stare at the conference table. “When I’m in the water, I just feel like I belong. Like I could float over the waves forever. I love the feel of wet sand between my toes, seaweed rubbing against my

ankles, the smell of the ocean. I love how you can look out at the ocean and feel like it never ends, like it just goes on forever. And I love that it’s full of so many species, all so different, but also all dependent on each other. That’s why I want to study marine biology.”

“And I know you will. Your mother says that she couldn’t ask for a better daughter. That she doesn’t know how she would manage without you, without your help.”

The tears I had hoped were gone threaten to re-emerge, but I squash them back.

“Why are you such a good daughter?” he asks.

The question catches me off guard, but I know the answer right away. “Because she works so hard, and she does it for us. She never does anything for herself. I can’t disappoint her because if I do, then what was all her hard work for?”

“Where do you hope your family will be in ten years?”

“I’ll be done with school, maybe have a job here at the university or something. Mami will be retired and I’ll help her pay for everything. Selena will be applying for graduate programs, Javi will be in college, and Ceci will be about to graduate high school.”

“I believe all of those things will happen.” He pauses and meets my eyes. “Thanks, Millie for seeing me. You’re what keeps me wanting to do this job. Just like you love learning about the ocean and ocean animals, I love learning about people and their immigration stories.”

I’m not sure how I feel about that analogy, but I nod to be polite. I don’t say anything because I know what he’s about to ask me—if he can write the story. The question has been hanging in the air between us, but I’m still not sure of my answer.

“I’m scheduled to appear on *Sebastian Smith: In Perspective*

next week,” he says. “I’d love to talk about you and share some of this interview during my segment.”

I swallow hard. Sebastian Smith hosts a long-running TV program that airs on channels all over Texas.

I look through the window at Mami again. She’s leaning her head back against the wall, her eyes are closed, and her hands are clasped together against her stomach. Mr. Wheeler is on his phone, pacing the floor in front of her.

“And, you’ll want to use my name?”

“Yes. Using your name gives validity to my story, gives it more meaning, makes it seem more real. I’d also like to take a few pictures. Get a short video of you talking about the ocean. There’s just something that lights up in your eyes when you talk about it.”

I drop my gaze to the table. “Okay,” I say, hating every suggestion he just made.

From under the table, he pulls out a black camera bag. He takes a few candid shots of me sitting at the conference table. Next, he switches the camera to video.

“Tell me about the first time you knew you belonged near the ocean.”

I force my eyes off the wood floor and try to look toward the camera. “I was five, probably, the first time my parents took me to the beach. I just walked straight to the water in my sundress, not stopping even to take off my flip-flops. I just knew, right away, that it’s where I wanted to be.”

After I respond to a few more prompts from him, he shuts off the camera. “Thanks so much for coming to see me, Millie. Today’s interview has been something special, and I can’t wait to share it with the world. I’ll be on Sebastian Smith’s show next Thursday at eight . . .”

He keeps talking, but I have trouble absorbing anything he’s saying. This all seems so unreal. We walk out into the lobby, where Mr. Wheeler is still on the phone and Mami is just opening her eyes. She stands up as we approach her.

“Mrs. Vargas, thanks for bringing Millie to see me. She’s amazing, just like you said, and pretty soon everyone’s going to know it.”

Mami smiles more widely than I’ve ever seen, and for the first time tonight, I am glad I came to talk to Mr. Zambrano. Mami’s satisfaction is what will get me through the news story that will depict me as an undocumented immigrant—something I had hoped to keep secret all my life.