

I AM NOT
ALONE

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CHAPTER I

Time to be free!

Alberto opened his eyes when he heard the voice. He was in bed, the gray light of dawn outside his window. There was no one else in his room.

It was the same voice he had heard a dozen or so times the past month. A man's voice. Not angry. Not loud. Not like when Wayne yelled at him to do something. The voice was insistent, nagging, high-pitched sometimes. Alberto didn't fear what it said or how it sounded as much as the fact that it was there. So real. There was sweat on his temples, on his legs.

The first time Alberto heard the voice he was riding the subway. The voice whispered, *I got you*. Alberto thought there was someone behind him, but there was no one close to him. Sometimes the voice came when he was working and sometimes when he was holding baby Chato. Now here it was again, telling him it was time to be free, whatever that meant. A dream? Lupe had once told him that one day he would even dream in English. Had the six months of evening classes at Brooklyn College finally paid off? But if the voice was a dream, even if it was in English, why was he trembling? The voices in dreams are invisible. This voice shone like a neon light.

Alberto turned on the lamp next to his bed and leaned onto the window ledge. The cold air felt good. All this week he had slept with the window open. The first time he was able to do that since he and his sister Lupe moved into the apartment six months ago in early November right after baby Chato was born. Already there was movement on the streets. Officer Ramos, the policeman who lived in apartment 3D, was walking his dog. A man stepped out of a white van with a stack of newspapers. Alberto suddenly remembered that it was Sunday. He did not work Sundays. Was that what the

voice meant? Maybe today he would be free. He could walk to Coney Island if he wanted to. Or maybe go back to the pottery studio and glaze the bowl he had made.

Alberto was startled by another sound, this time coming from Lupe's room. It was a man snoring. Wayne must have come in after Alberto fell asleep. That was not good. The days when Wayne visited Lupe were hard days. There would be fighting. Lupe wanted Wayne to marry her, to be a full-time husband to her and a full-time father to baby Chato. To be a parent was more than providing an apartment and an allowance for food and diapers and doctors. Wayne disagreed. He thought Lupe didn't know how good she had it—a luxury apartment in Flatbush, no financial worries. “I even employ that dumbass brother of yours.”

The walls in the apartment were thin. Alberto heard things that were not pleasant. He heard Lupe argue with Wayne about the wages that Wayne paid Alberto. Alberto got seven dollars an hour while Lucas and Jimbo got fifteen. And Alberto was careful when he worked. The tenants praised Alberto's work and sometimes complained about the sloppy work of Lucas and Jimbo.

“You need to pay him what you pay others,” Lupe told him.

“Does he pay *me* rent for living here? Does he pay *me* for his food? Room and board, that’s why he gets paid less.”

There were times when the urge to hit Wayne was so powerful Alberto had to sit on his hands or breathe twenty times or walk around the block. He was bigger and stronger than Wayne. He could pick him up and throw him out the window. Alberto wanted Lupe to leave Wayne. They would find a way to make it on their own. But Lupe needed Wayne. She believed that without Wayne, she would relapse into addiction. And Alberto needed Wayne as well. He gave Alberto work and did not report him to immigration. Half of what Alberto earned he sent to Mexico. His mother, his grandmother, and his two little sisters, Mercedes and Chela, they all lived with the money he sent.

Was it true that he was a dumbass like Wayne said? Three years ago, when they first came to the United States, Lupe tried to enroll him in a public school. Alberto was fifteen. A lady at the school gave him a test, asked him questions in Spanish that made him dizzy. Afterward, the woman told Lupe that Alberto would need to be placed in a special class.

“What is *special?*” he asked Lupe on the way home.

“You would be with other kids that have a hard time learning.”

He thought for a while about Lupe’s words. Then he said, “I’ll find a way to learn English, but I’m not going to a special class. I don’t belong in school. Mamá and Papá were okay with that.” The director of his school in Ticul had told his mother and father that Alberto had to repeat fourth grade because he was so far behind the other students. That’s when Alberto convinced his father to let him work as an apprentice potter.

“I know, I know. But it’s different here. Without school you won’t get anywhere. You won’t be able to get a good job.”

“I will learn on my own.”

And he had. At least, he was trying. He got a library card and took books out. One at a time. Children’s books at first, but the book he was reading now was about Japanese pottery. He was also slowly making his way, a page or two a night, through the high school equivalency workbooks that Lupe got for him. It would take another five years at the rate he was going before he could earn a high school certificate, assuming he could pass all the tests. His mind worked slow, he knew that, but slow was not the same as dumbass.

Baby Chato began to cry. Alberto opened the chest of drawers in his room and took out blue jeans and a T-shirt. He sat on his bed and waited to hear Lupe open the door to her bedroom. He would tell her that she could go back to sleep while he took care of the baby.

Get out of here!

He turned around to see if anyone was behind him, but he already knew there wouldn't be. The voice was inside and outside him all at once. It was like when he put a seashell against his ear. He could hear the sea and the sea was in the shell and in him. He felt cold and he shivered. He took a deep breath. He thought about hiding, but where could he go? He closed his eyes. If the voice had more to say, then let it say it. His father taught him to stand his ground when it came to fear. Alberto sat down on the edge of the bed. He placed his hands palms down on his thighs like someone who had been told to pay attention. Maybe a listening posture would make it easier for the voice to return, say what it had to say, then go away for good.

"Aquí estoy," he said. He crossed his arms to keep them from shaking.

After a while, he heard the microwave in the kitchen. Lupe was heating baby Chato's formula. There was a

spiderweb in the corner of his room. He began to count the separate strands of filament: forty-five. Still no voice.

He decided to speak to it. Maybe the voice was like a bully. If you faced him, challenged him, he would let you be.

“Why get out of here?” he asked, in English.

He waited, both hoping and not hoping that there would be an answer. He knew how to wait. When he put a bowl inside the giant kiln that Don Andrés kept behind the pottery shop, waiting was all he could do. For every piece of ceramic, the wait was different. The good potter knew how to wait.

He heard a dog bark outside and then he heard Wayne curse. There was the sound of a toilet flushing and then of Lupe and Wayne speaking to each other. He gave the voice a few more moments to return and say whatever it needed to say and when nothing happened, he put his sneakers on and stepped out of his room.

Wayne was sitting at the kitchen table listening to voice mails on his cell phone. He had on athletic shorts and a New York Giants T-shirt. Lupe was pouring coffee into Wayne’s mug with one hand and holding baby Chato on her hip.

“This damn woman is harassing me!” Wayne shouted

to no one or to everyone. Then, to Alberto: "I want you to go and clean her windows. She claims there are specks of paint all over the glass. I'm texting you her address. I told her you'd be there sometime this morning."

Alberto took baby Chato from Lupe's arms. Lupe gave Wayne the mug of coffee and then sat beside him. She waited for him to grab the mug, then said, "Wayne, it's Sunday." Wayne's full name was John Francis Wayne, but everyone called him Wayne.

"It's an hour's work tops and then he can go do whatever he wants! I gotta get this woman off my back!"

Tell him to go to hell!

Alberto was in the act of grabbing baby Chato's bottle when he heard the voice again. He hugged baby Chato closer to him. Lupe started to argue with Wayne. Baby Chato began to cry and for a moment Alberto thought that the baby had also heard the voice. He sat on the rocking chair in the living room and gave baby Chato his formula. For the first time since he'd heard the voice, it was clear to Alberto that it was not going to go away.

"Are you all right, hermanito?" Lupe came and sat across from him. Baby Chato was asleep again, his lips still clinging to the nipple of the bottle. "You look different."

“Different?” He felt different. The world didn’t seem as solid as before. “How different?”

“You’re pale, for one thing. It’s like something’s dragging you down.”

Wayne had gone back to the bedroom. He could hear him shouting on the phone. Alberto noticed a trace of white powder on the coffee table.

“You can’t do that anymore,” Alberto said sternly.

“It was only a little coca. A tiny, tiny bit.” Lupe made a sign with her thumb and index finger. “It keeps me from wanting more. Don’t worry, hermanito.”

Alberto reached out and checked Lupe’s left arm. There were no new needle marks, but there was a yellow-and-purple bruise. “He hurt you again.”

Lupe covered her arm with the sleeve of her bathrobe. Instead of responding to his comment, Lupe said, “I’m serious about you not being yourself. I don’t know how long it’s been since you went to the pottery studio or walked to Coney Island. When did you last go bowling with Jimbo? You don’t sleep. I can hear you in your room crying or laughing, I can’t tell which.”

“I’m all right. Tired.” Alberto rocked back and forth, looked down at baby Chato.

Lupe continued, lowering her voice. “I was doing

laundry yesterday and when I didn't see any of your laundry in the hamper, I went into your room and there was all your dirty laundry in the bottom of your closet. Your bed was unmade. There was an old, smelly banana peel on your desk!"

Alberto gave Lupe a questioning look.

"You have to admit, that's not you. You been cleaning up after yourself since you started to walk."

Alberto could not remember seeing a banana peel or even taking a banana to his room. And since when had he stopped making his bed as soon as he got up? The week before he had painted a whole wall, the last one to be painted in a room, the wrong shade of blue. Where was his mind during the two hours that it took him to paint the wall? It was as if there were clouds of forgetfulness in his mind. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not telling you this to give you a hard time. I'm telling you this because I want you to start caring about yourself more. I want you to put your room in order and then go to the pottery studio. I called them yesterday and paid for another month."

"That's so expensive. We need the money to send home."

“A few hours a week of studio time doesn’t take away from what we send home.”

“But . . .”

“After you finish the work Wayne asked you to do, go and make something beautiful like you used to do back home. Don’t come back here.”

Yeah! Don't come back!

“Stop!”

Alberto looked up and saw the surprised look on Lupe’s face. How could he tell her that he wasn’t talking to her without worrying her even more? He was embarrassed. And now Lupe had a worried look on her face. She was extending her arms, asking for baby Chato. Maybe she was afraid that he would hurt the baby. He removed the bottle from Chatito’s mouth and handed the baby to Lupe. Alberto rubbed his right temple.

“And that’s another thing. You’ve started talking to yourself.”

“I’m practicing my English,” Alberto responded.

“You do too much. All you do is work and study . . . and take care of Chatito. Go have some fun today. Go to a coffee shop and read your book. Go play soccer at the school. Then go see that lady with the windows. We’ll

be okay. Wayne promised to take us to Long Island. He has a house he wants to show me. Maybe . . .”

Lupe’s hope for Wayne to do what was right, to be a good man, filled Alberto with sadness. From what he had seen, Wayne did not have it in him to be good. Alberto stood up quickly because he was afraid the sadness would bring back the voice. Lupe stood as well. They both turned toward the bedroom where Wayne was yelling on the phone.

“He’s not good for you,” Alberto said.

“I know, I know. I’m working on something. I got a plan. You know me. I always have a plan. But right now, he’s all I got. All we got. Go now. I don’t want you to be here when he comes out. He’ll give you more work.”

“No more coca, all right?” Alberto glared at Lupe. “Think of Chato.”

“Okay, okay. Go. Please.”

Alberto walked quickly to his room and grabbed the red duffel bag where he kept the materials he used for work: spatulas, rags, a can of thinner, window putty, a couple of paintbrushes, tape, a small roller, screwdriver, pliers. He took the white painter’s overalls from the bottom of the closet and stuffed them in the bag. He looked

around the room. On top of the dresser was a picture of his family taken at a Mérida carnival a week before his father died. His father had his arms around his mother and his sister Mercedes. Alberto's youngest sister, Chela, was standing next to a five-foot stuffed animal in the shape of a jaguar that Alberto had won for her. Lupe was not in the picture. Lupe was nineteen at the time and already struggling with addiction. She had managed to stop when she got pregnant, but the white powder on the table was a sign that she was opening the door to her hunger once again.

She's a maggot.

Alberto tried to block out the voice by concentrating on the image of his father in the picture. His father was trying to smile, but Alberto could see the look of worry and pain in his eyes. Was he thinking about Lupe? Or maybe his father somehow knew that he'd be dead the following week.

The five books he needed to prepare for the high school equivalency test were scattered on the floor next to his desk. One book for each of the subjects he needed to learn: reading, writing, social studies, science, and mathematics. On his nightstand there was the book

on Japanese pottery. This little room and Lupe and Chato were all he had in this country. And they needed him. How could he not come back?

“It’s what I got,” he said out loud, hoping that the voice would hear him.