

A TORTURED SCREAM OF AGONY RIPPED OUT OF LUANA, BUT SHE QUICKLY caught it and slammed it back into her mouth. Her contractions had not long started, but she'd spent long enough containing the pain. That first scream felt sensational, but she knew it had to be the last; she couldn't afford to blow her cover.

The moon was rendered a smokey smear behind heavy, black clouds that leaned heavily on the ocean. Luana sat on the edge of a pitch-black, inflatable dinghy, anchored only a few metres from the rocky shore. Every inch of the boat had recently been spray-painted matte black to blend into the night, and the lingering fumes from the paint pushed Luana to gag—as well as the constant rocking of the dinghy, and the nauseating misery caused by her contractions.

By her feet were two pairs of men's size eleven boots, a swollen plastic bag tied off at the top, a small suitcase, a boxed flare gun, a flashlight, and a large plastic tub filled with bottles of water and packs of food.

Thunder finally rumbled over the ocean, and lightning crackled. For a split second, the flashing clouds looked like gigantic plumes of smoke from a city on fire. The water grew choppy, and Luana bobbed with the rippling current.

Between waves of intense writhing and gasps of air, she watched the black forest line, waiting, until another pang pierced her lower back for nearly a minute. Luana was sure it came sooner than the one before, but she was in no position to keep count.

In the ever-shrinking window of time before her next round of abdominal torture, she quickly slipped out her only cigarette and her lighter and latched on to it with her lips. The lighter sparked and the flame lingered before the exposed tobacco. She knew she shouldn't, but one puff would surely ease *something*.

Erratic footsteps quickly crunched out of the trees and onto the pebbles toward the shore. Luana pocketed the cigarette and lighter and pulled out a switchblade from her left boot in one swift motion. The four-inch blade flicked open as she stood semi-hunched, staring blindly into the dark. Heavy breaths pumped out of the fast-approaching runner when

Luana felt a sudden release of pressure within her. Amniotic fluid poured out between her thighs and splashed down at her boots.

‘*¡Put a madre!*’

‘Luana?’ called a deep voice.

‘Alonzo?’ she grunted, with eyelids squeezed shut and teeth bared. ‘Over here—’

Lightning sparked again and Alonzo caught a glimpse of the boat in the flash. The wind picked up as he broke into the water and splashed over to the dinghy.

‘*¡Vamos!*’ he shouted. ‘Drive!’

Luana opened her eyes to see the slick black mass of Alonzo pulling himself aboard. She looked back over to the trees, eyes frantically searching for any opening between them. ‘*¿Dónde está José?*’

‘Let’s go!’ he blasted, hoisting up the small anchor. ‘Come on!’

‘Where’s—*Hnnng*—my brother!?’ A wrench to her abdomen broke her sentence in two, catching Alonzo’s attention.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ he asked. It was more of an accusation than a question of concern.

Luana picked up the rolling flashlight, switched it on, and beamed it straight at Alonzo’s face. Drenched with sweat, bleeding cuts and ripening bruises, Alonzo quickly shielded his eyes.

‘Are you crazy? Turn it off!’

Instead, Luana scanned down Alonzo’s reposed frame to see his other hand applying pressure to the shredded, bloody mess on his right side. Shallow breaths escaped him as the trembling light drifted farther down his once-sky-blue uniform, following the trail of blood down his leg, staining the bright yellow printed text on his thigh stating *CDCR PRISONER*.

‘What happened to you?’ Luana asked.

‘Barbed wire got me good—’

‘Where is José?’ she interrupted.

‘. . . He didn’t—I couldn’t—’ Alonzo stuttered.

‘*What?*’ shouted Luana over the barking dogs fast approaching.

‘He’s not coming!’ Alonzo bolted, clutching his side tighter. ‘We have

to go!’

Luana looked back to the shore where four hollering German Shepherds burst out from the trees and bounded onto the rocks. She tossed the flashlight over to Alonzo and turned back to the engine’s cowl, yanking the cord to start it up. Nothing happened.

‘What’s going on!?’

‘*No funciona—*’

‘It’s gotta be working! It’s brand new! My cousin said he got a *brand new* one!’

Luana held her breath in anticipation of the next contraction and pulled again. Still nothing. Alonzo leaned forward with a strained grunt and snatched the red, coiled kill cord from Luana’s wrist. Before she could argue, he’d already clipped it onto the safety switch and slumped back to the bow panting laboriously.

He clicked off the flashlight and let it dangle by his side. ‘Try now,’ he groaned.

Luana grabbed the plastic handle and yanked the cord once more. The engine pattered into action just as she cried out from another wave of hellish contractions, and they were off.

As the boat jounced on every ripple, Luana’s teeth gritted into chalk. ‘*Joder! ¡Este bebé va a matarme!*’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ Alonzo asked, biting into the tied plastic bag and tearing it open. His new outfit fell to his feet as Luana roared in response—and then it clicked. ‘You’re having the baby *now!*?’

Thunder boomed above, and the wind pushed back against them, but the dinghy’s powerful engine fought back. Luana steered as best she could, choking the throttle with a vice-like grip, heaving against the stiff current furiously attempting to pull them off course. The ocean surged, and the white-capped wavelets grew more vicious, bruising the hull and blunting the blades of the propeller beneath the surface. But they quickly made some distance from the barking dogs and erratic flashlights back ashore.

Alonzo clicked on the flashlight and shone it at Luana. She was keeled over herself at the stern, straining to see beyond her heavily-furrowed

brow, but clasped onto the safety ropes along the edge. Her thick, black hair whipped her face like palm leaves in a hurricane, and her cheeks were now ruddy and clammy.

‘. . . You *have* to hold it—’ Alonzo started.

‘Don’t you *dare* tell me what I have to do!’ Luana growled. ‘I’ve done *enough* for you—*Hnnng!*’ the cramps in her lower back charged to the front of her abdomen.

‘You said the doctor told you there was still time—’

‘Well, your daughter wants out now!’ Alonzo pulled off his bloodied shirt with the theatrics of an unrelenting B-movie action hero and then threw it overboard. ‘What’re you doing? It’s covered in blood!’

‘Exactly,’ Alonzo replied, looking at her like she was crazy. ‘I’m getting rid of it.’

‘*Tiburones*, Alonzo! They smell blood in water!’

‘¡*Estúpida!*’ he said. ‘There ain’t no sharks in December—’

The sky exploded with light and noise, and bullets of rain shot down upon them.

‘We have to stop!’ said Luana, through bared teeth.

‘No!’

‘I’m begging you!’

‘Where would we stop? Look around!’

Alonzo tied the laces on his new boots. Luana knew there was no going back, but she spotted the black silhouette of a small island ahead of them.

‘There?’ she pointed. ‘Can’t we stop there?’

‘*Perra, ¿estás loca?* That’s Alcatraz! We keep going!’

‘I can’t hold this baby ‘til *México!*’

‘Just a little bit longer. Come on,’ Alonzo begged. ‘*Mira eso!* There’s the Golden Gate Bridge ahead!’

Luana replied with an involuntary bellow that grew louder like a passing hurricane.

Within minutes, they’d crossed beneath the bridge, and finally, they were out at sea. The moon was hidden behind ashy clouds that tainted the

heavens, and through the sheets of rain surrounding them, it was hardly discernible where the sea and sky met. They were drenched to their bones —seawater splashed aboard as the waves grew more ferocious, bucking them in all directions, but the engine hastened, taking them deeper into the storm. Luana inhaled short, sharp breaths, ignoring her frozen knuckles. Alonzo kept his eyes locked onto the distance as if he could already see their destination on the horizon.

*Thanks for reading.*

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook stores...*

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