



**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**

**AN
AMERICAN
IMMIGRANT**

a novel
JOHANNA

ROJAS VANN

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WATERBROOK

AN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT

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*To my mother.
Thank you for your sacrifice.
My life is sweeter because of it.*

PROLOGUE

JUNE 2009
CALI, COLOMBIA

ANITA

She clutched the leather duffel bag on her lap.

The flight attendant walked by and asked if she could store the bag for Anita in the overhead compartment. Anita shook her head. She wanted to make sure the contents inside didn't get flattened or crushed on the long flight home.

From the exterior slip pocket, she pulled out a journal and brushed the front cover with her hand. Spreading it open over the creases of the bag, Anita continued transferring memories from her head onto the page. Since arriving at the airport early that morning, she'd hardly let her pen rest.

She made this trip yearly, but it was the first time she'd had to travel with a few treasured possessions to store in her mother's home. With the divorce, she'd decided life in a new state would be the fresh start she and her three kids needed. But their new apartment lacked the space to store anything beyond necessities. Her mother's home was the only place she felt her things would be safe.

When she finally stepped foot through her mother's door after the long journey, she took a deep breath. Since moving to America, returning to her childhood home had become the

breath of fresh air she waited for each year.

Alba peeked her head into the front hallway, and when she saw her daughter standing beneath her doorway, luggage in tow, she scrambled toward her with arms wide open.

“*Hola, mi amor,*” Alba whispered, arms around her neck.

Anita’s shoulders relaxed beneath her mother’s embrace.

Alba stepped back and looked her daughter up and down. “You look skinny. Come, let’s eat. I have plenty.”

“Of course you do.” Anita smiled and followed her mother into the kitchen, where she was met with the familiar aroma of strong coffee and sweet bread.

“I wish you would have brought the kids with you. They’re getting so big. I’m afraid I won’t recognize them the next time I see them,” Alba said.

“If only I could convince them. They’re not interested in coming here, *Mamá*. I asked if they’d like to come, but every one of them had something they just couldn’t miss,” Anita said, using air quotes. “Some camp, some birthday outing for a friend . . . who knows. Their dad is staying with them while I’m here.”

Alba shrugged. “Well, hopefully the next time you come, they’ll want to tag along. Or you could just tell them they *have* to come with you.”

Anita shook her head. “I don’t know, *Mamá*. I don’t want to force them to come. I want them to *want* to come here. It’s not you, *Mamá*. They miss you, of course. But it’s like they can’t stand the idea of leaving the States. They think that’s all there is to see in the world.” She took a sip of coffee and stared into the mug. “I hope I didn’t make a mistake raising them there.”

Alba reached out her hand and grabbed Anita’s wrist, gently massaging it.

“I just want them to be proud of who we are,” Anita said,

looking into her mother's eyes.

"They're still so young. Don't worry about all that. Just keep speaking to them in Spanish and talking about our culture. They don't have to grow up in this country to learn those things and be proud Colombians."

"But what if that's not enough? They stumble on their words when they speak Spanish, and so they revert to English. They're more comfortable in English. I try to force them to speak to me in Spanish, but it just aggravates them. Alex doesn't even know what these are," Anita said, raising a *pandebono* from her plate. "I'm not doing enough, *Mamá*. I'm failing them."

"*Todo en su tiempo, mi amor*. Everything in its time, my love. You're not failing. You're a wonderful mother. Have faith and do your best. There's not much else you can do." Alba dusted her hands on her apron and stood. "Now finish up so you can get some rest."

When the round wooden table in her mother's dining room was cleared, Anita gathered her belongings from the front of the house and took them to the very back, where her old bedroom was. Alba hadn't changed a single thing since her daughters left.

She dropped onto the bed she once shared with her two sisters. One look around brought back fond memories of staying up late braiding one another's hair and gossiping about the boys in school. She let out a deep sigh. Never once did she imagine the three of them would be scattered around the Northeast in America, raising their kids hours apart from one another.

She lifted the leather tote from the ground, placed it on her lap, and peeked inside.

I won't leave you here forever. Just until I can afford to get us a bigger place.

She walked to the closet and wiped the dust from the shelf inside with the washcloth her mother had left on her bed. Then

she closed the leather bag with the gold-plated clasp and stuffed it as far back on the shelf as she could, hoping it would be safely hidden there.

Back on her bed, scooted against the headboard, she opened the journal she'd been writing in at the airport, her pen still stuffed inside. It'd been years since she'd written, but the journal still had a few empty pages to fill. There was a large gap of time and events missing from this journal, but perhaps with a little more dedication, she could fill in those holes with all that had happened since the day she left this home.

And what better place to document those memories than where it all began.

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

2018
MIAMI

MELANIE

“**M**mm, it’s still warm,” Melanie whispered as she brushed a copy of the *Miami Herald* across her cheek.

“What are you doing?”

She jumped and turned around to find Rick, the overnight security guard, sitting up from behind the receptionist’s desk.

“Rick! You scared me. What are you doing kicked back on Amanda’s desk?” Melanie folded the newspaper and tucked it underneath her arm. “She’ll be in any minute and I do not want to know what she’d do to you if she saw your grungy boots near her Chinese money plant.”

Rick kicked his feet off the desk and meandered across the lobby to a less comfortable post. “Ah, she doesn’t scare me. So, do you always sniff newspapers when you think no one’s looking?”

“Do you always take naps at Amanda’s desk when you’re on the clock?”

“Touché.”

“I won’t tell Amanda what I witnessed if we never speak of this again,” Melanie said with a wink. She reached for her badge, which she kept attached to the belt loop of her pants at all times.

The day HR handed her this badge was the day she became the first to arrive and the last to leave the newsroom each day. It was her first year on the job, and she had a lot to prove. This year especially would be crucial to her future success—there’s no way she’d allow another rookie reporter to outperform her.

“Deal.”

When she opened the door, a gust of air from the frigid newsroom tousled her cola-colored pin-straight hair—the perfect accessory for a confident strut to her desk.

Could this morning get any better?

She wore her favorite pair of black twill pants—the ones she’d bought at the J. Crew Factory the day she signed her offer letter—and had even splurged on a vanilla latte from Starbucks. The occasion warranted a fancy coffee drink, despite her having a slim thirty-five dollars in her bank account.

It didn’t matter. Not when this was the morning she’d been waiting for. All her hard work had paid off, and now it was time for the best part: to see her byline closer to the front page of the *Herald*. Her articles—usually local stories no one else wanted to cover—were often published somewhere between pages ten and fourteen. But not today. She’d overheard the page editors discussing placing her article closer to the front because of the big interview she’d landed with the attorney general.

When Melanie reached her desk, she laid out the crisp newspaper on top. She smoothed out the front and slowly flipped through the various pages. Every part of her wanted to find her name as quickly as possible, but she knew better than to turn the pages with too much force.

Melanie loved the way a newspaper felt in her hands. The gentle weight of it. The crinkling sound that reminded her to be careful. The way it bent to the rhythm of her fingers. Opening a fresh copy each morning was like a meditative practice that

never got old.

Only, suddenly, she felt pulled away from this calming ritual. She'd come to the middle of the newspaper and hadn't found her article.

She furrowed her eyebrows and tilted her head.

Maybe it's a little deeper in.

She turned a few more pages.

After another skim, she still came up empty.

Maybe I missed it. I must be so excited I'm missing it right before my eyes.

Okay . . . let's start again from the beginning.

When, again, she didn't see her story, she took a deep breath and decided to look through the entire paper once more.

Nothing. No headline. No byline. No story.

Her heart rate sped up and her cheeks became hot to the touch. She reached for her phone underneath the newspaper, launched her browser, and went to the paper's website to find out if the digital version of her article was missing too.

No trace of it online either.

Her arms stiffened and her hand formed a fist. To protect the paper, she had to step away for a moment or she might crumple it in her hands and toss it in the trash. She backed away from her desk and marched toward the bathroom while her mind raced with all the possible reasons her article could be missing from both print and online.

In the privacy of a stall, she retraced her steps in her mind.

Did I forget to give Ignacio the updated version? No. Can't be. I remember putting the hard copy on his desk two hours before the deadline.

Ignacio—her boss and the editor in chief—was old-school and still demanded hard copies on his desk to review each day. It was one of many things Melanie admired about him. While

newspapers everywhere were hyperfocused on meeting the demands of a “new kind of reader”—not to mention downsizing because newspapers just didn’t make the kind of money they used to—Ignacio fought to keep at least a few traditions alive.

She paced in a circle inside the handicap bathroom stall.

Maybe he forgot to look at it. Or maybe it got lost. . . . He has so many stacks of paper on his desk.

Or maybe my revision wasn’t good enough. No, no, no. That’s impossible. I checked everything off the list.

Stop jumping to the worst-case scenario, Melanie. You always do this and everything turns out to be fine.

There’s a perfectly logical explanation. There has to be.

I bet he pushed the pub date to tomorrow or another day this week. A more time-sensitive story probably took precedence. Yep, that’s it.

But there hadn’t been any breaking news overnight, and she didn’t notice anything in the paper that hadn’t been discussed in last week’s editorial meeting. So, what could it be?

There must be something else she missed.

Fear set in. Even as a full-time reporter, she didn’t always get her own byline. Most days, she assisted other reporters on their stories, which meant she had to share a byline. What could this mean about her performance? Her future at the paper?

She walked back to her desk, closed the newspaper, and stuffed it into the top drawer of the file cabinet by her chair. Then she sat down, bowed her head, and prayed there was a simple, logical reason why her article hadn’t been published. And, more importantly, that her job was safe. That all the planning and preparation she’d done had not been in vain. That her hard work would pay off and keep her from a life of hardship and scarcity like the one she’d grown up in.

When she finished her prayer, she looked up and spotted Genesis walking over.

“Finally,” Melanie said aloud.

Genesis was tall and slender with shiny blond hair and the biggest, brightest blue eyes she’d ever seen. Her hair was so blond and her eyes so blue that people often found it hard to believe she was 100 percent *Cubana*. Even Melanie had the same doubt when she first met her. But all it took was breaking out her Cuban slang for Genesis to set them straight. There was no denying authentic *Cubanismo* when you heard it in Miami.

“Good morning! How’s it going?” Genesis pulled out her office chair, which was tucked under the nook of her desk.

“Genesis, my article isn’t in the paper.” No time for pleasant-ries. Melanie needed help from her only friend at the paper as soon as possible.

“I’m doing great this morning, thanks for asking,” she responded with a smirk.

“I’m sorry, Gen. But this is serious. I need your help. What am I going to do? Do you think I’m fired?”

“*Ay, tumba eso*. You always get so worked up. Have you asked Ignacio yet?”

In this high-stakes environment, it was rare to meet a free-spirited journalist. Melanie had coined the oxymoron after working on a few stories with Genesis. Her friend’s carefree attitude often helped calm Melanie’s not-so-carefree personality, and she appreciated that. Only today, she needed someone who would allow her even a tiny meltdown. Her missing article was a big deal, and she needed Genesis to see that.

“No, I haven’t seen him come in yet.” Melanie had watched the doors ever since she didn’t find her article. She wanted to be the first to speak with Ignacio before anyone else could catch him and sour his mood.

“Oh, that’s right. I think he has a meeting with the publisher again. They’re probably at some fancy hotel in Brickell. He

should be here by lunch.” Genesis turned on her laptop and stared at her screen as if what she’d just said was no big deal.

“What?” Melanie braced a hand to her forehead and tried to calm her rapid breathing. The room closed in. Was the air getting thinner? Before she could start hyperventilating, she looked down toward her chair and drank in deep breaths, wishing now more than ever that she’d paid more attention in those yoga classes her college roommates used to drag her to.

Then she turned to look back at Genesis with her eyebrows scrunched together. “How am I possibly supposed to wait until lunch to find out what happened?”

“*Ay, mija, calmaté.* Everything’s going to be fine.” Genesis turned and placed her hands gently on Melanie’s shoulders. “C’mon, relax your face a little—you look like the queen Frida Kahlo herself. Just find something to keep you busy until you can talk to Ignacio—oh look, your mom is calling.”

Melanie looked down at her vibrating phone and let out a deep sigh. This was not a good time for her mom to call—but then again, her mother’s calls never seemed to come at a good time. She picked up the phone anyway, desperate for a distraction.

“*¿Hubo, mija?*” Melanie felt her shoulders tighten as she listened to the familiar greeting on the other end of the line. While she heard from her mother at least once most days, it wasn’t always welcome.

It’s not that Melanie didn’t like talking to her mother, who still lived back home in Maryland. She only wished conversations with her were easier—more enjoyable and less like a chore. Her mother, Anita, was a good mother—kind, funny in her own quirky way, and sweet as *dulce de leche*—but English was her second language. Melanie had grown up speaking Spanish in her home, but English would always be her native tongue—the only

language in which she could fully express herself. This meant conversations with her mother required endless explanations.

“*No entiendo*,” her mother would say to just about any topic Melanie spoke of. “I don’t understand. Tell me again. What do you mean?” Conversations never seemed to flow seamlessly back and forth, and at times, their phone calls felt more like a teaching session than a conversation between a mother and her daughter.

With as worried and, frankly, scared as Melanie felt, not knowing what had happened to her article, it was the worst time to enter into another one of those teaching sessions. So rather than being honest about how her morning was going so far, Melanie greeted her mother as nonchalantly as she could.

“Hey, Mom. Nothing much. What’s up?”

“*Nada*. I was just wondering if I could come visit you for a day or two on my way home from Colombia. I’m going this weekend, remember? So, I was thinking . . . since I have to fly through Miami anyway, maybe I could stay one night? I still haven’t seen your apartment or your work. I would love to see your life there. If I can.”

Melanie opened her mouth to speak but paused when her gaze drifted to the cabinet where she’d stuffed the newspaper.

“Mom, it’s not a good time. I’m really busy with work. Plus, where would you sleep? I don’t have a couch or guest room. You know I live in a studio apartment.”

“I don’t care about that. I can sleep anywhere—on the floor, even!”

Melanie wanted to say yes. She wanted to make an effort with her mom, but her offering to sleep on the floor brought back painful memories of the years Melanie spent sleeping on the floor of her mother’s bedroom with her siblings in the summer. Anita’s room was the only one with air-conditioning. She also

remembered overhearing friends at school giggling about Melanie's "bedroom" being in the dining room. When Melanie and her sister couldn't stop bickering and begged for their own rooms, Anita moved Melanie's bed into the dining room and closed off the space with a four-panel room divider. Melanie never again invited a friend over after she heard the rumors about her "dining bed" at school.

When Melanie first moved into her studio, she had a feeling her mother would take her having her own place as an invitation to visit whenever she wanted. But that wasn't why Melanie chose to spend twice as much on rent rather than share with a roommate. She wanted her own space, no matter how much more it cost her.

"Mom, no. I don't want you sleeping on the floor. How about another time? Maybe in the winter when you can get a hotel room at a cheaper price. I'll even stay there with you if you want."

Melanie tried to sound convincing, but the truth was, a visit in the winter wasn't probable. She'd keep putting it off and putting it off. There wasn't a life for her mom—or any of her family—to see here anyway. Her life consisted of long workdays, even on the weekends. But that's what needed to happen right now. These first few years post college were crucial to her long-term plan. Every day mattered.

Anita didn't say a word for a moment. Melanie could tell her mother was hurt by her response. She leaned back in her chair and rubbed her forehead.

Great, now I've got this guilt to deal with on top of my career being on the rocks.

I just wish she could understand how important my job is. I can't afford to take my foot off the gas.

"Mom, I'm sorry. There's just so much going on right now."

“*Bueno*,” she responded before changing the subject. “Your sister’s baby is just precious. I can’t believe he’s already going to be six months old. You should come meet him. Before you know it, we’ll be celebrating his first birthday.”

There it was—more guilt rising.

“I know, Mom. We FaceTime a lot. It’s just hard right now to take time off when work is so crazy.”

“*Ay, mija*, work is always going to be crazy. Trust me. Life never slows down. But you don’t get back any of these special moments that you miss.”

Once again, she doesn’t understand.

Melanie took a breath. “Okay, Mom. I’ll be home for Christmas this year for sure. I promise. But I have to go now. I’ll call you later.” She said those last four words every time she got off the phone with her mother, even though she knew she wouldn’t have to call her. No matter what she said to her mother, there would be a call from her the next day.

Anita was that way. Accommodating. Docile. Well behaved. Someone who always came running back.