

CAMILO

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I stepped off the plane into the hot tunnel, following the small man in front of me. I wiped the sweat droplets from my hairline, shouldered my bag more securely, took a deep breath, and set off after the man.

When I had first boarded the plane, I struggled to find a place in the overhead bins for my backpack. An old man, surely at least three inches shorter than my own 5'4" frame, upon seeing my distress, had pushed his own briefcase over and moved the other passengers' backpacks that I was hesitant to disturb. He motioned to me with his arms, eyes big, his hands extended and beckoning. I handed my backpack over to him. He stuffed it in the bin, snapped it shut, and gave me a reassuring grin, minus two teeth.

People questioned my sanity when they heard I'd be traveling alone. "So you're not going with a group?" "But you know people there, right?" I guess it seemed scary, but I knew I'd be fine. Pretty white girls aren't supposed to travel to South America alone. And they're certainly not supposed to befriend strange men who don't speak their language. But as soon as we were seated, the small space-saving South American man rattled off questions I mostly managed to answer, interspersed repeatedly with requests to slow down. He was nice, and what was I supposed to do anyway? Might as well learn the language on the way! We discussed religion as best we could, and when I told him it was my first time there, he indicated that he knew the best way and I should follow him.

Dumb idea, I know, but I followed him. I was in an airport. How bad could it be? In a country where I hardly spoke the language. Where I was traveling alone. As a female. Whose skin color was different from the rest of the population. Yeah, not too bad.

I just had to get to where my translator agreed to meet me, so as long as I didn't leave the airport with this man, I was basically safe. So there I was, following a man who could be mid-drug deal or head of some faction of guerrillas, praying I made the right choice. But what if I hadn't? I turned my head, looking behind me to realize no one was heading in our same direction. I knew we had been walking almost as fast as my own questions bombarded me, but we were as far from them as I was from Texas at this point. No turning back.

We emerged from these vastly empty hallways, funneled out of the baggage claim and into a giant ring of people. Everyone stared at this people chute, hoping the next person who walked out would be the person they're waiting for. I just prayed my translator could see me, because I couldn't see a thing as confetti blurred my vision. I dodged to avoid a snare drum and the rest of the band swooping in quickly, celebrating some sort of sports group that had emerged behind me, medals hanging from their chests. I dodged,

looking for space to breathe in the crowd. Oh, please find me.

I heard what sounded like my name, and turned to see a man about my age, maybe a little older, in a Green Bay Packers cap, skinny jeans, and a long sleeve button up. He was clean-shaven, wearing a white smile, shoes and jeans spattered in mud. I point to myself, "Lauren?" His grin widened, and he nodded his head up and down, almost at the same speed he was walking toward me.

"You are Lauren, yes?"

"Uh, yeah, that's me."

"My name is Carlos. Are you ready? Follow me!"

He grabbed my bags from me, and, before I could blink, the band had faded, and I was facing a three-lane road crammed with five cars driving parallel to one another, twenty cars fitting where seven was safe. Pedestrians walked in front of cars, arms waved, words flew, and over it all, a hundred horns. In Dallas, honking your horn means someone cut you off or may not see you, used sparingly and with caution. But here in Barranquilla, horns were the currency of driving, as normal as conversation. The warning shouted in the game hide-and-seek echoed through my memory: "Ready or not, here I come!"

I was torn from my reverie to catch my guide looking back, nodding and beckoning to me as people filled the gap between us. I caught up to him only to find him tying my carry-on suitcase to the back of his motorcycle, one that looked much less like a Harley and scarcely more than a dirt bike. "*Moto.*" He nodded his head toward the bike, and threw his leg over the seat as he shoved a helmet toward me.

I took a deep breath, thrust my head into the dank hole, and did my best to throw my leg gracefully over the bike, but only succeeded in knocking the bike off balance and sending my backpack halfway to the ground. My translator gave what sounded like a mocking chuckle, grabbed my hands, put them around his waist, and revved up the engine.

"Wait, wait, wait! Carlos, this is my first time on one of these, so can you go a little slow?"

He just smiled.

We flew over the curb of the sidewalk, whizzing by cars as Carlos magically turned inches into enough space for his whole motorcycle. I thought about high-fiving the passengers crammed into the taxi beside us, just to say I had done it. But we never lingered long enough for that to be possible. Maybe "slow" wasn't in Carlos' vocabulary.

We emerged from the chaos of cars, stopping in front of a two-story stucco palace painted sky blue. If this building had been in the states, it would be that house in the ghetto, renovated by some eccentric couple thirty years ago who wanted their house to be colonial: white scroll trim, wood banister, peeling paint layers. The word "*Bienvenidos!*" painted in pink letters scrawled over the doorway in script writing welcomed me and reminded me I was certainly not in the States.

Air conditioning. It was the first I'd been in since I stepped off the plane;

the air chilled me in my sweat-colored shirt. I sighed, ready to shower away my travels. Tomorrow I would finally meet him. We had corresponded through letters only, not even by phone. I needed to meet him in person. To hug him, to tell him I loved him and have him hear my words not as he imagined them on paper, but how they sounded, how they felt. But right now I needed to shower, and tomorrow would be here soon enough.

“Good morning, Lauren!” Carlos greeted me as I sat by the pool, sipping my Juan Valdez coffee. “Are you ready to see Colombia?”

This was it. Camilo’s *barrio* was about forty minutes away, which probably meant twenty minutes on Carlos’s bike. I had packed a soccer ball, cleats I hoped would fit him, a Dr. Pepper, Slim Jims, and candy, and a cardigan from Penney’s for his grandma. As we took off down the road, an experience I am sure will never feel normal and certainly never safe, I drilled myself on what little Spanish I knew, playing out how the conversation could go, preparing myself for what their living conditions might be.

The roads turned to dirt, and eventually the road became rut, as we passed by houses that could be better described as shacks. The air reeked of urine; garbage littered the ground. I wondered what all the graffiti said. Wrinkled and sagging women sat on their front porches, staring. The words “*gringa*” and “*Americana*” floated to my ears. The children left chasing their tattered soccer ball to follow us, not a hard feat considering the pace dictated by this road. Sets of eyes peered out windows, and people found activities to keep themselves busy in a place where they too could follow the action. I wondered if any of these children following us were Camilo.

Ever since I signed up at the table after chapel my junior year of college to sponsor Camilo, I had wanted to meet him. I’d received the letters telling me his favorite color was blue, that he liked to play soccer, and that his best friend Fernando liked it too. Each letter, he signed his name then asked for prayer for his grandmother, his primary caretaker. Even if all I knew about him were his favorite colors, subject, and sport, I knew he had a tender heart, soft brown eyes, and that he needed me.

The *moto* stopped, and Carlos pointed. That must be it. That house that is smaller than my college dorm. That house with a ceiling made of rummaged cardboard and plastic pieces, held in place by rocks and heavy trash. That house with the barred windows. And through the open door I can see a bent woman sweeping, and in the doorway a three-year-old girl holding a kitten. This is where Camilo lives, and that is his family.

Dogs ran barking from behind the house, three boys chasing after them, yelling and laughing. Like the rest of the *barrio*, upon seeing me, they slowed down, becoming subtle in motion. One of the boys, the one in the faded orange top and bare feet, stopped cold. He squinted at me in the bright sun, maybe wondering how a tourist ended up in this part of the city. Or maybe he thought I was a missionary, come to hand out instructions on how to get to heaven. I did my best to show a reassuring smile, one that said I was safe territory. He returned a shrug and a smile while the smallest of the three



simply picked up the stick at his feet and resumed chasing after the mutts.

The last of the boys, the one in the blue shirt, just stared, a look of unease still on his face. He stood with his back straight, facing away from his house, protecting. The kitten let out a meek cry; and, by this time, the old woman had ceased her sweeping to peer out the door at the white stranger.

Then he was moving, and I looked down to see the ground under me change as my thoughts stood still. Strong brown arms wrapped around my waist. I buried my face in thick black hair, kissing the top of his head. I peered down through the tears streaming down my cheeks, and our eyes met. Dark brown chocolate, lined in black, gentle and strong. This is Camilo, my Camilo.