

Escape to the North

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This book is dedicated to all women, especially the single mothers whose strength, courage and love carry generations forward. I also dedicate this book to my mother, whose resilience continues to inspire me. She is no longer here to see it completed, but her memory threads itself through every page.



The Omen

Santa Rosa de Copán, Honduras, April 2014

Mamá came through the bead curtain, leaving it rattling behind her. “Get up, girls. And get Juanito up, so he can go out to the henhouse. I need eggs to make breakfast.”

That was our *mamá*, María, getting us up in her usual manner. Her strict, yet tender voice, had a gentle way of waking us up on school mornings. Behind her call came the smell of bacon. It awakened my hunger before I could even open my eyes. I was not fully awake when I heard wings flapping on our windowsill.

“Oh, no.” I covered my head in an attempt to muffle the loud noise.

The rooster puffed up his chest and let out his irritating, morning crow. My little brother had named him Wally after our dog that had died a year ago. Juanito always bothered Mamá to let him have another dog, but she refused.

“Why does that stupid rooster have to stand on our windowsill and crow every morning?” I asked my sister, Julia, who lay next to me. I pulled the blankets off my face, wishing I had more time to sleep.

Wally flapped his wings and crowed again. Julia and I stared at the rooster who looked back at us proudly.

“Look at the way he stares at you,” Julia said.

We propped ourselves up on our elbows, wondering how to deal with this stubborn rooster. I made eye contact with Wally, and he stared back at me, tilting his head slightly. I got out of bed and went toward the window.

“Shoo! Shoo!” I yelled.

He flew away before I could reach him. A smile drew across my face when I saw Wally clucking away.

“I wish Mamá would make soup out of him. That would be delicious revenge ... literally.”

I went to the window and took a deep breath. It was a beautiful spring morning. The mountains slowly came into view as the fog lifted. The scent of the jungle brought me fully awake, energizing my inner being. I stretched my arms up and yawned.

Julia came in carrying a basin filled with cold water. “Wash your face. When you’re finished, dump it and get fresh water for Juanito.”

I splashed the cold water on my face. It stung my skin, but it cleared my mind from my earlier frustrations with Wally.

Julia was looking through her clothes. I admired her so much. She was eighteen years old. Her light-brown hair cascaded in light curls below her shoulders. Her big, brown eyes always seemed full of wonder. She had a small, pointed nose that gave her a conceited look, yet her smile reassured every one of her good nature. She loved to play sports in school and had the body to show for it. Many good-hearted boys liked Julia, but she was in love with her boyfriend.

Mamá said that I was just as beautiful as Julia, only more of a tomboy. That was the reason boys hardly noticed me. I thought that was a good thing. I would be turning fifteen

tomorrow. Although my body began to look more and more like Julia's, I was not yet interested in boys. My hopes were to become an elementary school teacher someday. That day was not far off. Plans were already in place to build a school in Santa Rosa.

I went to the next room where Juanito shared the bed with Mamá. At ten years old, he dreamed of becoming a fisherman like Papá. He didn't have our skin tone or hair color. His dark skin and straight black hair were the young image of our father. Mamá had put him in charge of the chickens to teach him responsibility. That included feeding them, gathering the eggs in the morning and keeping the henhouse clean. I glanced at the alarm clock. It read 6:00 a.m. Juanito slept soundly beneath a bundle of blankets.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and shook him. "Juanito, Mamá needs you to get up and gather the eggs."

"No," he said, rolling away from my hand. He pulled the blankets tight around his head. "Go away."

"If you don't get up by the count of three, I'm going to tickle you." I walked my fingers firmly over the blankets, threatening his small ribs and leaned into his ear. "And you know that I can turn into the evil tickle monster if you don't get up."

Juanito ignored me. I dug my fingers into the blankets.

"Okay! Okay!" he shouted, wiggling away. "I'm up already." He came out from under the blankets. "Why isn't Wally crowing? He always crows until I wake up."

"I shoed him away because he's too annoying."

"No, he isn't. He's just doing his job. That's what roosters do."

"I'll go get you some fresh water, so you can wash your face."

When I returned, he was looking through his clothes. I set the basin down on the small wooden table that Mamá kept in her room for Juanito to do his homework. Papá had built it for Julia when she was a child, emphasizing the importance of school.

Juanito walked to the fireplace, where Mamá stood and gave her his usual morning kiss. Then he grabbed the basket from the table and headed outside. He returned shortly and set the basket full of eggs next to the fireplace.

Mamá began cracking eggs onto a skillet. She sold whatever eggs were left over to Doña Marta. She and her husband, Don Manuel, owned the village fish market. It was our responsibility to drop off the eggs on our way to school. Mamá would collect the money later during the day. Doña Marta and her family were close friends of my family. After Papá died, they were always willing to help. They treated us like family, and in many ways we were.

Papá had worked as a fisherman his entire life. When he was alive, there was always plenty of fish to eat. He always made sure that the family wore decent clothes. Two winters ago, he had come down with a severe flu. Mamá tried her best to heal him, but he never recovered. What small savings we had were spent on a wooden coffin and a plot at the cemetery big enough for two. Mamá did not have enough money for a gravestone. On his grave, we were only able to place a rock that Juanito struggled to bring up from the riverbank. Mamá assured us that it was temporary until she could earn enough money to buy a proper marker. She never tired of going by every day to place fresh wildflowers at the head of his grave. We somehow felt Papá was content with that.

From then on, Mamá was our sole provider. She managed by washing clothes for the fishermen and selling them freshly baked bread. Julia and I helped her after school.

Mamá was a tall, beautiful woman in her mid-forties. She had a thin, yet strong figure. Her skin was light, and she had light hair that fell halfway down her back. She had a complexion that required no make-up, and now, crow's feet surrounded her eyes. She usually wore a tan dress with a white headscarf and an apron tied around her waist. Her leather sandals were made by the local villagers.

Even after Papá's death, we lived happy lives in the small village called Santa Rosa de Copán. Papá, Mamá and baby Julia moved here when Mamá was pregnant with me. Papá wanted to try his luck fishing in a bigger river. That's where I got my name, after the village that, according to Papá, would bring us good fortune.

"I think I'll wear the pink dress Kike bought me," Julia said, pressing the dress against her figure and contemplating her image in the long, thin mirror that hung in our room. "I'm meeting him after school." She spun around in a dance. "I want to look pretty for him."

I put on my school uniform: a white blouse with a dark-blue dress that went below the knees. It had two pockets at the waist. Julia put on a pair of sandals like Mamá's. I put on my mountain shoes. Aunt Teresa had sent them from Houston. I loved my shoes. I wore them with long white socks. Some of the kids at school made fun of me because I didn't wear shoes or sandals like other girls. They said that they looked like boys' shoes. I didn't care. My mountain shoes were perfect.

Julia and I finished doing each other's hair and went to sit at the table facing the fireplace. Mamá was serving breakfast.

Papá had made the table with the wood that was left over after he built our hut. Our house had two bedrooms and a kitchen-living area. Compared to other huts in the village, ours was the best. There was only one home and business made of brick in Santa Rosa. It belonged to Doña Marta and

her family. We loved our home, our kitchen table, our way of life.

Breakfast smelt delicious. Mamá served us scrambled eggs, bacon and fried bananas. My mouth watered before I sat down.

Mamá took one look at Julia and shook her head, clearly reading her after-school intentions. "I wish you would find a more suitable companion. One who is your age and not a gang member," Mamá said. "I don't approve of Kike. He doesn't work. I don't know where he gets the money to buy you all those nice things. All I know is it can't be good."

"He's not a bad person, Mamá. He loves me and he treats me well."

"He's a Mara, Julia. All he does is drink and smoke with his gang in the plaza," Mamá disagreed.

The Mara, short for Mara Salvatrucha, otherwise known as the MS-13, were a notorious international gang that originated in a faraway place called Los Angeles. I remember Papá asking why they called that place Los Angeles when they were sending us nothing but demons. "They should call it Los Demonios," he'd say.

Many kids from Central America who had gone to the United States looking for work ended up in jail or deported for breaking the law. Some of them joined gangs while on the streets or during their time in prison. When they were sent back to their home countries, they brought with them a criminal mentality and a deep hostility toward society. Their violent behavior caused serious problems for the peasants, who had previously lived in relative peace.

Papá said that the Maras were scattered across all Central America, Mexico, the United States and even as far north as Canada. For a long time, the Maras stole from the peasants, murdering anyone who might report them or stand in their

way. The peasants grew tired of the senseless killings and soon armed themselves. War broke out. The peasants began targeting anyone associated with the Maras.

The military stepped in and detained as many Maras as they could. Although a peace treaty was brokered, the violence soon reignited. Occasionally, someone was severely beaten and robbed. Before long, unsolved murders reappeared in different regions, causing new tensions.

One of the main reasons that Mamá didn't approve of Kike was his age. He was ten years older than Julia and had a reputation for violence. It was rumored that he had been deported from the United States for nearly killing a man with a tire iron. Kike's chest, back and upper arms were covered with tattoos. He didn't have any on his face or neck, like other Maras often did. Most of their tattoos consisted of numbers and symbols that made sense only to them. Most Maras dressed in California street-gang garb, such as a white muscle shirt, baggy khaki pants with sharp creases and Nike sneakers.

What worried Mamá the most about Kike was his cold stare. It never let her peek past his eyes. Julia didn't see that. She seemed to love all the nice gifts he brought her. He even promised her a life free from poverty for her and our family.

"Mamá, Rosa thinks you should cook that rooster," Julia said, changing the subject.

"What rooster?" Juanito asked.

"The one that crows on our windowsill," Julia said.

"You mean Wally? I won't ever catch him for that. He's my favorite rooster." Juanito smiled to himself when he figured that only he could catch Wally.

"I like him, too," Mamá said. "Without Wally, none of you would get up in the morning."

"I just don't understand why he has to crow on our windowsill," I said through a mouthful. "There are so many trees

out there, but no, he has to stand on our window, flap his wings and crow his head off in our ears. What's that chicken's problem?"

"It's not a chicken," Juanito said. "Don't you know the difference between a hen and a rooster? Wally's a rooster, dummy."

"Don't call your sister names," Mamá scolded.

"Sorry."

"Well, it just might be a good omen that Wally wants all of you to be awake and alert every day." Mamá winked at Juanito.

"Can we get another dog?" Juanito asked, taking Mamá's wink as a sign to push his luck. "One of my friends at school has puppies."

"What kind of dogs are they?"

"Pit bulls. They're really cool."

"Oh no. Those beasts can devour more food than all of us put together. When you grow up and find yourself a good job, if you still want to raise one of those things, get it. That's up to you, but not here, and not now," Mamá said.

"So much for that," Juanito mumbled and went back to eating.

"I need all of you to come straight home after school," Mamá said, looking straight at Julia.

Julia looked down at her food with a slight nod.

"We're expecting a large package from your aunt Teresa. It's scheduled to arrive on the evening bus. I want all of us to walk together to pick it up. We're going to have lots of stuff to sell, so we can have a birthday party for Rosita tomorrow. Julia and I will make the cake. Doña Marta's making Rosita's favorite chicken and rice *pastelitos*."

I looked up at Mamá and smiled when she winked. I felt so special.

Aunt Teresa was Mamá's younger sister. She left Honduras to work in a place called Houston, but she never forgot us. Every month she sent a big package filled with new clothes, canned foods, shoes, toys and cheap jewelry. She always tried to send us our sizes. We kept whatever we liked and sold the rest to buy things we needed.

She often wrote about her job as a maid for some rich people she called "Gringos." Mamá said that our ancestors were also *gringos* and described them as light-skinned people. According to Mamá, her ancestors came from Spain. They colonized Honduras hundreds of years ago. That's why our skin tone is much lighter than other natives. The only one in our family who resembled the Native Americans was Juanito. He took after Papá's side of the family. They had straight black hair with milk-chocolate skin. They lived in the south-east regions of the country, fishing the Atlantic.

When we finished our breakfast, we stood before Mamá for our blessing. She always did this as we left for school.

Julia grabbed the egg basket, and we headed out to the fish market, which was down the road from our home. The school was in the next village called Los Pescadores, named after the local fishing trade. It was a half mile walk through a path in the jungle that had been made over the years by students and villagers. This was our usual route since walking along the main highway was dangerous and took twice as long.

When we arrived at the market, Doña Marta was busy wrapping homemade milk candies. She was a strong woman in her mid-forties. Her salt-and-pepper hair was held back with a pink hair band. She wore the traditional dresses made by local women. Her facial characteristics displayed her Native American beauty.

"Good morning, Doña Marta," we greeted her, as Julia placed the basket on the counter.

“Good morning, children. Here, have a piece of candy for the road. And hurry. You kids are running late this morning.”

“Thank you,” we said and headed across the fish market to enter the path in the jungle.

“Wait for me,” called Herman.

He was short and Julia’s age. What he lacked in height, he made up with his athletic ability. He was considered the class clown, yet everyone loved his sense of humor. Herman claimed to be in love with Julia. He was good at making goofy faces to get her laughing and often tried to impress her. He never tired of hearing “No” every time he asked her to be his girlfriend. But she only saw him as a friend.

This morning, he overstepped his boundaries when he unexpectedly took Julia in his arms and kissed her on the lips.

“Stop it!” Julia yelled and pushed him away. “Don’t ever do that again, Herman. I’ve told you plenty of times that I have a boyfriend.”

Herman cocked his head back and laughed. “I had to kiss you. You look too beautiful in that dress. I couldn’t resist. You’re more beautiful than all the wild orchids in the jungle.”

He gave Julia a chivalrous bow, that made her blush and giggle. Filled with courage from the kiss he stole, he led the way into the jungle.

One of Kike’s gang members had seen us from a distance. They called him Zapato, because of the way his large jawbone resembled a shoe. He was 5’10” with a heavy build. His face was covered with tattoos. He wore khaki shorts and sneakers, but no shirt, revealing the tattoos on his upper body.

When he saw Herman kiss Julia, he ran toward the back of an abandoned hut, where Kike sat with Gato smoking a cigarette. He wasted no time in reporting what he had witnessed.

Fury overwhelmed Kike. He stood up, flicked his cigarette and said, “Gato, cut them off before they come out on the other side. Zapato and I will come in from behind.”

Of all Kike's gang members, Gato was by far the most violent. He earned his nickname for the predatory way in which he hunted his victims through the jungle with rapid speed. Gato wasted no time disappearing into the jungle.

Suddenly, Gato appeared in our path, breathing heavily.

Goosebumps erupted all over my skin.

Julia stopped a few feet from him. "Get out of our way, or I'll tell Kike you're bothering us."

"Why don't you explain why you cheat on me with this piece of shit?" Kike said from behind.

Just then, Gato grabbed Herman from behind in a choke hold, and Kike moved in close to him. Looking at Julia, he said, "You stab me in the back with this clown? After I give you everything?"

Herman struggled with fear-stricken eyes, but it was no use. Gato's hold was too tight. Kike slowly withdrew his knife and put it close to Herman's face.

"Stop, Kike! Stop! He was only playing!" Julia pleaded.

"I wanna play too," Kike said. "I'll be the jealous boyfriend who killed his girlfriend and her midget lover."

His eyes locked into Herman's fear. Zapato, who had appeared out of nowhere, grabbed Julia from behind, holding her arms to her waist. She tried to wiggle free, but he was too strong. She dug her nails into his sides, but he only squeezed tighter, constricting her breath.

"Let me go!" screamed Julia.

Kike plunged the dagger into Herman's chest. Herman's mouth fell open as if trying to let out a cry for help. No words followed his last breaths. Kike twisted the dagger, withdrew it and plunged it into Herman's stomach.

Juanito and I were horrified and didn't know what to do.

After Herman's body fell to the ground, Kike turned his attention to Julia. He moved close to her, his eyes fixed on

hers. Juanito and I stood frozen, we knew we needed to make a run for it.

“No, Kike, please!” Julia whimpered. “I love you.”

Kike embraced Julia and put his lips to hers. Sobbing, she tried to kiss him back. Her eyes grew wide and desperately motioned for Juanito and me to run.

Kike kissed her neck as he plunged the dagger into her. He twisted the dagger, bleeding the life from her. Julia’s head fell on Kike’s shoulder. He loosened his hold and watched her slide down from his body until she crumbled to the ground. Kike and Gato stared at her with disregard.

Juanito and I sprinted back the way we came. We ran for our lives as fast as our legs could carry us. Juanito took the lead. I followed behind, barely able to keep up. We heard them coming but didn’t dare look back for fear of stumbling. My only concern was that my little brother would get away, even if I didn’t.

As Juanito cleared the jungle, I felt the heavy breathing of one of them close behind me. A hand caught a lock of my hair and jerked my head back. I shook his hand free and followed Juanito into the fish market. Juanito ran past Doña Marta and hid behind a stack of boxes near the back door. I ran to the register, breathing hard, unable to speak. I looked back, my eyes wide with terror, expecting them to come rushing in at any second.

Doña Marta turned her attention toward me. “Rosita, why are you and Juanito not in school? And why are you breathing so hard? What’s wrong?” she asked, making her way around the counter to take hold of my arms. “Rosa, talk to me. What’s the matter with you two?”

I could not speak. My heavy breathing combined with the intense fear held me in shock. My heart pounded fiercely, pushing retched lumps of terror up my throat.

Doña Marta shook me. "Why is your brother hiding in the back? Rosa, answer me!"

I ran back to the screen door to look toward the path. I needed to see if they were outside, but they were nowhere to be seen. Still, I felt them there, in the jungle, lurking, watching me.

Doña Marta came up behind me, curious to see what I was looking for. When she saw that no one was there, she turned me around and hugged me in her bosom. She held me long enough to feel my heart pound against her chest. Then she withdrew and looked into my terrified eyes.

I choked on my sobs, trying to explain the horror that had just taken place.

"What are you saying, child? I can't understand you."

"It's Julia," I managed to cry out.

Doña Marta turned my face toward her. "What about Julia?"

"Julia's hurt!" I cried. "Kike hurt her and Herman with his knife." Agony choking my voice, I turned to look outside and pointed toward the path. "There."

"Oh my God! Manuel!" Doña Marta yelled.

Don Manuel was working out back with his twenty-two-year-old son, Pepe, gutting fish.

"Manuel! Come quickly!"

"What's all the fuss about?" Don Manuel asked from out back.

The rear door flew open, and Don Manuel came into the fish market with a knife in his hand. He was a tall, muscular man in his fifties, his brown skin wrinkled and rough from the years of fishing the river under the scorching sun. He was wearing a black rubber apron with his jeans tucked into black rubber boots.

“Come out from behind them boxes, boy,” Don Manuel said when he saw Juanito hiding. “What’s wrong with you?”

Pepe walked in after his father. He was dressed the same. A younger version of Don Manuel, he stood next to him, studying Juanito.

My little brother looked up in horror and let out a burst of air and cried. Hearing Juanito made me cry louder.

“What’s going on?” Don Manuel asked.

I pointed outside. “There,” I cried. “In the path. Kike hurt Julia and Herman with his knife.”

Don Manuel and Pepe threw off their aprons, ran outside and disappeared into the jungle.

Juanito ran to hug me. Doña Marta hugged the two of us tightly. We dug our faces into her and waited with uncertainty.

Manuel was the first to surface, carrying Herman’s body. Pepe followed, carrying Julia. The bodies hung loosely from the arms of the father and son, whose torsos were covered in blood. Herman and Julia’s necks and limbs swayed in a lifeless rhythm with each step. Don Manuel and Pepe laid the bodies down a few feet from each other on a patch of grass. They were dead.

Juanito and I peeked, then buried our faces back into Doña Marta.

“Oh no,” Doña Marta whispered, her eyes wide with horror. She crossed herself religiously, pulled away from us and rushed outside toward her husband and son.

“Pepe, quickly, go get María. Manuel, go get Herman’s father.”

The men ran off in different directions. The villagers came out of their huts and gathered around the bodies. News of the double murder spread throughout Santa Rosa rapidly. The villagers didn’t need anyone to tell them who was responsible for such butchery.