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A Few True Things

by Kristen Evans

The day Rafael Ochoa first noticed the thorns on his hands, it was too late to do anything about them. It was a Thursday, near the end of March. He ducked into the high school auditorium, accompanied as always by a simmering storm cloud of anger, his hands stuffed into his pockets: two stones at his sides. A blue bruise was spreading across his jaw.

The lights in the auditorium were low. Dark lighting, yellow lighting, like the air just before a tornado, tinted by greens and purples. Onstage, shadowy students moved as told, flimsy pamphlets in their hands. Rafa figured they were holding scripts, but honestly, he didn’t care. His cousin was running late.

Rafa shot an impatient glance toward the clock on the wall. For the third day in a row,

Elisa’s practice had gone over time. Since Elisa, her parents, and by association, Rafa himself, lived over fifteen miles from the school, and since Daniel and Irma both worked until nearly eight at night and they only had the two cars, and since Rafa didn’t feel like walking and wasn’t big enough of a jerk to make Elisa walk, Rafa was stuck at school as long as Elisa was stuck at school. Which meant that yeah, Rafa had had the time to get into a fight with Joyner, but midway through the fight he had noticed the thorns emerging through his knuckles. He was so taken off guard that he hadn’t had time to put up his arms, which meant that Joyner had definitely, definitely won. Joyner had hesitated at first—almost like he had seen, Rafa wondered if he had seen—but no one had commented on the thorns, brown and brambly and thick, and they hadn’t stopped Joyner’s fists, so Rafa assumed they couldn’t have really been there. If they’d been real, someone would have noticed. Someone would have said something.

The problem was, though, that they weren’t going away. Nearly an hour later, and there they still were. Rafa pulled his hands from his pockets, careful not to catch the spikes on the fabric of his jeans, and studied them: a tangle of brown spines erupting from his hands, just lighter than his skin. He almost thought there were more of them now.

Rafa kneaded his fingers against his temples as the drama teacher announced something into the microphone in loud, hurried English. Rafa could have picked it apart if it weren’t the drama teacher, but since it was, the woman’s drawl slurred all the words together, making vowels too long and consonants disappear, as if she were taking a switchblade to the words and carving out pieces of them. In the five years since Rafa had come from Sonsonate to Roseboro, he had learned to adjust to the sway of Southern words. Under the right circumstances, though, (anytime someone spoke too quiet, too fast, or too emotionally), he
felt much, much less than bilingual. The drawling, rural accent was how everyone here talked—teachers, students, even the rich ones, like Joyner.

At least when Joyner spoke, Rafa thought, there was no question what he was saying. The language of hate and challenge translated cleanly, no matter who was speaking it. Rafa almost preferred that. And he definitely preferred the language of fists. It was blunt, destructive, and bruised, which meant it suited Rafa perfectly. And it was what everyone expected of him.

He glanced at the clock again.

Rafa watched the second hand spiral. It was a bright red but not a pure red, tinted with a drop of orange. An easy color to mix. Not like the strange shade of the wall behind it, a bizarre aquamarine that sometimes looked vomit-yellow. Whoever designed this place deserved to be fired.

Rafa turned back to the stage and leaned his head against the vomit-teal wall, closing his eyes. It hardly mattered that only minutes ago he had released the need—Rafa’s fists still ached for a fight. Something tight in his chest pounded against him, urging his restlessness. He wondered if this was how Denis had felt, if this was the emotion that led to a car wrapped around a tree.

Don’t think about it. Anything but that.

“Rafa?”

Rafa opened his eyes to find the auditorium lights back to an antiseptic white, Elisa standing beside him. Her curly dark hair was pulled in a ponytail, a drawstring bag slung over one shoulder, her thumbs hooked in the straps of her backpack.

“You’re late,” Rafa said in English. His aunt and uncle spoke Spanish at home, but only sometimes. Rafa could never decide if he wanted them to speak Spanish more or less. When they did, they carried the accent of home. A good thing, but a painful thing. Like pulling out a splinter.

Elisa blew her bangs out from in front of her eyes. “Yeah, sorry. Mrs. Hodgins wanted us to run the whole act and it took longer than we—” She broke off, jaw falling open slightly as she took in Rafa’s face. “What happened?”

Rafa angled his face away from hers impatiently. “Can we go now?”

Elisa raised her eyebrows, and Rafa knew he’d offended her. “What’s the emergency? Is there a fire somewhere I haven’t heard about?”

Rafa wasn’t in the mood. He turned for the exit, but Elisa caught his arm, turning it over so the patch of thorns on his knuckles stood out sharp against the bright lights. They were grotesque, really, as if Rafa’s hands were twisting into a briar patch. A mass of dark lines.

There was horror on Elisa’s face. Rafa’s heart lurched.

She sees them. Oh, thank God, she sees them. Rafa steeled himself for her disbelief, for her questions, for some acknowledgment that he wasn’t crazy—
“Are these scrapes from hitting Joyner?” Elisa demanded. “You were really so eager for another fight you couldn’t let yourself heal from the last one?”

Rafa’s heart plummeted in his chest. Elisa didn’t see the thorns, either.

“I’m healed enough,” Rafa snapped. He shook his arm free and then he pushed through the auditorium doors into the warm, humid evening. The warmth and the wetness reminded him of El Salvador, like stepping outside into the steam from a hot shower. It was slick against his skin.

“You’re going to get suspended.” Elisa took long, hurried strides to keep up with Rafa’s furious steps, the cousins pounding unevenly across the pavement. “Or Joyner’s parents will make it a legal thing. They’re the sort of people looking for any reason to hate you. They’ll send you back if you give them an excuse, you know they will.”

“Maybe I deserve to go back.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Rafa didn’t know what he meant. He still felt dizzy, like he was looking at the world sideways. His hands were beginning to ache. He couldn’t tell if it was from the punching, or from the spines. “You’re not going to tell your parents, are you?”

“You can’t seriously think they need to be told. How are you going to explain your knuckles? Your face?”

Rafa shrugged.

Elisa let out a laugh, but an unkind one, verging on the slightly hysterical. “It’s going to take more than a shrug to keep Mom and Dad out of this one. You heard what they said last time. I mean, crap, Rafa, it’s not even like you’ve got a good reason. What, you just like beating up people? You’ve got to find a better outlet.”

“Like you?”

Elisa’s cheeks darkened in embarrassment as she fumbled with the keys to the car. It was a beat-up thing, old and grey, with mismatched doors. “Yes, Rafa, like me. You don’t have to act—fine, whatever, I know what you think about watching me practice—but you’ve got to do something. I’ve seen your art. Your hands were made for that—for creating things. Why do you insist on breaking everything down instead?”

“Like you?”

The doors unlocked, and Rafa slid into the passenger seat moodily, clenching his jaw.

Elisa was wrong. Rafa didn’t insist on breaking things, and he didn’t like beating people up. What he liked was doing something that proved he was real, something that changed the way the world worked. Art had done it for a while, letting Rafa create out of nothing, watching as the world filled with his brush strokes. But then Denis had—well, Denis had died, and creation seemed useless, and Rafa spent his time bludgeoning out bruises and scrapes. You couldn’t get hurt if you weren’t alive. Sometimes Rafa needed a reminder that he hadn’t been killed too.
He rested his head against the glass of the window and stared at the gravel as Elisa reversed.

“Look, I know I’m not your mom. But I worry about you. One of these days you’re going to be in a fight, and something will break that you’ll never be able to fix.”

Rafa exhaled, examining the patch of thorns creeping towards his wrist. That was exactly what he wanted.

The night went about as expected: Tío Daniel demanded answers, Tía Irma provided a lengthy lecture, and Rafa mostly stood there and listened. Not that he needed to listen, exactly; he could guess everything Daniel and Irma said before they said it. The words responsibility, carelessness, and ungrateful came up a lot. So did worried. And DACA. And lost.

The word Rafa least wanted to hear, though, was Denis. And that one . . . that one was unavoidable.

“Rafael,” Daniel finally ventured, once it was clear Rafa wasn’t going to answer to his satisfaction. “I know it’s been hard since Denis—”

“This isn’t about him,” Rafa interrupted, too loudly. Neither Daniel nor Irma had commented on the briars which now entirely covered the backs of Rafa’s hands, but at this point, Rafa hadn’t expected them to. The pain went bone-deep, though, and every time Rafa caught sight of his own hands he half expected them to be covered in blood.

“Rafa,” Irma added, softer, reaching a hand out to Rafa, as if to touch his shoulder. “It’s normal to hurt. But your brother wouldn’t want this for you.”

Rafa’s fingers curled into fists, the stems cracking taught against his hands. Something pulled tight across his chest. “Shouldn’t have died, then, should he.”

“You know that wasn’t his choice,” Daniel said, “and it wasn’t his fault.”

“Yeah, because it was mine.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Rafa turned away. He wished everyone would stop trying to tell him what he did and did not mean.

“Have you at least tried talking to your counselor at school?” Irma pressed. “She’s there for exactly this reason.”

For thorns on Rafa’s hands that no one else could see? The counselor would only call him crazy. To talk with an undocumented kid who’d come—by some twist of fate or stupidity—to one of the most conservative towns in the States? She probably thought he didn’t belong, either. To counsel a kid who had survived the gangs and the cartels and La Bestia and the icebox and a million other cruelties in the crossing only to lose his brother five years later in a stupid car crash that had only happened because Rafa and Denis had fought? What could the counselor possibly have to say to him?
Sometimes Rafa felt as if he’d lived six lifetimes.

“I’m going to bed,” Rafa said at last.

“Rafa—”

His aunt and his uncle didn’t move, and Rafa went to the bedroom of the double-wide where he was staying. The door swung shut quietly behind him, clicking into place with a sigh.

When Rafa woke up the next morning, he couldn’t move his arms.

He opened his eyes blearily to find them pinned in place on the bed, the tangle of thorns spreading past his wrists, well up his forearms. The spikes were definitely thicker now, and the sheets were twisted around them, the spines caught on the cotton.

Rafa let his head fall back onto the pillow, weary. Still not gone, then. Gathering his energy, he forced himself to sit up, leaning over to unpick the sheets from his skin. It took longer than he thought it would because every time he freed a part of himself he would find a different section had caught on the fabric instead. By the time Rafa was completely untangled from his bed, there was a lot of noise coming from the kitchen. Someone pounded on the door to the room: Elisa.

“Come on, Rafa, we’re going to be late!”

“Hypocrite,” Rafa muttered to himself, but he rose to his feet, carefully threw on his clothes, and stepped into the hall.

Because Rafa was wearing short sleeves, he half-expected everybody at school to stare at him. His arms were very visible, and very, very wrong—in some places, he was so covered in overgrowth that he couldn’t even see his own skin anymore. There was something stirring beneath his chest that he thought might have been panic, but he’d had so much to worry about for so long that he couldn’t tell if this emotion was related to the thorns or was just a general state of unease.

He was wrong about people staring because of the thorn bushes sprouting from his arms, but he was right about people staring at him. They were looking at the bruise on his face. Most of the kids did that stare/not-stare thing you did when you were interested but didn’t want to seem rude: glancing at Rafa from the side of their eyes, or picking a spot just past him and focusing on that instead.

Rafa put on a cracked, wolf-like smile and stared back. Daring someone to ask what had happened. No one did. There were benefits to looking dangerous when you wanted to.

If he had thought his friends might say something he was mistaken; none of them looked at the thorns. They didn’t even comment on his bruises.

It was what they all expected of him.
The only class Rafa and Joyner shared was English, which was taught by an older man named Mr. North who was enthusiastic about red pen corrections, American literature, and tacky ties. Rafa, who was enthusiastic about none of those things, always chose a seat at a table in the back of the room. Joyner, who acted enthusiastic about all of the above but wasn’t actually, usually sat in the back too.

Today Rafa got to class first. He dropped his backpack unceremoniously to the ground and went to rest his head in his arms on the table. He paused, though, remembering the thorns. He didn’t care if they were real or not; he didn’t want to risk impaling himself on them. So instead Rafa leaned back in his chair and kept his eyes on the door.

Joyner walked in with a swagger, surrounded by a handful of friends. His blonde hair was perfectly styled, and he dressed in the manner of a person who has always had money—so effortlessly it was clear that it must have taken quite a lot of effort.

There was a huge bruise blossoming around Joyner’s split lip. Not as bad as the one around Rafa’s eye, but still, bad. From across the room, Rafa met Joyner’s eyes. For a split second, Joyner flicked his gaze downward to Rafa’s arms. And focused on the thorns.

He sees them.

Joyner’s eyebrows went up, and then down, and then the bell rang and Joyner’s crew took their seats and Mr. North took control of the classroom. Rafa spent the whole class period in a daze, desperately wanting to get proof from someone, just one person that his arms were as heavy with thorns as they felt. Even if that person was Joyner.

Why did that person have to be Joyner?

During class, Rafa tried to think of things he might say, but there was no good way to approach the person who regularly either beat you or got beaten by you to demand they tell you whether or not they could see the thicket sprouting from your arms.

In the end, when Rafa caught up to Joyner as he was leaving class, what Rafa said was, “Can we talk?”

Joyner’s friends nudged him with knowing smirks.

Joyner’s eyebrows went up again, pointedly looking at Rafa’s bruised face and not his arms. “Our conversation last night wasn’t enough?”

Rafa gritted his teeth. Look at me. You see them, you see them, I know you do—

“If you want a rematch, you’ll have to wait. I’m not stupid enough to fight during school. Colleges care about that sort of thing.” Joyner’s mouth twisted in disdain. “Not that you’re going to college.”

As far as Rafa knew, it was true. He didn’t have the money for college and he didn’t have the grades for a scholarship. That only made it worse.
“I don’t want to fight,” Rafa snarled. Even as he said it, he realized he did. Rafa wanted to use his fists the way he used to use his paintbrush, making a long stroke across the canvas until the world was different than it was before. He wanted to throw back his head and scream, howling like coyotes in a desert. He was so tired of having so little say in anything.

Joyner rolled his eyes, then focused directly on the brambles coating Rafa’s arms. “Monday,” he drawled. “The usual.”

Was he talking about the thorns or the fighting?

Before Rafa could say anything else, Joyner had already left.

Over the weekend, the thorns did not disappear, and Rafa grew used to them, the way he had grown used to so many undesirable things before. It was funny, really, what a person could get used to. In Sonsonate, it had been fear. In the trek north, it had been violence. In the detention center, it had been uncertainty. In Roseboro, with Denis, those first few years when it had just been Rafa and his brother, it had been happiness.

Now, it was thorns.

As Elisa worked on her homework and Rafa ignored his, the news blared on the small, old television. A protest in Raleigh. Or a rally, maybe. Possibly both. The crowd was in support of a wall. They were protesting—well, him, really. They were protesting him.

Someone in the crowd was holding a sign that said RETURN TO SENDER. The footage showed other signs too, finally focusing on a hastily scrawled one in red: DIE, ILLEGALS, DIE.

Elisa cast him a worried glance. “Rafa, it’s just the news. They want controversy—” Rafa let out a bitter laugh. Everyone already thought he was a criminal who was going nowhere. And as for dying, well, Denis had done that already. At least the Ochoa boys were fulfilling expectations.

On Rafa’s arms, the thorns crackled further.

Late that night, when the pain from his personal thicket woke him up, Rafa rose to his feet and out into the living room. He was looking for medicine, or water, even, but on his way to the kitchen sink he stopped.

Tía Irma was lying on the couch, the TV lighting the room a silent, glowing blue. She must have fallen asleep shortly after coming home from work. Something inside Rafa twisted guiltily. If he weren’t here, Irma and Daniel would have one less person to pay for. But he didn’t know where he’d go.

He reached to scratch awkwardly at his arm, then paused. Not wanting to get the thorns from one hand caught on the other. Not wanting to hurt more than he already did.

Rafa looked down on his aunt for a moment. Then he grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch, draped it gently over his aunt, and went back to bed.
And then Monday came. Rafa sat through school, his arms stiff. He had given up expecting anyone to notice the thorns. They didn’t hurt anymore; they just felt like part of him.

As though his arms were made of brambles instead of skin or bones.

In his English class, there was some conversation about the rally from the weekend—a handful of students who declared proudly that they knew people who had been there, another handful who wished they had. Rafa sat still and stiff, trying not to look like he was listening. But it was hard to ignore Joyner’s loud, drawled comment: *Rapists and criminals, isn’t that right, Rafa?*

Mr. North didn’t hear Joyner specifically, but he took control of the classroom. There was some general reprimanding. Rafa doubted anyone was listening.

The pounding need to get to the woods behind the school—to fight, to fight—quaked through Rafa, and he spent the whole day staring at the clock. Knees bouncing eagerly. Brittle fingers drilling against the wood of his desks.

Finally, finally, it was time. Rafa dropped off his bag in the auditorium. He turned to duck out of the room—

And felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Tell me you’re not going back there.”

He turned, the hand dropping as he moved. “Elisa.”

His cousin stood there, her eyes pleading. “Rafa, please. You’re going to get hurt. Can’t you just stay here? For once?”

Rafa scoffed. “And watch you practice?”

“What? Why would I care about that?” Rafa hadn’t meant it to come out that way: so incredulous. Rafa cared about the Holocaust the average amount, probably—but Elisa had made it sound like this was a particular topic of interest for him, and it wasn’t.

Two red spots were burning high in his cousin’s cheeks. “Because there is a difference between telling a story and bearing witness,” Elisa snapped.

Rafa just looked at her, confused.
“Look, we’ve been talking about it in drama. The Holocaust is a story everyone already thinks they know. There are good guys and bad guys and sometimes the people making movies or plays skip the truth part and go right into sensationalism because that’s what audiences expect.”

Rafa paused, then nodded slowly, because it seemed like Elisa was waiting for him to do something and he couldn’t think of anything to say.

“That’s what’s happening with you. Everyone already thinks they know your story. Only the people telling it are like those idiots on the news or the jerk you keep fighting—they’re wrong, Rafa, they’re wrong. You’re the only one who can bear witness. And fighting won’t change anything.”

He said, “In order to bear witness, someone has to be listening.”

Elisa opened her mouth—but then the drama teacher was shouting for the students to get back onstage, and Elisa paused. So Rafa took advantage of the moment and ducked away.

Facing Joyner sometimes felt like facing a giant: not because Joyner was much taller or stronger than Rafa, but because of everything he represented. Money, and power, and legacy. Things Rafa had never had.

Rafa stood in the usual spot, half-hidden in shadow by the trees. The sunlight filtered through the leaves, turning the whole clearing a dusky, golden brown.

When Joyner showed up, Rafa didn’t wait for a speech. He didn’t wait to allow himself a spike of hatred at Joyner’s perfectly rich appearance. He didn’t wait to say, Why can you see the thorns? He didn’t wait for a greeting. He didn’t want to talk.

Instead, Rafa threw himself at Joyner. And Joyner responded.

Like snarling wolves, Rafa and Joyner grappled with each other, a blur of fists and feet and knees and thorns.

It felt good to pound out the truth of things, letting his anger out into action. Rafa imagined he was punching the gangs in Sonsonate and the corrupt police in Mexico and the border guards in Arizona and the people at the rally. He shouldn’t have tried; Rafa knew that fighting things larger than himself always meant he would lose.

And he was losing now.

Everything ached. Knuckles on fire. Leaves and underbrush were sent into the air under their feet. Joyner connected nearly as often as Rafa did, maybe more, and Rafa was breaking, and breaking, and breaking.

Joyner drew his arm across his forehead and looked down at where Rafa lay on the forest floor, curled around himself. Sneering.

“I don’t know why you even try. You really are a waste of space.”
“No, I’m not.” Rafa surprised himself by saying it. His thorny fingers dug into the earth at his sides, feeling the reality of it. Soft and damp. He remembered what Elisa had said: bear witness.

His stomach twisted. He didn’t want to think about Elisa.

He didn’t have to for long: Joyner laughed in his face.

Far worse than losing to Joyner was the moment, later, when Rafa had to meet Elisa’s eyes at the end of rehearsal. After Rafa limped back through the auditorium, feeling sick and hurt and bruised. Rafa was surprised by the guilt he felt—as though the thorns had somehow found their way from his arms into his stomach. Worse, too, was the disappointment in Elisa’s expression at the sight of new bruises and dirt in Rafa’s hair. Worst of all was Elisa’s silence.

There really was nothing more for her to say.

Rafa’s fists—which had been clenched tight—loosened and fell to his sides.

A few days later, Rafa trudged into his bedroom from the pick-up soccer game happening down the road. He was covered in sweat and cut grass and thorns, always the thorns. He had not fought with Joyner again. He didn’t think he would. Rafa wasn’t sure he could explain why other than to say that Rafa no longer had the energy to lose. He had gone looking for a fight because he had wanted to lose one. It wasn’t what he wanted anymore.

He didn’t know what he wanted.

Rafa slung his bag off his shoulders, kicking off his shoes as he made for his chair. But he paused. There was something on his desk, something that hadn’t been there earlier. Rafa moved closer and looked down on it until he understood.

A pad of over-sized water color paper. Some pencils. A set of paints. And a note.

The note read, in its entirety, *Do something with your hands. Draw something true.*

Elisa’s handwriting.

Rafa studied the blank white paper, the paints. He thought about what Elisa had said about bearing witness. He thought about the way his fists felt pounding against Joyner. He thought about the car crash that had killed his brother. He thought about people bearing signs of hatred, demanding that he leave the States forever. He thought about the briar patch twisted across his arms.

And then Rafa sat down and began to sketch.

He tried painting several things, though he started with a hope and a lie.
It was difficult to draw anything at first because the thorns kept scraping against the paper. Once or twice there were horrible sounds and Rafa worried the paper had torn. Other times, once he had started to set watercolor to the page, the thorns dragged their way through the colors, smearing them. Rafa cursed quietly and dabbed away the mistakes.

The first painting was this: himself, Papá, and Denis, standing outside a two-story colonial house. A small one, compared to the mansions lining the downtown streets of Roseboro. Still, much larger than anything Rafa had actually lived in. The shutters were blue.

The house was the hope, not the lie.

The lie was what was on Rafa's face: a smile, stretched wide. Making drawing—Rafa's eyes crinkle. It was too happy.

Real Rafa examined the impossible scene, then crumpled it in his fist.

He pulled out a new sheet of paper and tried again. This time, a scene from the trip north: a view from the top of a speeding train, all lines and motion. There was no sense making it a watercolor; watercolor could never communicate the violence or the speed of La Bestia, the cool metal under an inky sky. So Rafa drew it furiously, dark lines forcefully made, and there in the corner, huddled onto the roof of the train: Rafa and Denis. Heads hunched down against the wind.

Even drawing it, Rafa couldn't help but think of a girl he and Denis had been traveling with. The girl had fallen from the roof of the train. She'd probably died. Neither Rafa nor Denis had stuck around to find out.

Something on his arm snapped.

Rafa paused his furious drawing, glancing down in horror, half-expecting to see a piece of his arm on the page. He was half-right: a thick bramble had broken off his arm. It lay on the paper like an accusation.

Rafa gritted his teeth, batted it away, and drew again.

This time, it was the sparse rooms of the icebox—the detention center where he and Denis had been sent when they first arrived in Arizona. Rafa drew it as he remembered it at night: full of huddled forms with reflective emergency blankets pulled tight against them to protect from the unbelievable cold. Even as Rafa drew, he shivered. His shaking hand made the lines tremble. He thought of Denis promising him things would be all right. He thought of the flood of English, the fear of a future he didn't understand.

There was more snapping. Smaller. A series of crackling breaks.

Rafa swept off the thorns with his pencil shavings. And still he drew, his eyes blurring wetly.

The car crushed against the tree, that last, awful night. Denis's body on a stretcher. The horrible, cruel realization that Denis might have actually lived longer if he had stayed in El Salvador. If he had left Rafa behind. If Rafa hadn't shouted at him and made Denis take off in the middle of the night down a poorly-lit road.
Rafa’s paper was flecked with thorns: fallen brambles, and with spots: fallen tears.

Denis’s biggest dream had been to come to America, and Rafa felt suddenly sick, because how could America mean anything if coming meant losing everything? But then he thought of his overworked aunt and uncle and his cousin who cared, and Rafa knew he hadn’t lost everything. Not everything.

Rafa didn’t decide so much to stop drawing as his hand decided to simply let go. He was crying now, in a way he hadn’t allowed himself in years. Violent, core-shaking sobs. Mourning a life that used to be his, and the brother who should still be there, and the future no one seemed to want him to have.

The future he knew he deserved.

Rafael Ochoa was tired of losing.

His arms were no longer a thicket, exactly, but more of a rose bush: twisted, still, with thorns, but surrounded by the silk of petals. Something cruel and beautiful. It shouldn’t have been possible.

Rafa sucked in a deep, shuddering breath, wiping roughly at his eyes. He pushed back his chair, piled his drawings together. And he padded quietly to Elisa’s room, where he left the drawings in front of her door. Setting them down was like setting down a backpack filled with stones.

Bearing witness.

Elisa had told him to draw something true, and he had.

Here was a truth: Rafa wanted a future to look forward to, and he was allowed to want it.

Here was a truth: he deserved happiness as much as anybody else.

And here was a final truth: accidents happened and the world kept turning, and Denis’s death was not Rafa’s fault, it was not his fault.

As he stood in the hallway by Elisa’s room, he glanced down at his arms—almost entirely back to normal. Now, though, they were dusted with the deep red-orange petals of a tropical flower he thought he recognized. The petals were silky against his skin. On the back of his hand, there was a single briar, but it was not deep. Rafa reached over and plucked it out. So small. The sort of thing you find stuck to your shoe.

The motion had sent petals tumbling from his arms. They drifted gently down.

“I am not anything I don’t want to be,” Rafa whispered.

He brushed the rest of the bright flamboyán petals from his skin and watched as they fluttered to the ground. He let the briar join them.

“And that,” he said, “is something true.”