



Smoke

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Magdalena's eyes narrowed and became an even darker ebony the day she saw the images flash across the screen—the crying children reaching out to their shackled mothers, the sea of brown faces herded like cattle. She had warned her granddaughter of her dark visions, of the signs, the omens that told her not to travel, not to take the road northward.

But her granddaughter, Celia, considered herself a *moderna*,¹ relegating her grandmother's *brujeria*²—and all the omens and curses that were part of it—a relic of a superstitious out-of-date world. Besides, she told her, she had to leave because Antonio was going to turn ten, and already they were pressuring him to deliver *paquetes*³ to *touristas*⁴ in the local hotels. Magdalena had offered to place curses on these men, on their whole families if needed, but Celia was not satisfied that this would provide sufficient protection. Before she and the two children left, they accepted Magdalena's incantation of protection and the gold medals of Our Lady of Guadalupe that had been kept in the family for generations. Magdalena's five-year-old great granddaughter kissed the medal as she had seen the adult women do when they prayed at the altar rail. But Celia had only accepted out of respect for her grandmother, not betraying her own agnosticism, hoping that a half-belief would grant them some protection.

There was no way for her to know if Celia and the children were among those she saw trapped in the cruel net of the *monstro*⁵ who would tear families apart. It had only been two weeks since they left, without any clear plan of how to cross, so Magdalena hoped they had not tried and would soon be coming home. But the only news of her daughter she had was what she texted over a week ago. Even her middle-aged daughter had the new phones without wires, but Magdalena had no use for such devices. Her latest update was a push-button phone instead of a rotary with a long cord she could stretch throughout the few rooms of her small house.

She had seen the images on a television screen in the window of a furniture store on her way back from the *panaderia*⁶ where she had gone to buy sweet bread for the week. She didn't own a television set but had kept the radio on for days, hearing the reports of what was happening on the border. She had heard about children in cages, heard the entreaties of parents who had no knowledge of where their children had been taken. People didn't think *brujas*⁷ shed tears, but her

1 modern woman

2 witchcraft

3 packets

4 tourists

5 monster

6 bakery

7 witches

eyes shone like obsidian each time she heard about the separations.

Everything changed the day she saw the images for the first time. A deep determination betrayed by the brittle darkness of her eyes which no longer made tears settled within her. This was beyond tears, beyond whatever emotions and human actions that could be summoned. But she knew she had to wait until he was at his weakest and most vulnerable. And so it was after his defeat and his anguished failures to maintain power that she called on her sisters in *brujeria* to meet at her house. They did not form covens like the witches of lore in Europe and America. There were strong bonds not only through decades but generations of *brujeria*. Her advanced age gave her some cache among those she knew, the font of knowledge of the generations before them. So, when she called for them to come, it went unsaid that all would appear at her doorstep.

Magdalena set out the platter of *pan dulce*,⁸ a pot of *te de yerba buena*,⁹ and cups and plates in preparation for her guests. At the far end of the table, she placed a woven basket filled with charcoal. At exactly two P.M., four women appeared in her doorway and quickly shuffled into their places around the table, the usual social greetings replaced by a nod, each recognizing that this was urgent and not a social call. The women ranged in age from their mid-fifties to their sixties, Magdalena the eldest at seventy-five.

“Sabemos porque todos estamos aquí,”¹⁰ began Magdalena. The group nodded slightly in acknowledgement. “Por los niños.”¹¹

“Por los niños,” they repeated as though saying a holy litany.

Each woman then pulled out the five pieces of paper they had been requested to bring. In fine script or in bold and crooked printing, they had written the most powerful of all the curses in their repertoires.

“Bien,”¹² said Magdalena, and the women solemnly passed the slips of paper around the table. Then Magdalena stood and passed the basket around, asking them each to take several large pieces of charcoal, for the heart and for the lungs, she explained. She passed around kerchiefs to tie and carry the charcoal home with them.

Next, they selected an hour tomorrow when they all, each in her own home, would set the charcoal on fire and use bellows to make clouds of smoke that would rise as they read the curse-filled incantations.

Once the business was settled, they relaxed into the company of old friends over tea and *pan dulce* and talked of family and past times when they had joined forces.

At two o'clock the next day, confident that her sisters were doing the same, Magdalena lit a flame on the liquid covering the little stack of charcoal she had prepared in the open pit behind her house. The flames burst bright, then settled into an orange cover hovering over the pieces of charcoal. Magdalena tended to the flames, waiting and watching for the coals to glow. When it was time, she pumped the bellows to make the smoke curl into the sky, and then she began the incantations, singing them, Gregorian chant-style, into the burning coals, into the rising smoke, into the open sky for miles across the continent.

The ex-President stood on a stage alongside the few miles of border wall he had been able to have constructed during his term in office. “Here, behind me,” he yelled, “is the greatest legacy of my presidency.” The crowd roared in response. As he began to raise his arms to receive their adulation,

8 sweet bread

9 mint tea

10 “We all know why we are here.”

11 “For the children.”

12 “Good” or “Fine”

he was suddenly overcome with such forceful, convulsive coughing that he had to grab onto the podium to maintain his balance. The crowd fell into hushed whispers as they watched him struggle to gain his breath. He lifted one hand toward them in a gesture of reassurance, then held onto the podium and began speaking again. But after a few words had been muttered, he was overcome by an escalating siege of coughing. Aides now rushed to his side and guided him off the stage, the buzz in the audience rising behind them. Between spasms, the ex-President whispered, “My heart feels like it's on fire!”

Emergency procedures were put into place, and in a short time a helicopter had medevacked him to The Mayo Clinic Hospital in Phoenix where the Chief of Staff was waiting to attend the former president. Each time the ex-President spoke to describe his symptoms, the coughing spasms erupted. The heavily masked physician pressed his stethoscope against the ex-President's chest and a shadow passed across his face. The doctor immediately admitted the ex-President for a battery of tests to try and understand what had changed so suddenly and so radically in his breathing, particularly since the COVID test was negative.

After CT scans, MRIs, and multiple blood panels, the doctor stood at the ex-President's hospital bed. “I can tell you what we found, but I can't really give you any good reasons why,” he began. “First, the good news: your blood work all came back normal.”

“What's the bad news?” the ex-President asked, grimacing and beginning to cough again.

“I don't understand the CT scans and MRI of your lungs. I know you've never smoked, but your lungs look like you've been smoking for fifty years. Though it doesn't look like cancer, two lobes are so badly damaged that they will have to be removed and biopsied. It just doesn't look like anything that the thoracic surgeon or the radiologist have ever seen. We're really baffled. I've ordered respiratory therapy to begin right away, which will give you relief from that cough.” The physician handed the ex-President an iPad and stylus. “In the meantime, use this instead of your voice.”

He grabbed the iPad and quickly wrote, “Feels like my heart is on fire.”

The doctor hesitated. “Yeeeah, you mentioned that. We've done every test there is, and they all came out negative. We can't find anything wrong with your heart or any explanation for the burning sensation, but we'll have you wear a monitor for a while to watch the symptoms over time.”

He hesitated then wrote, “When can I go back to work? We've got lots of rallies lined up.”

“That's the thing,” the doctor said. “The surgery is pretty heavy duty—we're cutting through the ribs—so there's a long recovery time and therapy to keep the rest of the lungs functioning well. Plus, we still have to figure out what to do about your heart complaint. It could take months if you want to have a good quality of life.”

Magdalena pressed her hand against the American newspaper to keep it in place as she nailed it to the wall. She stepped back, her dark eyes shining in the morning light as she read the headline: Former U.S. President Hospitalized with Mystery Illness.