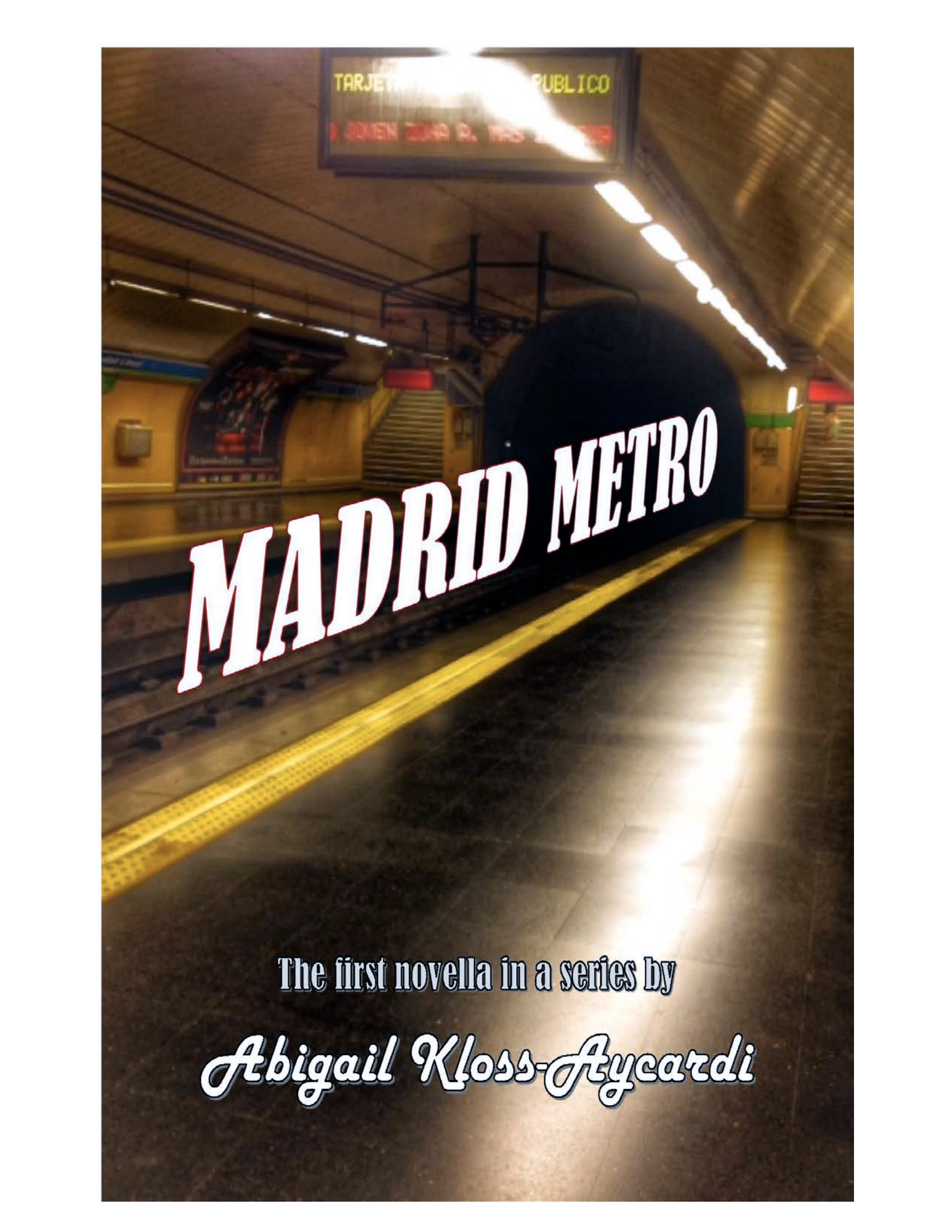


A photograph of a Madrid Metro station platform. The platform has a yellow tactile paving strip along the edge. In the background, a dark tunnel entrance is visible, flanked by stairs. A digital display above the platform shows "TARJETA PUBLICA" and "1 JUNIO 2019 A. 18:50".

MADRID METRO

The first novella in a series by

Abigail Kloss-Aycardi

Madrid Metro

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This book is a work of fiction. People, places, events and situations are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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You took my often times rough-edged words and ideas
and made them smoother than satin.

Thank you so very much!

Madrid Metro by Abigail Kloss-Aycardi

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*I dedicate this book to my parents,
Steve & Ruth Kloss.
It's true that we all have a story in us.
Thank you, as always, for all your encouragement.*

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CHAPTER 1

The train was moving too quickly for the curve and began to jackknife and slide off the track, sending people and objects flying to the opposite side of the car. Gasps and screams filled the air. The sound of metal scraping, grating and screaming was almost deafening. Everything went black. Olivia was thrown with a tremendous thrust into the opposite railing, dislocating her left shoulder initially. Before she could finish crying out in pain, the force sent her flying straight toward Jess.

All he could think about was the woman that was being thrown into his arms,

“She’ll never know who I am. She’ll never know how I-”

Olivia’s battered shoulder caught his throat, choking him, sending both their heads into the glass window behind. Her messenger bag, still hanging around her shoulder, went flying and landed with a powerful blow right into Doña Maritza’s stomach, knocking the wind out of her. The train continued to slide diagonally along the track with the same terrible grinding noise and spewing sparks. Then, to make matters worse, the car began to tilt until it finally fell on the side where Jess and Doña Maritza were sitting. All the passengers and their belongings were thrown on top of the windows. The weight was too much and the passengers simply fell out. Jess and Olivia hung out of the train, with only their legs still inside. Jess grabbed onto the edge of the window opening in an attempt not to be crushed as the train continued to slide with a terrible grinding sound, sparks showering everything, creating the only light to be seen. Doña Maritza had just barely grabbed onto the railing at her side and was holding on with all her might.

As she grasped for the railing, with people and objects being tossed about all around her, she thought,

“Please God no! This is my chance to right the wrongs of my idiot husband once and for all. I’ll get to return to my home with a cleared reputation. My children won’t carry their father’s sins any longer. Please God, not yet!”

The train finally stopped moving. There was the sound of something like compressed air leaking from somewhere at the front of the train. There was a very strong noxious odor as well. The little Romanian girl’s cry turned into a scream.

When Jess came to, gasping for air, he felt a weight on him, his back burned and his head was pounding. He searched frantically for the iPod in his jacket. He pulled it out, relieved to find that it was still functional. He found the flashlight application and turned it on, waving it around above his head to see what was on top of him. It was Olivia, limp like a soaked paper bag. She made no sound.

Doña Maritza was cut and bleeding, but she didn’t feel as though she was seriously hurt. She still clung to the railing, hanging for a little while, trying to get her bearings. Finally, she saw Jess’ light below her and realized that she wasn’t very far above the ground. She let go of the railing and when she landed on the ground, she could see that Jess was trapped underneath Olivia’s small body.

At that moment, all of Doña Maritza’s motherly instincts went into action. Olivia and Jess were now *her* children and she was going to get them out of this metal trap! She slowly maneuvered around a lifeless body and a duffle bag. She

reached underneath Olivia, above her chest and just underneath her hips, and lifted her enough for Jess to slide out from underneath and take hold of her. Very slowly and carefully they sat down on the ground and gently turned Olivia over. Then Jess put the light full on her face.

“Dios Santo!” cried Doña Maritza.

Jess felt a spasm and began to sob, “Olivia! Olivia!”

Her face was covered in blood from the gash at the top of her head and scratched from sliding across the ground. There was a cut that ran from the left side of her head behind her left ear down to her neck. Her hair was matted with blood, gravel and glass.

Jess cradled her head in his hand and stared at her, his features frozen in a panic-stricken contortion. Doña Maritza took the iPod from his hand when she saw how he had begun to tremble. His hand hovered above her forehead as though he was afraid to touch her lest she disappear. He bent his head over her face and delicately stroked her hair. The whole time, his eyes filled with tears, brimmed with them, spilled over with them until they fell upon Olivia’s pale face. He began to sob bitterly like a small boy. He gently pressed his lips to her forehead and rocked back and forth, his tears now dripping down both their faces.

Doña Maritza stayed motionless as she took in this tragic scene. His grief was palpable, so much so that she found herself holding her breath. Suddenly, she shook Jess’ arm, trying to arrest his attention and rouse him to action. He finally looked at her like a frightened child. She pulled tissues from her big vinyl shoulder bag that she had somehow managed to retain in all the chaos. Then she unwound the scarf from around her own neck. Swiftly tearing it into pieces, she folded the layers of the scarf and put them in Jess’ open hand. Then she placed his hand on top of the gash on Olivia’s head and along the cut. She then held it firmly and nodded at him. He was to understand that he had to hold it there to stop the bleeding. Then she set to work searching out any other serious wounds that may not have been visible. When she found none, she began to explain to Jess what they were going to do. She spoke loudly and slowly so he would understand her.

“You are going to hold her like that. I am going to take your light and look for a way out.”

“But-“

“We have to take her to a hospital. Take these tissues and try to clean her face. We will need to carry her out...and...eeh...” She took Jess’ blue scarf from underneath his jacket and wound it around Olivia’s head twice to secure the make-shift bandage. They would have to carry her out of the tunnel and they wouldn’t be able to compress the wounds.

Doña Maritza gently placed a hand on Jess’ face motioning him to lean forward. Taking the light she surveyed his injuries. The back of his jacket was soaked, presumably with blood, and it was caked with gravel as well.

“Chu-leta! Dios mio!” she didn’t hold back from using her customary Panamanian expressions of shock.

He had a large bump on the back of his head. She touched it gently making him wince. In all of the commotion, once Olivia’s bag had dislodged itself from Doña Maritza’s stomach, it swung around and cushioned Jess’ head when they fell

together out of the train. Doña Maritza knew that if it hadn't been for that bag, Jess would never have survived the blow.

"Chuzo!" she let another Panamanian exclamation shoot from her lips.

Doña Maritza shook the tears away, took the iPod from Jess and surveyed the train car. The small door at the front of the car appeared undamaged. She tiptoed the best she could around the lifeless bodies, the moaning injured and the strewn baggage. Upon reaching the door, she was unable to open it. It was either locked or jammed. Searching around her for something to break the door's window, she found a cane. Turning her head away she banged on the window repeatedly, putting all of her weight into it. She swore several times, asking God for forgiveness. A big boy of about sixteen, called to her,

"Wait! Let me try!"

He respectfully moved her to the side, and with just two thrusts of his big, heavy boots, kicked out the glass. Then he took the cane from the Doña and chipped away the loose glass. It was a small opening, but it would have to do. The carriage in front of them had been disconnected in the accident and it was the only way out.

She called out to everyone in the train car,

"There's a way out! Get out now!" Her shrill yet commanding motherly voice roused many from their daze.

Jess had been intensely occupied with wiping Olivia's face. He couldn't tell if she was breathing or not and was too afraid to search for a pulse. The idea of losing her when he had only just found her was beyond consideration. Resting his forehead against hers he began speaking softly to her.

"Please don't leave me. Please hang on. There's so much to tell you."

When he heard the Doña yell, he regained some sense of awareness beyond Olivia. Slowly he carefully stood up in the dark carefully cradling Olivia in his arms. Bending his head over her face he whispered earnestly, "Please!"

He took her messenger bag and handed it to Doña Maritza.

Those who hadn't lost their lives were in a rough state but they could help each other, so they let Jess out of the car first. Many of them had located lights of one kind or another and followed behind Doña Maritza. Several worked together to carry out the limp bodies. Some were dead and others were simply unable to move. As they climbed out of the car, they observed more survivors crawling out from the other cars behind theirs.

It took some time to maneuver around the wreckage but once they had passed, they could spread out across the tunnel and move more quickly. After what seemed an eternity, they spotted the light of the next station, the way out.

A loud explosion sent them all tumbling to the ground, but Jess held on to Olivia, falling with a wince and yelp to his knees. His head was still throbbing. They turned and saw an orb of orange fire push itself out of the train. Several of the surviving passengers began to sob uncontrollably. The little Romanian girl screamed as the elderly man with Il Mondo in his coat pocket clutched her to his chest trying to calm her.

They all stayed frozen in shock. Finally, Doña Maritza called out in her shrill voice once again:

“Adelante!”

They got up and pushed onward until they reached the abandoned station. As they came out of the metro tunnel and into the mid-morning sunlight police, fire fighters and emergency medical teams were just arriving and came rushing toward them, shouting and carrying gurneys.

CHAPTER 2

To anyone stepping onto the metro that day, Olivia would have appeared to be seated there since the beginning of time. The deep purple color in the scarf she wore over her charcoal gray hoodie was the only thing that made her obvious and kept the other passengers from sitting right on top of her. She was so tiny and looked so serene that she might have been a sculpture placed there by the city of Madrid to promote fine art appreciation.

Her head was inclined toward the small laptop that rested on her legs. Tiny brown cables could be seen running from the buds in her ears to some hidden location inside her jacket and were mostly hidden from view by her long, chestnut colored hair that lay straight and shiny over her shoulders. Her brown, thick-rimmed glasses were more like blinders and hid her peripheral vision from the sight of others, something that, as a true introvert, she relied on whenever she was surrounded by people. At a glance, Olivia looked like a fifteen year old girl rather than a woman in her late twenties. She was so petite and her oval face was so small. Her almond-shaped eyes and softly pronounced cheekbones made her look quite young. She had a tiny mouth with slightly thin lips that she bit lightly as she typed.

In reality she hadn't been on the train long at all, but she was determined to write the poem. That morning as she lay in bed regaining consciousness a smile slowly spread across her face. Then her teeth began to show and her belly trembled. A hearty laugh shook the whole bed. Then a long sigh slid from her lips, and then, "W O W". She had had one of those dreams. The kind that stay with you all day long, making you smile like a fool at random moments throughout the day, or even burst into giggles. She lay still with her eyes open, staring at the orchids on her windowsill, reliving the dream. Those who knew her well, knew that this particular stare meant she was composing in her head. Suddenly, she jumped out of bed, talking to herself in low tones as she scrambled to get her mp3 player. She yanked ankle socks onto her feet and then jammed her feet into her athletic shoes.

She plugged in the treadmill, tucked in her ear buds and started a brisk walk, toying with the mp3 player searching for the right song. She landed on it with a smile: "The One Who Got Away" by The Civil Wars. Perfect. As she picked up the pace, the emotions, visions and words melded together.

An hour later as she brushed her teeth, looking at her wet hair in the mirror, she began to talk it out:

"Ma fow kiez foo ma powz..." She had to hear herself say it out loud so she could remember it on the train. As soon as she was ready, she left her apartment and jogged through the streets repeating the words over and over in her head because there was no time to stop to jot them down anywhere.

"My soul cries through my pores..."

She ran down to the metro with her laptop naked and tightly grasped in her hand. Standing with a stony look of frustration, she waited impatiently for the train to pull up. There was just no more space inside her brain for all the words and images and ideas. They had to be typed out *now* so they wouldn't slip away into the vacuum of daily life, never to be recovered thereafter. As soon as the train

rolled to a stop and the doors slid open, she settled into the first space she saw, throwing her messenger bag underneath the seat with the strap wrapped around her foot for security and quick retrieval.

After that, the world around her just fell away. Her delicate fingers tap danced in a flurry across the keyboard. Once she had recorded the key thoughts, she blinked and began to breathe normally again. She stretched a little, then continued the finger dancing for a while longer before she became aware of the activity going on outside of 'her hive'. She looked up to see where she was. She was crossing Madrid for an appointment with an attorney. It would take nearly an hour to get there, giving her plenty of time to write.

By the time Jess Wilkinson stepped through the open carriage doors of the Madrid Metro, there was little space to sit. The doors nearly crushed him as he slipped through and tumbled onto the seat beside the door. Olivia, who was between worlds, didn't realize that the seat on her right was now taken until she saw a knee. (Her beloved glasses that kept her from the prying eyes of others had completely blocked her view of Jess getting situated beside her. Her music had turned tranquil, he lurched forward for one instant as the train pulled away from the station and she suddenly saw a knee appear.) The young man was distracted by what looked like a blank business card with a phone number scribbled on one side that was lodged under his seat. To her relief he didn't see the dramatic flinch she made with her entire body. By the time he faced forward in the seat, she appeared to be in her original sculpture-like attitude.

Jess' visit to Madrid was largely unplanned. He had scheduled this month-long holiday at the beginning of the year, but when the time drew near to leave London, he still had no accommodations, no itinerary and no intentions. His Spanish wasn't perfect, which made his co-workers tease him relentlessly up to the minute that he clocked out on the previous Friday afternoon. He just wasn't the kind of person to over-plan things. Brushing up on his Spanish, planning out where he'd stay or which attractions he'd like to visit wasn't really his style. His mother worried about this quite a bit and she called him before he left. He drove her crazy with his lackadaisical talk:

"Mum, don't worry. When I get there I'll go wherever things look interesting. If I like the smells coming from a restaurant, I'll eat there. If I like the way a road looks, I'll take it." (Commence the stern chiding) "I don't need your map. I have a mobile and, Mum, that map is older than you!" (Louder stern chiding) "Mum. Find Russia on it....It says 'U.S.S.R.' doesn't it?" (Silence) "Besides, I'm staying in Madrid. I don't need a map of the whole of Europe." (Yielding tone of voice) "Yes, I'm packing some jumpers and – (Concerned tone) "The parka?! It's October in 'Sunny Spain', not January in Scotland!"

Jess sat on the metro smiling at the black parka on his lap. For all his teasing, he couldn't vex his mother any longer and gave in to her wish.

When he looked up, he took a deep breath. He was on holiday. At last. He began to look around at his fellow passengers. They were all quiet except for a little Romanian girl at the end of the car who was chattering away to her young mother. A handsome man in his seventies was reading *Il Mondo* while peering around a long loaf of French bread that he secured between his knees. Jess glanced at all

the people surrounding him like a curious five year old boy on his first trip to the fair, taking everything in with comically wide eyes. For someone who had just turned thirty-two, his countenance was quite youthful. He had a copious amount of unruly golden brown curls that his fingers got lost in whenever he tried to smooth them. His eyes were as blue as the Caribbean Sea on a sunny day. They were full of feeling and were crowned by two eyebrows like marquees that spoke a myriad of emotions all on their own as they arched and dipped. He had a slightly ruddy complexion and a graceful yet masculine jaw that was finely hewn. He was known for his decidedly jovial grin whenever something caught his fancy. It was that silly grin that often got him scolded by his parents and teachers as a kid. It was that mischievous grin that could make a girl feel weak enough to sit down if it was directed at her.

His grin however, was something that his family and closest friends had been missing for quite some time. His heart had been badly bruised and broken by a cruel and selfish young woman. There was something about her that made him feel like an electrical current ran through him whenever she was around, something dazzling about her. She had a spark, a mischievous *something* that made her irresistible to him. Her subtle flirtation made him feel as though she was tickling his heart with the tip of a feather. He had invested a year loving her from a distance and another year basking anxiously in her inconstant attention. He spent all his free time, late at night imagining what was in her heart. How noble she must be. How kind and understanding she must be. He had painted her portrait on his heart, more beautiful than any human being could ever be.

She called him from time to time, inviting him to parties, confiding in him and even begging him to trust her when he felt insecure about what there was between them. Her presence had been something he longed for continually, leaving him breathless, tremulous, even a bit nauseous on occasion. She could make his day by a simple text message or she could break his day by not being within view in a room. He dangled from her fingers like a pitifully neglected puppet. He saw the attentions she paid so many other young men shamelessly. He would burn inside, then cool down, become melancholy and then, eventually, she would remember he existed and would soothe him with her sweet words and looks a few days later.

When he had become sufficiently worn out by the repeated emotional whiplash, she finally dropped the anvil on his heart once and for all. She became engaged to some sullen, soulless youth of twenty-two.

A part of him was relieved when he heard that she had married. Now she couldn't play with anyone else's heart as she had with his for so long. The other part of him, however, remained frustrated and deeply wounded. He had so much to offer her: his heart, his soul and boundless joy. Yet she had settled for a moody, petulant *boy*. He tried to console himself with the concept that she obviously had very low standards, and if that was what she had been looking for, then she got what she deserved. That line of thought never made him feel better. She chose someone else. ***She didn't want him.*** It was that simple. So with his heart went his beautiful infectious smile and twinkling eyes.

Jess looked beside him. Olivia had resumed her writing and was once again oblivious to all around her. He took comfort in her thick glasses and the bangs

that had fallen around her face, hiding her eyes. He could openly watch what she was doing. First he saw the ear buds and knew she was listening to some sort of recording, probably Bach or something of that nature, he imagined. She *looked* like someone who would listen to Bach. One of those smart types, all quiet and reserved. Her fingers were in full motion but suddenly came to a dead stop, frozen in a talon-like position that made Jess' hair stand on end. Did she realize he was watching her? He fumbled for his iPod and pretended to look for something. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the last three fingers of her right hand move just slightly to a beat or rhythm only she could hear. He couldn't help himself. He turned his head to watch again. With a dive like a bird of prey, her fingers came down again on the keyboard, her typing almost frenzied. Again a sudden, brief pause. Then a few decidedly dramatic key strokes and that was it. She stretched out her fingers, tenderly laying them across the keys in a manner that was akin to reverent thanks.

Olivia took a long, deep breath and relaxed all her muscles. Now the poem wouldn't be bouncing around inside her head all day, driving her crazy. She scrolled to the top of the page to determine how it sounded as a whole:

Too Real To Be A Dream

*My feet are hitting the conveyor belt pavement with urgency
My soul cries through my pores
I know they say that dreams are snippets of things on our mind
Moments that collide in the night
I believe it but something runs deeper
You run deeper*

*You're not just a snippet
You're something buried deep within my psyche
Moments we've never had that collide in the night
You're too real not to exist somewhere outside of my mind
Your arms around me
Your clear eyes delving into my secret self
Knowing all there is to know and loving me anyway*

*How are you just an image or a feeling that my mind has stitched together?
Where do you roam?
Why does your soul cry out to me
And taunt me thus?*

*Come for me
I know you're out there
Because you're just too real to be a dream*

Olivia Polansky
{Written on the treadmill}

Jess stared at that name. “Olivia Polansky”. *This* was Olivia Polansky. He leaned heavily against the railing beside him to try to have a better view of her. She had taken one of the ear buds out and it was sitting on her shoulder now. He could hear the music. It was the same song she had been listening to on the treadmill.

So much for Bach he thought. Her choice of music aside, he was astonished to be sitting next to *Olivia Polansky*. She was right next to him and his fascination was rapidly intensifying. He wished more than anything to see her face and desperately wanted to look into her eyes. He was sure that she was exactly as he had imagined her all along.

CHAPTER 3

The train came to its next stop. Doña Maritza Caballero de Lezcano clutched her large vinyl shoulder bag with both hands as though she carried half a million dollars inside it. She tugged at her pink scarf and the collar of her bright red trench coat. She hated big cities. At least this one was clean and organized but it was definitely a far cry from Panama City with its garbage strewn about the streets, insane traffic and heavy air pollution. The metro hadn't been finished in the capital before she left and it was a cause for great complaint because it turned one way streets into two-way streets and made other streets obsolete. It was a nightmare to traverse the city no matter what time of day or what part of the year. Just the thought of it made her growl. She preferred her little country house in the Chiriquí province. Thinking of that brought tears to her eyes, so she took a deep breath and shook her head with decision. "No! Not that."

Doña Maritza looked at the carriage with dread. There were no open seats. No one was standing, but she hated not being able to sit. She was tired of being surrounded by so many people who were all unwilling to talk. If they weren't reading a newspaper or a book, they were listening to music, which, in her opinion was just a way to exclude people and be rude without apologies. She also hated being jostled about like a cow being transported in the back of a pickup truck. She was of small stature, about five feet tall. She was thin and had the appearance of someone who could easily fall over if the breeze blew too strongly. In truth however, she was quite strong, like a box elder tree whose branches look feeble but cannot be snapped in half, only bent. Her face had the same appearance. It was worn from years of difficulty, tanned from many hours in the sun and wrinkled from seventy years of existence. Her only true beauty was her sleek white hair that hung just below her chin and curled slightly at the bottom. Her black eyes had a dullness to them due to many a disappointment that could not be remedied. Though fragile in appearance, she was sinewy down to the very nucleus of her every cell. A woman who could endure anything and most certainly had.

The doors opened. Olivia immediately saw the frail looking Doña who seemed quite exasperated. In one swift movement, she slapped her laptop shut, lifted her leg with the messenger bag wound around it and threw the strap over her head:

"Doña, siéntese aquí," with a respectful and reassuring smile, she motioned to the lady to take her seat. The Doña's eyes lit up. She was relieved to see that there were still young people in the world who had good manners.

"But where will *you* sit, my love?" she asked, suddenly looking about her at the packed car.

"Don't worry yourself. I've been sitting for a while now. It will be good to stretch." Olivia replied kindly.

Doña Maritza took the seat beside Jess and gave a small sigh. She looked up at the young woman who now had her arm hooked around the rail that ran from the seat to the ceiling of the bench across from Jess. Olivia pulled the mp3 player out from inside her hoodie and started skipping songs. The device was in her hand which hung down at her side. Jess was an expert at reading things upside down. He watched with interest to see what other music she enjoyed. She landed on

Mumford & Sons, then Dean Martin, Lauryn Hill, James Brown, OneRepublic, Lara Fabian, Stevie Wonder, Modjo, The Gypsy Kings, Benny Goodman...it was clear that she was looking for something specific. Ah, she found it: Ella Fitzgerald singing "Summertime". This pleased Jess. A look of calm contentedness spread across Olivia's face. A good song. Soulful, rich, full of a kind of longing.

Doña Maritza removed her old-fashioned sunglasses and pulled out a brightly colored case that had a unique pattern. It immediately caught Olivia's attention.

"Doña. Excuse me, but have you ever been to Panama?" with a little hesitation.

The lady's hands dropped in surprise, "I *am* Panamanian! What made you ask?"

Olivia beamed, "I lived in Panama for several years and I would recognize a *mola* anywhere. They are so vibrant."

"You lived in Panama?!" This was going to be a better train ride than she thought. "Where?"

"I lived in Chiriquí, first in the mountains just below Volcán Barú, and after that, I moved to the bottom."

"What a thing!"

"Where did you get the *mola*?" Olivia felt more sociable now that her poem was written. She also had a little pride in knowing about the fabrics made by the Kuna, an indigenous tribe in the country. *Mola* was the Kuna word for 'fabric'.

"Well, I don't really like these things, but it was a gift from my granddaughter. I don't know why she thought I would like it. My other granddaughter gave me this as well." She took a small money pouch from her bag that was decidedly unlike the case. It had a unique jagged pattern like teeth that ran all the way across it in three different colors and the pouch itself was of a durable green fabric.

"That's made by the Ngäbe people!" Olivia's eyes widened. "How wonderful!"

"Wonderful you say? I'm Panamanian! I'm not a dirty, lazy Indian! Why would they give me such a thing?" Doña Maritza's eyes flashed with a kind of simplistic indignation.

Olivia's facial expression, which was usually quite calm, took on a very rigid appearance and her eyes went dull for a moment. She bit her bottom lip and turned away for a moment. When she looked at the woman again her eyes began to glitter.

"Doña. I can see that you are very proud to be Panamanian." (a pause) "But I beg you not to say such things to me about the indigenous people that I came to love. I had the privilege of knowing the Ngäbe people and I found them to be respectable, hardworking, generous and warm hearted."

Jess stared at Olivia. The car was very small and suddenly felt even smaller in the midst of this scene. He had wanted to observe her, see her face and eyes and now she was only four feet away from him. She was gripping the strap of her messenger bag so tightly that her knuckles turned white. She looked over to the front of the car and then drew off her reading glasses. Wiping her eye with the knuckle of her thumb, she put her glasses into a case inside her bag and replaced them with sunglasses that she pushed to the top of her head. This afforded Jess a better look at her face now that her hair was pulled back a bit. It was clear she was trying to restrain something profound that this elderly woman's comments had

stirred up within her. She was glad that no one around them was paying attention, or at least they didn't seem to be listening.

Doña Maritza was taken aback by such a staunch defense of a people she had scorned her whole life. Her parents spoke of them being lazy and dirty and brainless. Her parents were *always* right. She thought of all those ridiculous road blocks they put up that kept food, gasoline and water from making it across the country. She thought of them burning down the police stations throughout the country. All just because the government planned to build a dam on their lands. She didn't understand them at all and couldn't figure out what would make some *gringa* get all worked up over them. She looked hard at Olivia. She realized that there had to be something more behind this passionate response.

"*Niña*. You're a *gringa*." Olivia's head spun around and her eyes were fiery. She detested being called a *gringa*. To most Spanish speakers it simply meant a native English speaker. But to her, it was like having a hot poker jabbed into her ears.

Maritza continued, "Why would *you* ever have dealings with *indigenous people*?" putting a great deal too much emphasis on the words 'you' and 'indigenous people' for Olivia's taste.

This was the last straw for Olivia. This woman was completely insensitive to others' emotions, so Olivia had to deal with her as though she had no heart. Even if it meant wounding her blind pride.

"Where do you think *you* came from? You *all come from the indigenous*. Spaniards went to Panama and had children with the natives. The *original Panamanians, the real Panamanians*. The Kuna and the Ngäbe were in Panama *before you*."

Doña Maritza was born with dark skin, but these words turned her almost pale. She remained silent, with Olivia's eyes still on her, burning holes into her head. She thought she couldn't take any more of this conversation that had taken a sharp turn for the worse. But Olivia wasn't finished. She took a breath to steady herself.

"I lost everything. My home and my land that I purchased with my inheritance – gone – under the most unjust circumstances. I had no place to go and not enough money to pay even modest rent. My *dear indigenous friends took me into their home*. They insisted that I stay with them until I was able to stand on my feet again. I owe them so much for their kindness and generosity. They loved me like I was another member of their family. They expected *nothing in return*. Not a nickel." (Another deep breath) "And you tear them to shreds because your parents and grandparents taught you to hate before you could even speak. You know *nothing*."

It was over. Olivia had said it all. It was as though everything she had ever wanted to say to all the ignorant racists she had met in Panama finally tumbled out like a boulder onto this tiny lady. She didn't even care if she had offended her. If she was stupid enough to say those things out loud, she could take a little correction.

Jess spoke basic Spanish. Though he struggled to form some sentences and it took him a while to speak, he understood quite a bit. He understood nearly everything that had passed between Doña Maritza and Olivia except for a few

words. He could see the agitation of both women, but it was Olivia's he could feel as though it was his own. He struggled with the desire to go to her and offer her comfort but all he could do was gaze upon her.

Olivia felt like her words had been futile. Her father told her that attitudes and preconceived ideas are nearly impossible to change in people and even more so as they get older. Why did she let those comments provoke her so much? Ever since she was a little girl, attacks on her friends always sent her into this kind of fit.

Several minutes passed. Doña Maritza trembled. That last monologue had been the grenade that shattered the insensitive shell around her heart. She slowly leaned forward, stretching her hand out to Olivia:

"Your heart is much bigger than you are, and mine..." she wiggled her pinky finger, "is not big enough to fill this little finger. Please forgive me."

Olivia looked up in shock at the hand that was before her. Then she saw Doña Maritza's face. Her lips were trembling and tears were welling up, her eyes were almost fuchsia.

Olivia grabbed onto the railing with her left hand and extended her right hand to grasp Doña Maritza's.

"Maritza Caballero...de Lezcano, at your service."

Olivia nodded.

Now she was only two feet away from Jess and he could see that her face had relaxed a little and she would regain her composure. Her eyes were so full of feeling. He always thought brown eyes were like that. You could just get lost inside them. They had a way of searching the deepest part of your soul and knowing it all in an instant. He felt a strange sensation inside, it was like – he thought of the word his sisters always used – it was like "melting". He felt like his insides had been super-heated and turned to liquid. It was getting harder not to go to Olivia Polansky and reveal everything to her.

For a few minutes after peace had been made between the two women, everything was quiet on the train. The Panamanian widow, the American writer and the vacationing Londoner were silent as their thoughts travelled in seemingly different directions.

CHAPTER 4

After being on the train for so long, Olivia finally glanced up and saw Jess for the first time. Quite caught off guard, she began a rather silly internal dialogue:

“You’ve been next to **Apollo** for nearly *thirty minutes* and you waste your time writing and fighting with old women?”

“Shut up. What’s a man to writing?”

“Oh how very ‘Mary Bennet’ of you! Exquisite blue eyes, beautifully placed in a perfectly shaped head, covered in golden curls like **that** are *inferior to writing*?! You can-**NOT** be serious! He’s like a Michelangelo creation! **Look at him!**”

Olivia obeyed herself. Jess was slim and obviously quite tall, probably more than six feet. There was the slightest glow to his complexion. His chiseled cheek bones hovered above a well sculpted, narrow chin. It was evident by what she could see of his muscular build that he either worked outdoors or simply worked out regularly. He obviously knew how to dress too, except maybe for a giant parka that rested on his lap. It didn’t really fit the rest of his ensemble. He was wearing a black jacket with a collar that stood up a bit. Underneath the jacket was a glimpse of a sky blue V-neck shirt, mostly hidden by a deep blue scarf that was draped across the back of his neck and hung down to his hips. He wore midnight blue jeans with coal black boots. Needless to say, all of this made Jess’ Caribbean blue eyes pop, and now they were looking directly into hers.

Oh - *wow*, this was awkward. He caught her staring at him. She froze, wondering if he understood Spanish. Maybe he wasn’t aware of what had passed between her and Doña Maritza. He didn’t *look* like a Spaniard. But what did she know anyway? There clearly was no way out of this. They were staring at each other.

Jess was having a similar battle. He had finally given in to his yearning to look at her, but now *she* was looking back at *him*! He couldn’t handle it.

“Hi,” he almost jumped. Some part of him stopped being a complete dunce and spoke for him.

“H-hi,” (cough) “Sorry, hi.” Olivia turned the lovely shade of crimson that was her biggest curse. Now no one could doubt that she was embarrassed.

“Did you...” (she gestured toward Doña Maritza) “mm, do you speak Spanish?” Jess slowly nodded, “Enough.”

Olivia put the back of her fist against her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut, spreading her lips into a wide banana shape and moaned softly.

“It’s okay. Don’t feel bad. I-I think what you said to her was amazing... and brave... and really showed true loyalty to your friends. You have an open heart. There’s no reason to be ashamed of that.” He surprised himself again.

“If you say so.” She was upset for having lost control of herself in front of others and the longer she looked at him, the worse she felt.

“Do you mind if I ask how you ended up here in Spain?” asked Jess hesitantly, kindly distracting Olivia from her self-criticism.

“I don’t mind. My money is basically gone-“ Jess looked at her in astonishment when she said ‘gone’. “Sorry. It’s like this: I purchased a house on a piece of land

from a dishonest man. He forged the title to the land, when in reality the land didn't even belong to him. When the legal owner of the land discovered I was there, I was evicted. The land had been promised to a family member but was never properly titled. It's a huge mess, and now, the man that dishonestly sold me the property is dead. So I don't see how I could ever recover my inheritance money."

"Wow... That's terrible. I'm so sorry."

Olivia nodded to him in appreciation for his sympathetic response, "Well once I realized that my inheritance was gone, leaving only my small savings, I had to find another place with affordable rent and food, the basics. Panama is no longer as cheap as it was when I moved there, unless you own your own home and have crops. So I talked with some Spaniards I met and they happened to have a really nice furnished flat here in Madrid. Due to the economic crisis here, they were struggling to find renters. Food isn't quite as expensive in Spain so I decided to give it a try."

"You're American, right? Why didn't you move back to the States?"

"I just can't afford it and quite honestly, I don't feel very safe there anymore. The violence is becoming too intense and extremely unpredictable."

"I forgot. It is pretty crazy over there isn't it?"

"Yes, unfortunately. I don't like to think about it. I spent most of my childhood dreaming of living abroad and that hasn't changed. And I love getting to know different cultures. I met lots of Spaniards when I was in Panama and thought they were pretty cool. So I'm happy enough here. And the food is *phenomenal*, that's a bonus." She flashed a big smile that brightened her eyes, giving Jess goose bumps the likes of which he had *never* experienced before.

Nervously clearing his throat... "Any recommendations for a tourist? I'm here for a month but I don't really have plans." Jess was desperately hoping that Olivia would invite him to eat somewhere, or to see one of the parks, just so he could keep looking at her unreservedly. Maybe he would get up the courage to tell her how they were connected, perhaps she would...

Gasps and screams filled the air. The sound of metal scraping, grating and screaming was almost deafening. Everything went black. Olivia was thrown with a tremendous thrust into the opposite railing, dislocating her left shoulder initially. Before she could finish crying out in pain, the force sent her flying straight toward Jess.

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