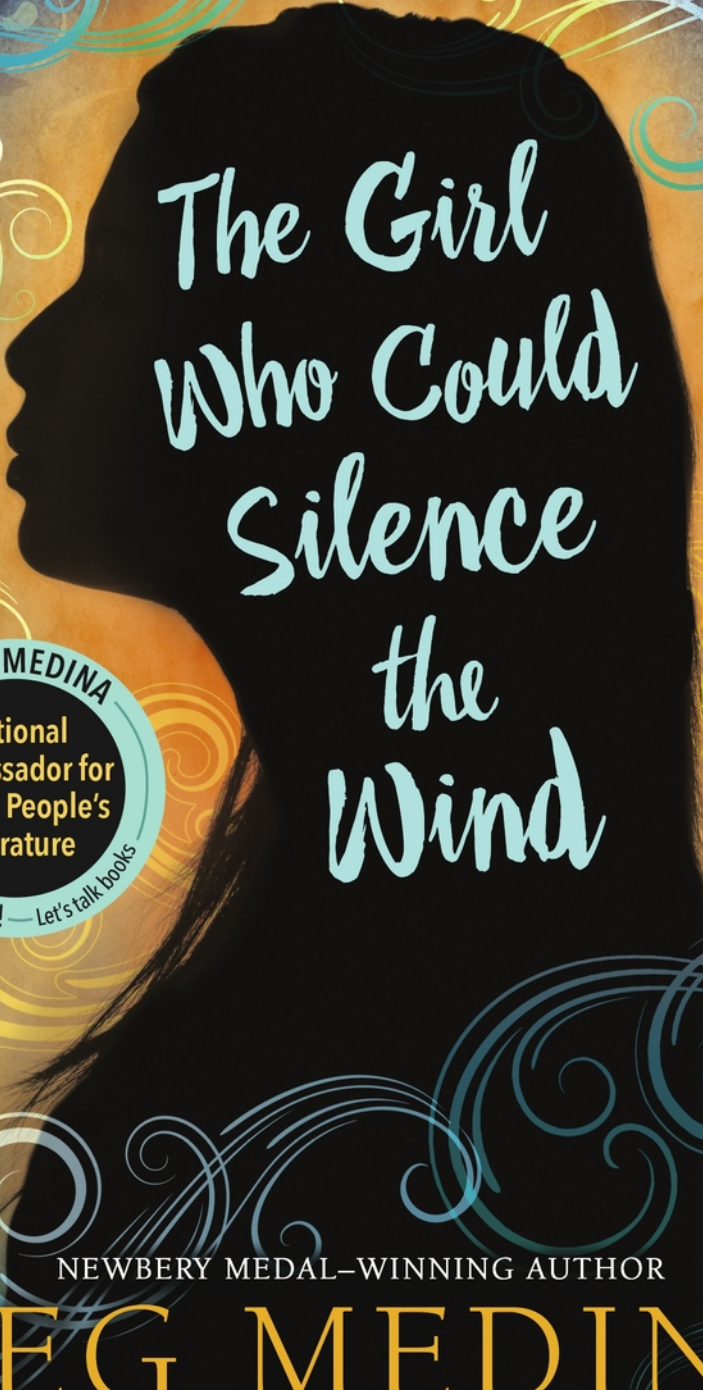


"Adventurous and romantic." — Newbery Honor-winning author Margarita Engle

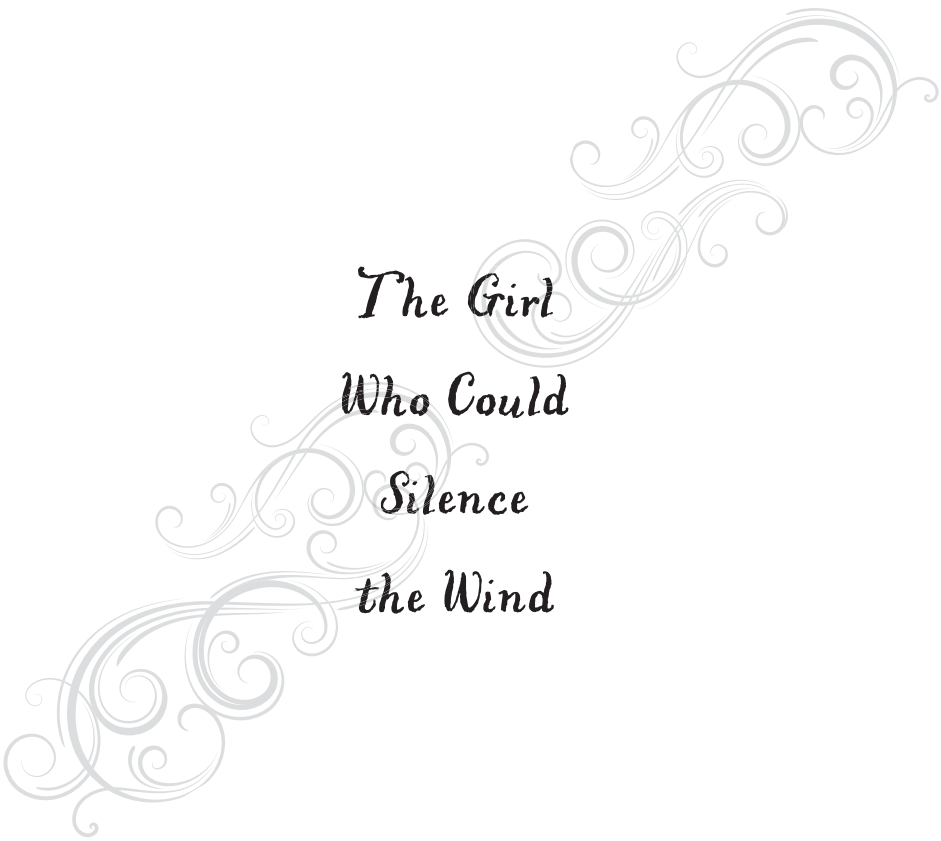
A black silhouette of a girl's head and shoulders, facing left. The silhouette is set against a background of swirling, colorful patterns in shades of blue, green, and yellow. The title of the book is written in white, stylized script across the girl's face and neck.

The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind



NEWBERY MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR

MEG MEDINA

A large, light gray decorative swirl design that curves diagonally across the page, starting from the bottom left and ending at the top right. It features multiple loops and flourishes.

The Girl

Who Could

Silence

the Wind



The background of the cover features large, light gray, stylized swirls that originate from the left side and curve upwards and to the right, framing the title text.

*The Girl
Who Could
Silence
the Wind*

MEG MEDINA



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are either products
of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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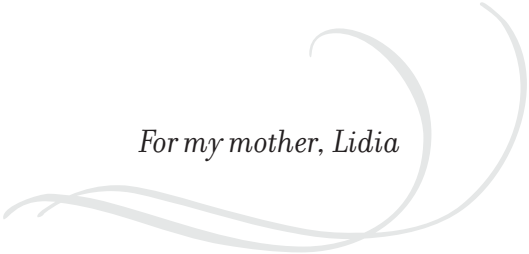
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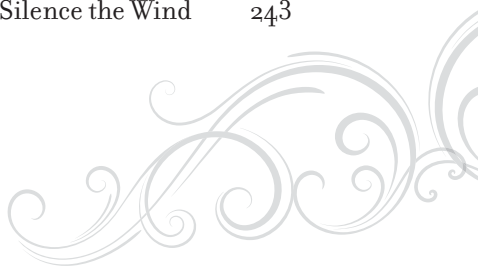
For my mother, Lidia



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A decorative header featuring the word "Prologue" in a stylized, cursive font, centered between two large, symmetrical, light gray swirls that frame the title.

Prologue

The curse on Sonia Ocampo's life came without warning before she was even born, cleverly disguised as good luck.

It blew in on one of the worst storms anyone in Tres Montes had ever known. The wind moaned as it bent pine trees in half and stripped them down to bare sticks. Bawling cows were dragged down the mountain on waves of mud, and far below in the canyon, the river swelled and churned like an ocean. The villagers huddled in their swaying houses and cried out their final prayers to any god who might still have pity—all but the Ocampos, who were too busy coaxing a baby into the world.

The tempest—like the birth—raged on for hours. But when at last Sonia Ocampo slipped into the world, blue and shivering, the wind miraculously ceased and the river calmed, leaving behind a peaceful and starry night.

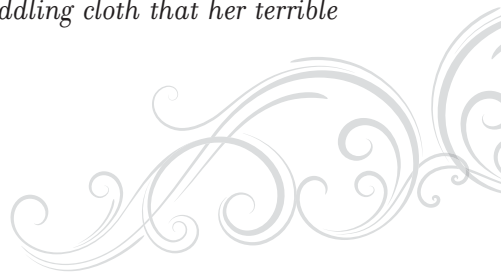
The next morning, the people of Tres Montes were shocked to find themselves still alive. They donned rubber boots and climbed over rubble to reach their church ruins. Each family was counted; not a single life had been lost. No one could explain their survival.

But then they learned of the girl who had arrived in the night.

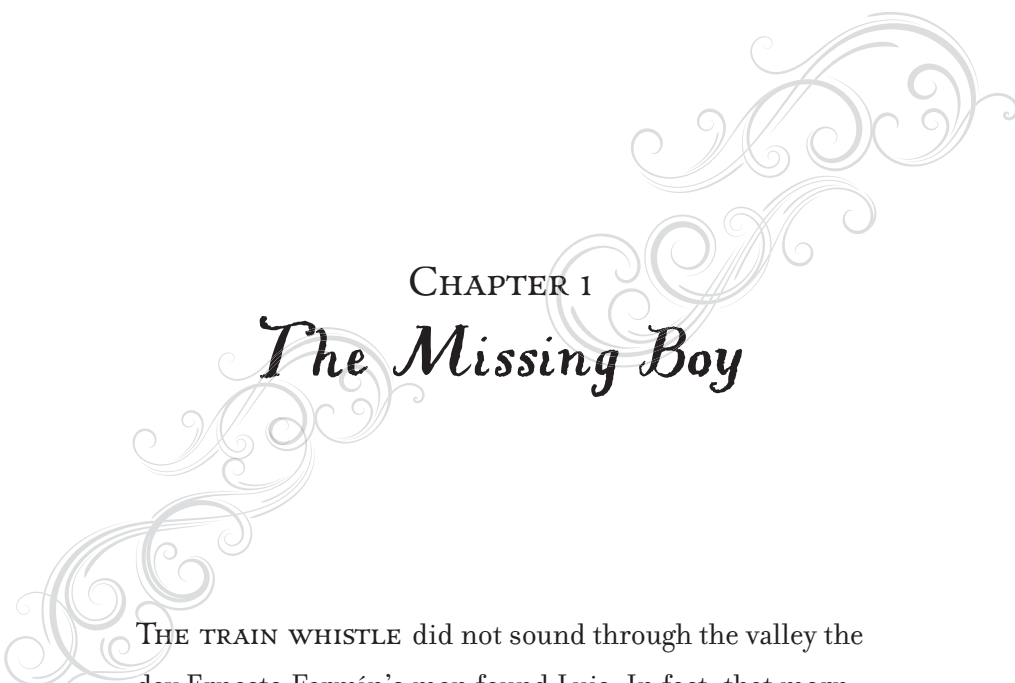
The elders gathered to inspect the child closely. Wrapped in her grandmother's shawl, she wore the unmistakable look of a sleeping angel.

"She must have been sent to us by God," the old miners proclaimed, unaccustomed as they were to good fortune of any kind, "to protect us from harm."

The coppersmith was ordered to his forge, where he pounded a nugget of metal against his anvil until it revealed the shape of a girl with arms open to world. This was the first milagro ever pinned to Sonia Ocampo. And it was with that simple prick of a prayer charm through her swaddling cloth that her terrible destiny was fixed to her for good.





A large, light gray decorative swirl design that starts from the bottom left and curves upwards and to the right, framing the chapter title.

CHAPTER 1

The Missing Boy

THE TRAIN WHISTLE did not sound through the valley the day Ernesto Fermín's men found Luis. In fact, that morning the whole mountain was unusually quiet. The winter winds had blown in during the night and coated everything in yellow dust. Ghostly buzzards circled for prey over the canyon.

In those days, the train's weekly arrival was still a spectacle for the people of Tres Montes. It crossed the bridge before dawn on Saturday, belching white steam and blowing its whistle to frighten any goats grazing up ahead. Soon after, it would pull into the station, Marco, the handsome conductor, waving like a cinema star over the heads of the bike-taxi boys he'd known all his life. Passengers from far away stepped out to buy pastries and share news from the capital. To Sonia Ocampo, the train

meant more than customers for her family's pastries and vegetables. It meant a glimpse at a world she thought she would never know.

She'd been running late that awful morning. Her eyes were heavy for sleep as she crossed the highway and hurried along the winding street. The vigil over a miner's sickbed had lasted all night, much longer than she had expected, but she hadn't had the heart to leave Old Guacho afraid and alone. Even now, as she ran along, she could hear his pitiful groans mixed with the yelps of stray dogs following at her heels. It was as if suffering itself were chasing her.

The rest of her family was already at the plaza, getting ready for market. She spotted her brother Rafael's truck parked against their stall as she arrived. Like everything else, it was coated in dust. Even her brother looked like a spirit.

"Did I miss the train?" she asked him.

He handed down a basket of dusty tomatoes and glanced at the empty tracks through the haze.

"Why do you care?" he replied. "Are you going to moon over Marco like the other girls?" He waved pompously over his head like the conductor.

Sonia pinched his leg. "You're jealous." She squinted to see the farthest point of the tracks and frowned. "It's strange, that's all. Marco never forgets to blow the whistle."

"And who needs *that* racket?" Felix Ocampo said, interrupting them.

Sonia and Rafael exchanged knowing glances as their father joined them at work. Nearly deaf from a lifetime of blasting through silver mines, Felix hated having the cottony peace inside his ears shattered—especially by the train that lured young men to the cities. "A cursed engine of evil" is what he called it. Sonia had long decided that it was pointless to argue with him. Rafael was a different story.

"We do," he grumbled. "It's progress."

"What did he say?" Felix put his ear close to Sonia.

"Nothing, Papi." She shot Rafael a warning look.

But Rafael raised his voice so his father could hear every syllable. "I said, 'It's progress.' The future is out there at the end of the tracks, Papi. Here we're turning to useless dust. See?" He blew a puff of grit from his fender.

Felix glared. "Yes, yes, the *future*," he huffed. "What kind of future is it when boys leave their own families for places unknown? It's a disgrace!" He jutted his chin at Lopez, the milkman, who was hanging cheeses by himself. "Tell me, what father should be left with his hands in his pockets and lonely for his own son?"

Rafael rolled his eyes in plain sight. It would be another quarrel that would change exactly nothing.

"Wipe the sleep from those insolent eyes," Felix snapped. "And watch your mother's *buñuelos*! The woman spent an hour frying them!"

Sonia rescued the tray of her mother's pastries from Rafael's boots as their father stormed off. Two had already been flattened—a stroke of good luck, in her view. She handed Rafael one and took a bite of the other. It was their favorite breakfast.

"Here," she told him. "This might be a sweeter start to the day."

Rafael tore off a piece. "He's wrong."

"He's Papi," she replied before a yawn overtook her. "Sorry."

Rafael studied her tired face as he chewed.

"So, how's Old Guacho?" he asked finally. "You were gone all night again."

Sonia shrugged, wiping jelly from her lips. "The same."

Guacho had mined his whole life like their father. Now his coughs rattled in his chest, and he barely opened his milky eyes. Sonia didn't like to share any of that. Why burden Rafael with dreary reports of dying miners? It would make them both feel strangely old and hopeless. It was better to see her brother laugh, to careen down the mountainside on his bike handlebars or hop river rocks when the water wasn't rushing too hard.

"Tell me something," she said, changing the subject. "I notice you look awfully tired yourself. Were you out late again? Doing something I should know about?"

Rafael grinned as he considered his favorite topic. "A little of this and a little of that."

"Oh." Sonia licked her fingers of the last morsels. "A little of *that*. What's her name? Or have you lost track again?"

"Don't worry, *hermanita*." He wiggled his eyebrows. "I have my ways of remembering my girlfriends."

Now it was Sonia who rolled her eyes. "Louse." His last fling—a girl named Dora—had cried over him for a week.

Rafael gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and brushed the dust from her eyelashes. He was a rascal but a charming one.

"Why don't you go home and get some sleep before Mami and Papi find something for you to do?" he told her. "I'll unload the rest."

She shook her head. "Thanks, but no. I think I'll wait for the engine of evil."

Rafael flashed a conspiring grin as he slipped the tray of *buñuelos* on his shoulders. "Suit yourself."

Soon he was moving through the crowd like a waiter in a fine hotel. He looked nothing like a miner, Sonia

thought. Not like his father or grandfather or any other Ocampo man before that. It was as if he'd been born into the wrong life entirely.

"¿*Buñuelo*, guapas?" he called to a few girls, enticing them with his smile and the scent of anise.

A twinge of envy bit at her ribs as he disappeared around the corner. What would it be like to be as carefree as Rafael, to worry about nothing more important than whom to kiss next? Sadly, she would probably never know. She was already sixteen and had never so much as held hands with a boy—all thanks to her destiny.

Sonia pulled her shawl closer and closed her tired eyes, trying not to feel too sorry for herself. The shawl felt like a heavy armor on her shoulders and made her ache for her bed. Hundreds of metal charms were pinned to the threadbare cloth with scarcely the space of a fingernail between them. Mouths to cure a gossip. A heart to find true love. Feet to ensure a safe journey. A fist for strength. So many petitions had been made of her over the years that Sonia had lost count.

She dozed in the gritty breeze, trying to imagine even a simple walk without this weight, but of course that was like imagining a walk without her skin. She'd worn this shawl from the first moment she'd opened her eyes, and today she roamed like a living altar in the mountains. Every step

she took jangled with the wishes and hopes of the people who feared what the world had in store for humble ones like them. She was their best hope.

"Bring us back safely, Sonia!" the miners called to her from their trucks each morning.

"This union will bear many healthy children, thanks to you," happy parents cried as Sonia trailed down the aisle behind brides on their wedding day.

"Walk him to the arms of God," Old Guacho's wife had said only yesterday.

"Sonia!"

The voice jarred her awake and nearly toppled her from the flatbed where she'd drifted to sleep.

"Señora Clara?" Sonia said, when she turned and saw who it was.

The woman was wrapped tightly in her own shawl, only her eyes showing. She pressed a charm into Sonia's hand and kissed her fingers reverently.

Sonia looked twice. Gold: a bright yellow piece in the crude shape of a boy. The metal, she noticed, was still warm to the touch.

Dread crawled up her spine as she took in Señora Clara's anguished expression. There was only one way someone so poor could get metal like this. The widow would have a new bloody space in the back of her mouth, a

gold-filled molar or bicuspid now missing . . . something not too troublesome to chew without.

Sonia climbed down from the truck, wincing. The sun had heated her charms into branding irons. She pulled the widow into the shade. "What's wrong?"

"He's vanished—like *that*." Señora Clara snapped her trembling fingers. By now the rest of the Ocampos had gathered with the other merchants to listen. Felix sat in a folding chair with his arms crossed proudly; his wife, Blanca, was at his side. Tía Neli sat on an overturned crate and filed her nails as she listened.

"I've asked everywhere, but there is no trace of Luis," Señora Clara continued. "It's been five days since I've seen him."

"Well, is he out chasing skirts?" Tía Neli arched her penciled brow knowingly. "That wouldn't be a first around here."

Blanca Ocampo blushed and poured more tea for Señora Clara. "*Por Dios*, Neli . . . such an idea."

"What?" Tía Neli retorted. "Luis is a young man like any other! Ask Rafael if you don't believe me! He'd know better than anyone." Across the stall, Rafael pretended to stack more peppers, but even from here, Sonia could see his ears were red.

"Let the woman talk, Sister," Felix ordered. He and Tía Neli shared the same dark eyes and sharp tongues, but in everything else they were utter opposites. Not even their mother, Abuela, who visited from the grave in dreams from time to time, had a good explanation for the dueling twins she had left behind. "Five fingers from a single hand, no two the same."

Señora Clara's chin quivered as she spoke of Luis. Her only son had been born with a lame leg, the right foot limp as a dead fish. Of all the young miners, only Rafael didn't mind climbing down the shafts with him—or, on occasion, inside a willing girl's bedroom window.

"If only such a thing were true," she told Tía Neli. "But I've made every hussy in this town swear on the souls of her dead. None has seen him. I . . . I don't know where he could be."

Sonia blinked. From the corner of her eye, she could see Rafael grow still, his jaw clenched.

But you do know, she thought. We all know. But as usual, no one had the valor to make a mother face the truth.

Like every boy in Tres Montes, Luis nursed secret fantasies of a life outside the mines. That's what young men talked about—besides girls—as they rode along the serpentine path to the mines. Each year a few lucky ones got working papers for jobs far away, out in the open

air—golden boys who sent money back home. But for most, there were no papers. If hunger and imagination nudged them enough, they left quietly on their own to find their way to the capital and beyond, risking robbers who stalked travelers in the valley.

“What do you think is beyond that mountain?” Sonia had asked Luis as they picnicked on the cliffs once. She could still see the last plume of smoke as they’d watched the train disappear for the capital.

“The whole exciting world,” he had replied, already enchanted. “What else?”

But how would Luis make a trek through the valley? Steep hills always made him topple despite his special shoe; climbing left him wheezing. Without Rafael as a companion, who would carry his pack? Who would help him over the boulders the way she sometimes did?

“Help me, Sonia.” Luis’s deep voice suddenly became Señora Clara’s, who now knelt at Sonia’s feet. She looked so small and pitiful. Her eyes were gentle but frightened in a way that made Sonia’s chest ache.

“Please, Señora Clara,” she whispered. “Stand up.” It always filled her with shame when elders begged her for help.

But Señora Clara only bowed her head lower.

"You'll pray to bring him back to me?"

Every neighbor turned. Alicia, whose husband had finally become faithful. Georgina, whose skin had been cured of oozing sores with Sonia's herbs and prayer. Even Luz, saved from the clutches of a fever in her crib.

"Save my boy's life," Señora Clara whispered. "You are my only hope."

Sonia's mouth went dry. The bones of her shoulders bowed lower still as she reached for the widow's hand. Señora Clara's fingers were long and thin like her son's, but her hands were as icy as those of a corpse.

Felix sprang to his feet. His voice boomed. "Of course she will save him! Take that worry off your heart, *señora*. Sonia has God's ear."

For the rest of the morning, Sonia prayed at the church ruins, where a circle of stones beneath the prickly weeds still marked the spot where she had lain as a newborn. Of all the things she had ever asked for, Luis's safety seemed the most urgent. Guacho, dying in his bed, was an old man. His whiskers had grown white with time; he'd lived out his days longer than most miners. But Luis was young; he was at the beginning of his days.

So as proof of Luis's goodness, she carefully listed for

God every kindness he had shown. She begged pity for his worried mother. She asked for good strangers to help him find his way.

When she was through, she walked wearily back to Rafael, sitting in his truck. He took a long drag of his cigarette and glanced around the market. Then he took her shawl and balled it like a rag in a corner.

"Lie down, Sonia," he whispered. "You need sleep."

She lay back, staring for a long while at the spotless sky overhead. Finally, she turned to him. "Where is Luis?" she whispered. "He left to find work, didn't he?"

Rafael would not meet her gaze. Instead, he tossed away his cigarette butt and crept to her side.

"Sleep." Stretched out alongside her, he hummed the tune Blanca used as their lullaby. It was an old miners' song, one to lift men's spirits over the endless blackness of their days.

It was useless this time. As the afternoon wore on, the air grew hotter, and thick dust swirled in intolerable eddies. The cows would not give a drop of milk. And even the wild parrots that usually roosted happily in the bushes pecked at one another so viciously that Rafael finally shot a pistol in the air to send them off.

But what Sonia noticed most of all was that the train did not arrive.

Across the market, Tía Neli put down her magazine. Sonia watched as her aunt marched to the police station at the end of the plaza and rapped loudly on the shutters.

"And when do you plan to do something, Ernesto Fermín?" she demanded at the window. "Being the police captain is more than showing off your medals and that silly gun, you know!"

Capitán Fermín sighed. "What exactly do you expect me to do, Neli?"

"First of all, let me in."

Sonia rolled over as her aunt stepped inside.

Shortly afterward, four of the department's best men set out on horseback, kicking up clouds as they thundered off.

It wasn't long after that.

Sonia was sipping her mother's chamomile tea when Capitán Fermín arrived with the news. He climbed up to the auction platform and removed his worn hat. Beside him stood Marco. The conductor's tie was loose, and his eyes were rimmed in red.

"Friends," the police chief began. "Today I have a sad obligation."

The villagers abandoned their conversations and

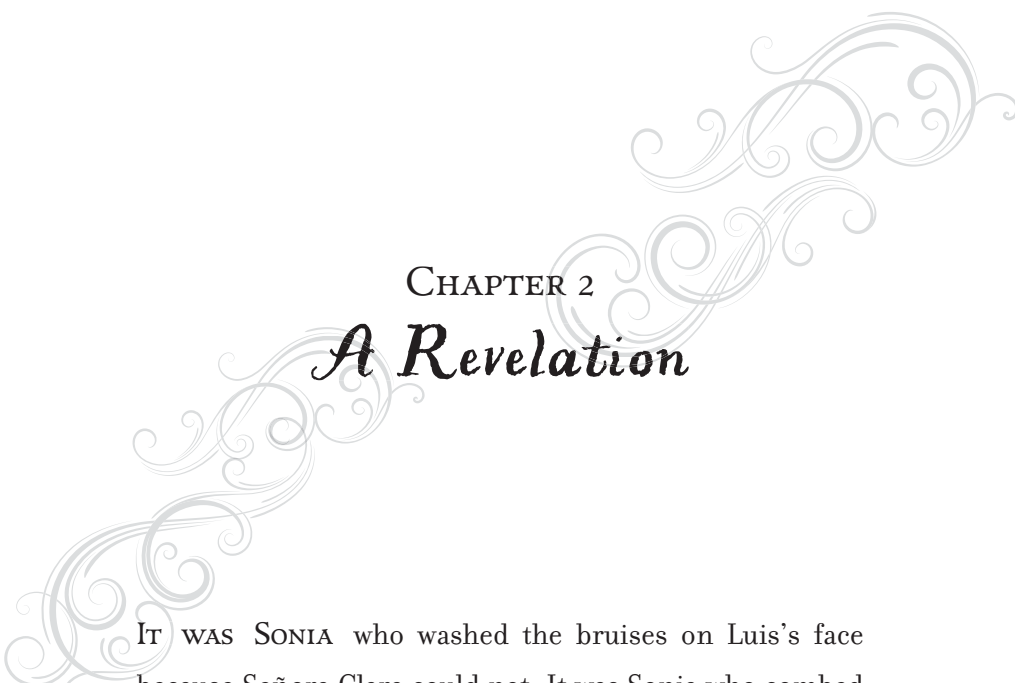
crowded in like sheep to brace themselves. A covered cart was beside the mounted men in the road.

Capitán Fermín did not dare look at Señora Clara, who was already tearing at her hair and wailing. Nor did he even try to stop Sonia from walking unsteadily to the cart when she spotted the worn sole of a familiar thick-heeled shoe.

She pulled back the canvas. Black flies buzzed at Luis's eyes, half opened and fixed on her in accusation. Thieves had turned his hip pockets out. His thick hair was matted with blood where their bullets had blasted through his skull.

"I thought it was a dead animal on the tracks," Marco told the stunned crowd.

He had managed to stop his fine train just in time.

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CHAPTER 2

A Revelation

IT WAS SONIA who washed the bruises on Luis's face because Señora Clara could not. It was Sonia who combed his thick hair down around his wounds. Sonia who knotted his tie and folded his stiffened hands. When she was through, she sat staring mutely at her friend's body, ashamed at how she had failed him so completely.

Weeks later, when other girls could dream again of boys holding their hands by the river, Sonia could not close her eyes without seeing images of Luis's body laid out like a doll on his kitchen table. She could still see the worn cuff on his trousers and the plain wooden coffin bobbing on men's shoulders through the trees. She conjured faceless men and the sound of their bullets tearing through his skull for a few miserable coins. Finally, she decided to stop sleeping altogether.

"The girl is sick with sorrow," Blanca explained to the women who stopped by to inquire. There was talk at the market that Sonia's eyes had become dull, that she refused to stir from her room.

"It was the mother's fault," Sonia heard one say. "I'm sure of it. An evil secret Clara is being punished for. Your poor child could do nothing."

Sonia turned over in her bed. *Where was God in all of this?* she wondered bitterly. Why had he turned a deaf ear to her supplications for Luis? Priests could spin long sermons on the topic of God's mysterious ways, but it made no sense to her at all. In fact, it made her furious. Never once had she complained of her fate. She'd shouldered everything that had been expected of her. She'd prayed each night without fail, each *milagro* like a bead in an endless rosary.

And yet Luis had still died—and now his mother was being blamed.

A knot of doubt squeezed inside her for the first time in her life. It all seemed to grow clear now. She had held Luis in her heart with all her might—and he'd still been murdered. What if she had no power, no magic or special favor? What if all there was in the world was luck?

Sonia sat up slowly and stared at her shawl, which was

hanging near her door. It all made sense now. Her whole life had been built around a silly mountain myth. She was nothing but a fraud, a girl in a costume. She was as helpless as anyone else in Tres Montes.

"So, are you going to waste away here forever?" Tía Neli had appeared at her bedside with a cup of hot tea. "I can't take much more of these nosy visitors."

"Send them away," Sonia mumbled.

"I've tried, but no one takes a hint in this town." She sat at the edge of Sonia's bed and held out the cup. "Drink this. I put special pepper in it."

Sonia stared into her aunt's bright eyes instead. Tía Neli had always loved her dearly, having no daughters of her own. "I'm serious, Tía. Send them away. Then tell them I can't give them what they all want."

Tía Neli put a hand to Sonia's forehead and set down the tea. "Every sadness passes, you know. Even a terrible one like this."

Sonia shook her head, her eyes brimming with tears. "It's not only sadness, Tía. It's more than that. I *can't* do what everyone wants. I can't stop bad times from finding us. I can't control things any more than they can."

Tía Neli flinched, and Sonia knew that her aunt had been thinking of Luis, too — and adding up the facts.

"Does it matter?" she said. "I've lived in Tres Montes long enough to know it's pointless to terrify a mountain-side of people with unpleasant realities—which are never welcomed, anyway. Maybe it's honorable enough to give elders hope in their old age. Besides, any god would say it's a sin to make your parents suffer with worry."

But for once Sonia would not be agreeable. "And what of my suffering? Do you know what it's like to live as I do? To be asked to make rain in the dry season? To cure coughs? To dress your dead friend because you couldn't save him? And *why* am I cursed this way? Because I was born on the wrong night, that's all. It's all been a silly lie!"

"Shhh!" Tía Neli bit her lip and walked to the window to check the yard.

"I need you to help me," Sonia insisted. "I've wandered around town like an armadillo long enough. I need you to help me tell everyone the truth."

But Tía Neli only turned and put up her hand. "Your *abuela* used to say, 'God often does the right thing by crooked means.' You have to be patient. A solution will present itself."

Tears of frustration spilled from Sonia's eyes. "I can't trust God! He's abandoned me completely!"

"Don't talk nonsense." Tía Neli nodded to the ladies who had finally left along the path. She turned to Sonia with

a stern face. "It's time to get up. The kitchen floor needs sweeping."

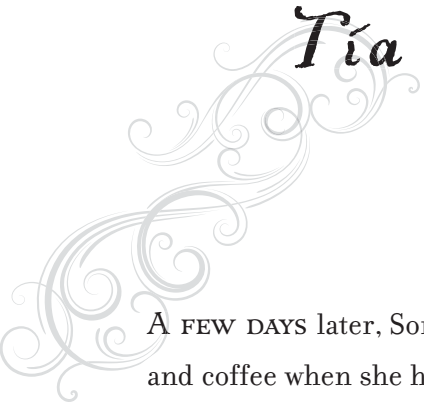
Sonia stared at her hopelessly.

"Go," Tía Neli said firmly. "Go, and leave the rest to me."



CHAPTER 3

Tía Neli's News



A FEW DAYS later, Sonia had just finished her honey toast and coffee when she heard a pounding on the door. It was Tía Neli, breathless with excitement to announce the big news. The rancher's daughter, Cuca, who lived farther up the mountain, had broken her hand in a careless fall from her horse. Tía Neli had been visiting the girl's mother when it happened. She'd heard the bones snap like twigs. She'd seen the girl's hand inflate like a frog's throat in springtime.

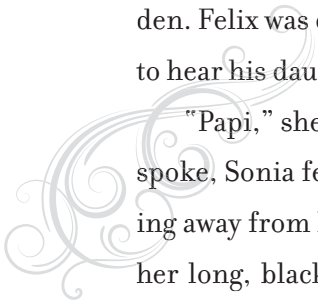
"She can't travel to the capital this year!" Tía Neli cried gleefully. "She'll be useless as a worker! Isn't that fantastic!"

Sonia gave her aunt a blank look.

Tía Neli stopped in her tracks and grabbed her niece's hands. "I've been puzzling for days for a way to help you

without disturbing matters too much,” she said. “Don’t you see? This is the answer! This is your chance to be free of your troubles and still make your parents proud—or at least richer, if you’re smart. Run—find your father!”

Sonia had no real idea of what her aunt was talking about, but she rushed down the path to the vegetable garden. Felix was crouched over a tender squash vine, too deaf to hear his daughter calling him.



“Papi,” she said, reaching for his elbow. But just as she spoke, Sonia felt a gust of winter wind and something falling away from her, dropping as softly as a silk ribbon from her long, black hair. She looked all around—so shocking was the feeling!—but saw nothing.

It was only as she stood panting in front of her startled father that she began to collect her thoughts. Somewhere on the path between Tía Neli and her father, the ties that bound her to their home in Tres Montes had been cut loose.

“Come,” she said, shaking. “There is important news at the house.”

By the time Felix and Sonia arrived, the rest of family was already gathered. Blanca was softening beans, Tía Neli was pacing, and Rafael, home early from his weekend card game, was pretending to nap on the couch. Sonia moved his feet and sat down beside him to listen.

As a courtesy to his know-it-all sister, Felix let Tía Neli share her news between sips of her coffee. Naturally, he was not happy in the least with his sister's bold interference in Sonia's life. He often said Neli's longing for all modern things was repellent, that she was never satisfied with the simple beauty of a mountain life, and her son, Pedro, was plagued by the same ailment. With his silly mother's blessings, the boy had left three years earlier to slaughter hogs somewhere in the North.

"Turn your nose up if you like, but it's thanks to Pedro's hogs that I have my house," Tía Neli always bragged. But Felix still scoffed at her new shoes and the perfume she wore even to water the goats' trough. He thanked God every day that Blanca had shown no such inclination.

Felix followed the bread crumbs to where Tía Neli's story was leading. When she finished, he crossed his arms and gave her an annoyed look.

"My children are staying put, Sister," he said firmly.

"But, Felix, Sonia can go to the capital instead of Cuca and learn a skill. She'll see something besides cows and pine trees. Imagine it: the capital—a big city." She pursed her lips and gave Sonia an especially pained look. "Besides, look at her: The girl needs a bit of rest from all these unpleasant shocks. Her eyes looked bruised from worry. Have pity!"

"She'll rest here just fine in her own bed."

"Well, then, how about the money? Or is it that you don't mind eating only beans every day?"

Sonia sat on the edge of her seat barely breathing as Tía Neli made her case. Escaping as a worker in the capital! She had once seen a picture of the domes of the presidential palace. A few of the older girls from school worked there each winter, far away from their parents and mountain ways. Now maybe Sonia would have a chance to see it herself—and escape from her worries. She gave Rafael a pleading glance for help.

He tapped Sonia gently with his toes and propped himself up. "If I know Sonia, she'll find a way to earn more money than Papi *and* me!" he said, giving her braid a tug.

Felix shot him an angry look. "It's too dangerous for an innocent girl to be alone in the city," he said. "Think of her on the trolley. Those savages might steal your sister off or pinch her raw."

"Modern women learn how to take care of themselves, Brother," Tía Neli argued. "And if she works in a good house, the owner will invest in her safety. I've heard they post guards everywhere on those estates." She turned to her niece, unable to resist dropping a morsel to cheer her. "You might travel in a fancy car with a driver!"

Sonia's eyes grew wide. "A chauffeur?"

"What kind of car?" Rafael asked.

"Who *cares* about cars?" Felix snapped. "Sonia Ocampo a servant? Ridiculous! She's a gift from God."

"So what? Everyone needs to know about a little dusting and fetching—even an angel," Tía Neli insisted. "How do you think heaven stays so white and clean? Anyway, I promise you, she'll be in a reputable house. We'll arrange for her to go with Ramona. She'll make sure her girls treat Sonia like a sister." Here she paused carefully. "In return, Sonia will bless and protect them. Isn't that right, *niña*?"

Sonia stared at her aunt. "Of course."

"And who'll protect us right here, eh?" Felix stabbed the table with his forefinger. "The rainy season is practically upon us, Neli. Storms, illness—where will we be without her?"

The mere thought of an entire season of new petitions drove Sonia to near madness. Reading her expression, Rafael chimed in.

"In that case, lend *me* one of her dresses," he offered. "I'm nearly twenty, and I have nice legs. I'll be happy to go in her place and earn all the money."

"*¡Silencio!*" ordered Felix.

Tía Neli bit her lip to keep from laughing and shook her finger at her brother. "Don't be such a brute, Felix. God has sent this chance to Sonia for a reason. It would be rude

of you to ignore it. Besides, why do we have children, *hermano*, if it is not to help us when we get old? She's young and strong and able to work."

She looked around the shabby kitchen.

"It's time to get our noses out from the clouds and put our feet on firm ground. A new stove is in order, and you won't last much longer in the mines to save enough for that. Haven't you seen the shape Guacho's in after twenty-five years in the mine?"

Felix grimaced and looked away from Blanca. He knew she deserved better.

For an agonizing moment, Sonia thought her father would once again refuse. Hope shriveled in her chest. One way or another, she had to be free. She would have to be bold in dealing with her father. There was only one voice of authority that no traditional man could ignore. It was even stronger than God's.

She went to her father and pressed his hand to her cheek, hoping he would not detect the daring lie that had gathered on her lips. Felix Ocampo had always prided himself on being an obedient son. He'd even honored his mother's dying wish to be buried with a cup of tea in one hand and her favorite knitting needles in the other. Sonia leaned in close to his ear.

"Papi, I had a vision. Abuela came to me last night and

told me to leave Tres Montes. I didn't want to frighten you, but now I have no choice."

Her father's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "My mother?" he exclaimed. "She came to you?" Everyone knew that the dead bothered themselves only with the most important things.

"Yes. Abuela said, 'Go on, *mi vida*. There is a place for you in the city.' This job is what she must have meant."

Tía Neli arched her brow and nervously reached for her necklace.

"Mamá was always wise. . . ." she offered cautiously. "That's where I get my brains."

Sonia knelt near her father and looked into his worried eyes. "I know you want me here in Tres Montes. But Tía and Abuela are right. This work will help us with the things we need. God has presented this chance for a reason."

"January through September." Tía Neli counted on her fingers. "Nine months. She'll be home in no time."

Blanca turned from her pot at last and regarded Sonia carefully. Sonia knew that her mother loved her children above all else and found it nearly impossible to see them suffer. She could see that no amount of tea and incense had helped chase away the nightmares. Blanca glanced over her shoulder into the scant pot of beans that would have to

stretch to feed the entire family. Only one thing frightened a mother in Tres Montes more than starving.

"They never come back the same," she said quietly.

"Blanca—" Tía Neli began.

"You know it's true, Neli. I am not a modern woman like you, but I'm not a stupid one, either. The young go places we can hardly imagine, but they come back with new words in their mouths and new ways in their hearts. They learn to look at their own parents with shame. Suddenly Tres Montes is too slow for them, too small, too dusty and poor. They hate to come home, and then, one day, they forget their own families altogether. We lose them forever."

A long silence fell on the Ocampos. Even Tía Neli sighed, lost in thoughts of whether Pedro would wrap her legs in warm blankets one day when she got old.

It was Rafael who rescued them. He forced a smile over his sad eyes and clapped his hands twice.

"¡*Vamos!* We've had enough wakes," he chided. "It's time to be happy again. I say, Abuela is right. If Sonia has the chance to work in the capital, she should go and not look back." He turned to his sister and winked. "Just make sure you come back with lots of money, Sonia. I could use a new truck."

"Finally! Someone has good sense!" Tía Neli patted

her lips with a napkin and took Felix's hand. "I will arrange to see Arenas in a few days. He's hiring the last round of workers for the season next week. She'll make you proud. You'll see."

"I am already proud," Felix muttered. Then he looked at his wife and did the unthinkable. "*Bueno*, Blanca. You nursed her yourself. What do we do with the girl?"

Sonia squirmed in her chair as her mother turned back to look at her.

Then Blanca lowered her eyes and spoke loudly enough for Felix to hear. Her words rang out like a proclamation, though tears were already pooled in her eyes.

"Tell Abuela to be still in her grave. There is no stopping a girl born stronger than the wind. Let Sonia go."



CHAPTER 4

A Deal with Señor Arenas



SONIA GLANCED DOWN at her feet as she trudged down the steep incline toward the plaza below. She had been traveling down the hillside for only a short time, but her boots were already consumed in the yellow dust that would hover in Tres Montes for the duration of the dry season. The thin powder floated in the air and made everything look faded. Even the girls walking just ahead of her looked like floating spirits.

In the weak morning sunlight, and still so far away, the plaza looked deserted. The main street was long and narrow, lined with flat-topped stucco buildings and windows dressed in rusty iron bars. Their large hand-painted letters marked each establishment. FARMACIA, POLICÍA, REGISTRO CIVIL. From there, small winding roads spread out haphazardly and ended at the church ruins. Sonia looked

away, hoping that today might be her chance to leave it all behind.

She felt in her pocket for her birth registration, her money, and her handkerchief; everything was in order. For now, it was only her boots that were the problem. She would have to make them shine like glass before they met Señor Arenas. Tía Neli, who had assigned herself chaperone, would insist. After all, she had made it clear how important it was to make a good impression.

"To serve a fine family in a big city, you must be impeccable in your appearance and manners," her aunt had told her. "One has to be a person who cares about the smallest details." Even silly ones, Sonia assumed, like dusty boots.

As the girls finally reached the valley, they rushed to get the taxi drivers' attention, negotiating for a proper price. Tía Neli surveyed the confusion calmly.

"You!" She snapped her fingers at the back of a young man with a bike taxi at the edge of the highway. He tossed away his drink, beamed a smile, and pedaled toward them.

To Sonia's surprise, it was Pancho Muñoz, from school. She lowered her shawl to greet him, her heart already racing.

"What luck that it's you," she said politely over the squeaks of his rusty wheels. He had only recently begun

his job, but already Pancho looked like the other taxi boys. He seemed taller in the pressed blue shirt of a taxi apprentice, much older than he did in his worn cotton shirts and bare feet during the week at school, when he was nothing more than Pancho the Orphan about whom the other girls snickered. He was too formal when he spoke, they said, too given to daydreams. But Sonia liked him for all of those qualities. Now, in the sunshine, he looked especially handsome.

Pancho tipped his cap, blushing. "We've missed you at school, Sonia. I hope you're feeling better."

Sonia went mute in his gaze. For one thing, he had sweet brown eyes. But there was also no explanation she could give for avoiding everyone. The wind gusted sharply again, and Tía Neli nudged her forward. "We'll be late," she announced.

Pancho offered Sonia his hand and cast an appreciative glance at her legs as she climbed onto the bench.

Tía Neli frowned at him and settled in beside her niece.

"To the plaza, *por favor*." She leaned in to Sonia, who was already at work on her boots. "I'll do the talking from here."

The office was small and hot. Girls waiting for interviews filled every seat in the hallway. Sonia wiped the

perspiration from her lip and peered over her aunt's shoulder as they read the job listings provided.

Today Señor Arenas was hiring for several employers. A glass factory in the west was looking for steady-handed workers and a citrus farm to the south wanted workers who didn't whine about red ants or scorching heat. A few nannies were needed to tend to the imperial children of dignitaries. But Tía Neli pointed at the last entry. It was only two words: Casa Masón. "That's the one," she whispered. "Wait here."

She walked over to the young secretary toiling behind an old desk. "How many are needed at Casa Masón?" she asked.

The secretary stopped typing and looked up crossly over the top of her glasses. She opened a coffee-stained folder and glanced at the last page.

"Four in total for the widow," she said primly. "But don't get your hopes up, *señora*. We take only experienced girls for such a position." She tossed Sonia a dubious glance. "Our client is very clear on that point."

Tía Neli walked back to her seat and patted Sonia's hand.

"Change that face, *niña*," she said firmly. "You'll be fine. It's all in how you handle these silly men."



"How do I know she'll be any good?" Señor Arenas asked as he leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his protruding belly. He scrutinized Sonia as a rancher might eye one of his herd. "She looks a bit scrawny. I've got fifty other girls to chose from who are meatier and experienced." Sonia knew it was true. As always there were more girls than he could possibly hire—a tidy situation for a businessman with the only legal employment agency for a hundred miles.

Tía Neli smiled and waved her hand in the air as if shooping a pesky fly.

"You have fifty very ordinary girls, *señor*. What I'm offering you is an *extraordinary* one."

Sonia nudged Tía Neli with her heel, hoping to silence her discretely. She longed to be ordinary, nothing more. Sonia tried her best to smile and ignore the perspiration running down her back.

Señor Arenas twirled a toothpick and shrugged. "She's pretty enough," he said. "I'll give you that."

"Of course she is. And she has a natural elegance, *señor*. She was born with it. If that's not extraordinary, I don't know what is!"

Señor Arenas clamped his gold-rimmed teeth down on a toothpick. "But can she work?"

Tía Neli gave him a pout and shook her head. "Really,

Señor Arenas, it's as though you'd never heard of the Ocampos. We are a most hardworking and revered family, as you know. *This* is the girl everyone has heard of: Sonia, the girl who silenced the winds of Tres Montes." She laid Sonia's shawl across his desk to show him the *milagros* as proof. "Ask your mother. She comes to Sonia for petitions from time to time."

"Tía—" Sonia began in protest.

But Señor Arenas had already pushed the garment away in disgust. "Please! Enough with old superstitions! This is the capital we're talking about. Nobody there cares about that. In fact, my girls are on strict orders not to talk such nonsense at their jobs! It makes us sound like lunatics. I don't need girls who think they're angels. What *I* need, *señora*, are girls who know their place, girls who can work like brutes without anyone knowing they're in the room."

Tía Neli's face reddened. "Well, in any case, it doesn't matter," she said, taking her niece's hands. "Show Señor Arenas your hands, Sonia. You'll notice, *señor*, that her hands are slender but strong—perfect for doing the meticulous work you need in a fine household. They seem to me the same hands of a future pastry chef. If you ask me, she'd make a marvelous kitchen apprentice."

Sonia glanced down and almost gasped. Her aunt had

given her three large bills, wrapped in a rubber band. It was enough to buy food for a month. Tía Neli nodded sweetly in Señor Arenas's direction.

Sonia drew her hands from her lap and extended them, palms down for inspection, though she couldn't think of where to look in her embarrassment. She turned her gaze to the waiting area, where the remaining girls waited hopefully for their chance at work contracts.

Immediately, she felt Señor Arenas's hands caress her wrists. When he withdrew, the bills were tucked between his own stubby fingers. He slipped them inside his shirt pocket casually.

"Pastry chef." He chuckled.

He opened a file folder and slid on his dirty glasses. After a few moments, he made a whistling sound to summon the secretary.

"Send the rest home."

The secretary cast an insulted look at Sonia as she turned to go inform the others. Sonia tried to look innocent, but she knew she had cheated. What kind of girl bribed her way ahead of friends and neighbors?

It's your only chance, she told herself. It's your only escape.

Señor Arenas offered her a form for her signature. "You do know how to write, don't you?"

Sonia nodded and studied the paperwork. Her name had been added to a list of three others under a column marked CASA MASÓN.

Señor Arenas reached into his drawer and pulled out a pretty spice bottle. He placed it before her on his desk. The foil label read ESPECIAS MASÓN.

"So you know where you're going," he said, tapping the lid. "Casa Masón spices are known the world over. It's the old widow Katarina Masón who runs the business now, of course. She's rich beyond all your dreams since her husband died. Take care to please her, *niña*. Opportunities like this don't come often, understand? A hundred other girls would die to have your spot." He pointed at the shawl in her lap. "And make sure you leave *that* thing behind."

"Gladly, *señor*!" Sonia answered, and signed her name.

"Congratulations," a jobless girl called to Sonia as they left the building.

"Good luck comes to those who are worthy," cried another.

Sonia looked back and nodded silently, her mouth glued with shame.

Tía Neli patted her back as they climbed into a taxi to take them all the way home in celebration. She held the jar