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— *The Washington Post*



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KICK YOUR
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MEG MEDINA

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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To my husband, Javier

CHAPTER 1

"Yaqui Delgado wants to kick your ass."

A kid named Vanesa tells me this in the morning before school. She springs out with no warning and blocks my way, her textbook held at her chest like a shield. She's tall like me and caramel. I've seen her in the lunchroom, I think. Or maybe just in the halls. It's hard to remember.

Then, just like that, Vanesa disappears into the swell of bodies all around.

Wait, I want to tell her as she's swallowed up. *Who is Yaqui Delgado?* But instead, I stand there blinking as kids jostle for the doors. The bell has rung, and I'm not sure if it's only the warning or if I'm late for first period. Not that it matters. I've been at this school for five weeks, and Mr. Fink hasn't remembered to take attendance once. A girl near his desk just sort of scans the room and marks who's out.

"Move, idiot!" somebody grunts, and I follow the crowd inside.

It's Darlene Jackson who explains the trouble I'm really in. She's a student aide in the guidance office, and she knows all about Yaqui Delgado. "She was suspended last year for fighting." We're in the lunchroom, so Darlene has to shout for me to hear. "*Twice.*"

I've only known Darlene a few weeks, but already I can tell she loves drama, especially if she has a front-row seat and it's someone else's catastrophe. Her mother is one of those nosy PTA types, too, so Darlene always seems to know whose parents are getting divorced, who failed last semester, or what teacher will be fired at the end of the year. Don't ask me how, but that little spy even knew that our science teacher's husband had dumped her. Before Ms. O'Donnell got past her swollen eyes to teach us about Newton's laws last week, the whole class knew her love life was in shambles.

Darlene pushes up her glasses and tells me the whole rumor: "Yaqui Delgado hates you. She says you're stuck-up for somebody who just showed up out of nowhere. And she wants to know who the hell you think you are, shaking your ass the way you do." Darlene lowers her voice. "She even called you a *skank*. Sorry."

I'm stunned.

"I shake my ass?"

Darlene studies her egg-salad sandwich for a second.

"Definitely, yes."

Interesting. I've only had an ass for about six months, and now it seems it has a mind of its own. If only my friend Mitzi were here to see this! Last year in ninth grade at my old school, I was a late bloomer. *Planchadita* — ironed out and hipless — nothing at all like Mitzi, who got her curves in fifth grade.

It was Ma who first noticed my body changing, but she wasn't exactly tactful about my getting *cuerpo*. "Put on a bra already, Piddy," she said after she noticed a man on the bus gawking at my chest one day. "You can't go around with two loose onions in your shirt for all the boys to stare at," she snapped, like it was my fault that man had helped himself to the show.

Lila — that's Ma's best friend in the whole world — is the one who took me shopping for lacy bras the next day.

"Be proud, *mi vida*," Lila whispered to me in the bra section of the store as I stared, shocked, at all the lace and bows. "And keep your shoulders back."

This ass shaking is probably Lila's fault, now that I think about it. It's all the dancing we do. She's been teaching me to merengue the way they do in her favorite clubs. Right before school started, she introduced me to her collection of old Héctor Lavoe records. We've listened to them so much that I've got the tunes stuck in my head.

"Move your feet small, like you're on a brick," she said when we danced across her apartment. "But the hips? Shake them big, *mami*." She gave her bottom a good one-two to show me. "*Así*."

Maybe now I'm stuck on swivel. Who knows? When Lila walks down the street, men's eyes get glued to her junk. Even bus drivers slow down to see. Ma says she's a human traffic hazard.

Darlene finishes nibbling down to her crusts and tosses them inside her paper lunch bag.

"Maybe you could practice walking normal," she suggests with a shrug. "You know, a little less wiggly. Like me."

I try not to choke. Darlene does not *walk normal*. She leans forward as if she's being led by her nose with an invisible rope. I'd say she scurries.

"I think I walk just fine," I tell her.

"Suit yourself, then," she says. "All I know is that Yaqui Delgado is gonna crush you." She demonstrates by balling up her lunch bag and casting a knowing glance at the table across the lunchroom. That's where the Latin kids sit.

The first day I got here, I stood with my tray, just sizing up the neighborhood. The Asian kids were clustered near the middle. The black kids had a bunch of tables to themselves. I spotted the Latin zone right away, but I didn't know a single one of them from any of my classes. As I got closer, a few of the guys grinned and elbowed each other, but none of the girls looked like they were going to make

room. In fact, it was downright chilly how they stared at me. Luckily, Darlene waved me over.

So here I am at the corner table near the trash cans — the worst real estate in the cafeteria. Since we moved, I've had to start over. Our table is all the kids from our fourth-period science class, like Sally Ngyuen and Rob Allen. They're both in the tenth-grade physics class with Darlene and me, which I'm finding out is a breeding ground for outcasts here at Daniel Jones High School.

Right now Rob is looking scared — even for him. He's not an ugly guy, but he's skinny and pale. The knot in his neck is bobbing, and the rims of his eyes look as pink as a hamster's. He's crazy smart, which I like, though he might be more popular if his brain came in a more attractive package. He can solve a physics problem even faster than I can, but what does that get him around here? Not a single friend that I can see — and I would know. His locker is next to mine.

"Who's going to crush you?" His voice cracks a little as he stares at the balled-up paper bag.

"No one," I say.

"Mind your own business, Rob," Darlene snaps. She turns back to me and rolls her eyes. Even in a group of geeks, there's a pecking order, and Darlene's on top. Rob glares at her, but he shuts up.

"I don't even know Yaqui Delgado, Darlene," I tell her with a shrug. "I'm not worried."

"Well, she knows *you*. And she hates your guts. You're new here, Piddy, so take my word for it. You're as good as dead. These Latin girls mean business. If I were you, I'd stay home tomorrow."

I stop chewing and give her a look.

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm a Latin girl, too, Darlene."

Darlene rolls her eyes—*again*—like I'm the stupid one. White-skinned. No accent. Good in school. I'm not her idea of a Latina at all. I could point out that Cameron Diaz is Latina, too, but why bother? It won't change Darlene's mind.

"Yeah? Then why aren't you sitting with them?" she asks.

The color rises in my cheeks as my eyes flit across the room. It's because those girls are a rougher bunch—nothing at all like Mitzi and me. Still, I won't give Darlene the satisfaction of knowing that. It's bad enough that when Coach Malone read out my last name in PE and the Guatemalan girls in back gave me weird looks, even though they should know better. "You Spanish?" they asked. I ignored them.

"My last name is *Sanchez*, remember?" I finally say to Darlene. "My mother is from Cuba, and my dad is from the Dominican Republic. I'm just as Latin as they are."

I finish off my peanut-butter sandwich and force myself to make small talk with Rob for the rest of lunch

period, just to annoy her. This is harder than it might seem. He's not much of what you'd call a conversationalist; I think he's out of practice. His thoughts more or less explode from his mouth without warning.

"I'm going to make a dagger," he blurts out.

It takes me a second to realize he's talking about our English project. We're starting to work on our *Julius Caesar* presentations.

"Watch out for 'zero tolerance,'" I tell him. "I know a kid who got suspended for a water pistol in sixth grade." It was my neighbor Joey Halper, early in his career as a goon.

Rob shrugs.

"I'll say it's Reynolds Wrap before I whip it out."

"Creeper. What are you whipping out?" Darlene sneers.

Rob turns red, and that pretty much ends our chat. Thankfully, the bell rings just then, and we join the stampede for the door. I can't help but look over my shoulder at those girls. I don't see Vanesa, but maybe one of them is Yaqui. Maybe she's watching me right now, staring at my swishy ass, hating me. I hold my books tight and press forward in the crowd, keeping my hips as still as I can.

CHAPTER 2

How I got into this *lío* at Daniel Jones High is because the lobby staircase in our old apartment building finally gave way, and Ma said, “¡Hasta aquí!” Otherwise, I’d be at Charles P. Jeantet on the better side of Northern Boulevard, and nobody would be after me at all.

But every week, something would happen in the building to rattle Ma. No hot water from the boiler on Mondays. Mr. and Mrs. Halper fighting so bad, Lila sometimes called the cops. Dog turd from the old boxer in 1D that’s ninety-one in people years and can’t make it outside in time anymore. It was all getting on Ma’s nerves — not exactly her strong point — and that day when the stairs went *pfft*, she’d worked overtime, too.

I was in Lila’s living room, watching our soap opera, when we heard the crash. It sounded like a *whoosh* followed by a truckload of china breaking. The front door even shook a little. Then came Ma’s screams.

“¡Dios mío! ¿Qué es esto? Help!”

Lila grabbed the old plunger handle she keeps in case of burglars, and we headed out the door. Sure enough, there was Ma, standing in a cloud of genie smoke, knee-deep in rubble where the five lobby steps had crumbled right under her feet. Covered in all that marble dust, she looked like a Greek statue of herself, only furious, the way you’d picture Medusa. Her hands were shaking; the veins in her neck were ropes. Even after we dug her out and got her upstairs, I could tell she wanted blood.

“¡Sin vergüenza! We can’t live like animals! We’re decent,” she shouted into the heating pipe. It ran down the stack of apartments, all the way to the super’s place near the laundry room. She smacked a frying pan again and again against the metal to make sure he heard her over the hum of the dryers. Hearing Ma wasn’t going to be a problem, of course. The whole building was probably listening in on her *escándalo* through the pipes; maybe even the whole block could hear. That tells you how mad she was, because if there’s one thing Ma hates, it’s looking low. The worst thing you can be is a *chusma*. She thinks we get a bad rap as Latinos, which she’s always trying to undo by being extra quiet and polite all the time.

“Calm yourself, Clara.” Lila adjusted the flame under the teakettle and opened up the cupboard to look for honey. *“You want a heart attack?”*

"I don't want to calm down!" Ma's face was nearly purple.

"What if someone calls the cops on us?" I asked, trying to help. What's more *chusma* than *that*, right? It got Ma's attention.

She gave the pipes one more smack before tossing the frying pan aside. Then she flopped into a kitchen chair, exhausted. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes to send a prayer to *el Señor*, though who knows if he still listens to her. It's been fifteen years since she's gone to church. When she opened her eyes again, it was like the irises had been drained of their color and all that was left was steely silver. Her voice was low.

"No, I don't want a heart attack, Lila. And, no, I don't want cops. What I *want* is to move. The Ortegas are lucky they got out when they did." The Ortegas are Mitzi's parents. They moved to Long Island in May to get away from the "bad element" in our neighborhood.

Oh, no, I thought. Not this again. Ma is always threatening to move when she's upset about something—but it's never anywhere reasonable, like Maspeth or Ridgewood. It's always Hialeah or Miami, or should I say, *Me-ah-me*, aka Cuba with food. Sometimes she goes so far as to make us start packing. Once she got so annoyed about the icy walkway out front that she brought home boxes from work and announced that we were leaving for

Florida. Luckily, we're the only Cubans in the United States who don't have relatives there, so we wouldn't have had anywhere to stay. Lila found her a good pair of rubber-soled boots on sale instead, and we stayed put.

I had to think fast.

"Mitzi says Long Island isn't so great. The people are snobs." It's a lie. I talked to her last week. She likes it fine, even with the all-girl Catholic high school that came with the deal. "Why don't we just sue the super?" Even this seemed easier than packing up the apartment in boxes—and Ma likes court shows. "Who knows? We could get rich if you're hurt. Do you have a limp? Are you traumatized?"

Ma gave me an exasperated look and turned back to Lila.

"I'm serious. It's not just talk like the other times. And if you don't believe me, look."

She got up, opened the cupboard, and reached for an old El Pico coffee can from the top shelf. When she opened it, I gasped. Inside was a drug-dealer-size wad of bills.

"Ma!" I said. "Did you rob a bank?"

"Don't be fresh. I've been saving," she continued. "And now it's finally time. Lila, get me the phone number for Mr. Wu."

Lila stared at the money and didn't say a word. Mr. Wu is her old boyfriend—a Chinese guy who grew up in

Uruguay—but he's also the owner of Happiness Home Realty, the biggest real-estate agency in this part of Queens.

Ma meant business.

So, Lila set the whole thing up, just like Ma wanted. All she had to promise was a dinner with Mr. Wu, and he said, “*¿Cómo no, linda?* I'll be happy to show your friend what I got.” Like I said, no man can resist Lila.

The next day, the three of us were standing with Mr. Wu in front of a two-family house at the corner of Forty-fifth and Parsons Boulevard, not too far from our old place. A FOR RENT sign was taped inside the empty window on the second floor, Mr. Wu's smiling picture overlooking the bus stop.

Mr. Wu was grinning at Lila stupidly as he fumbled for the keys to the apartment. It had been at least six months since Lila had called it quits with him, but I could tell he was hopeful, like all her old boyfriends are for a while afterward. I tried not to notice him practically drooling. Men just get weird around her, like the air gets electric and they go blind to everything except for her. Lila wears heels and sells Avon part-time, when she's not doing *champú* at Salón Corazón. She's nothing like Ma, who is Hanes brief three-packs and a worried face. Lila's hair never shows roots, and when she walks by, it's all Jean Naté and talcum that makes men want to cling to her tighter than her sweaters.

"Too bad she's loose," Ma says when she hears Lila's pumps clicking down the stairs for a date in the city. I don't think she means it—or if she does, it doesn't stop her from loving Lila. I know because I can see the worry lines cutting deep between her eyebrows as we watch Lila through the blinds. Some nights I turn over and find the other side of the sofa bed empty and Ma still waiting at the window for Lila to come home.

Lila isn't bad, though. She's just alive in a way that Ma is too tired to remember. It's like Lila can still hear the rhythm in a salsa on the radio and not just complain about the noise.

"*Bonito*, right?" Mr. Wu tried yet another key and juttied his chin at the rosebushes hanging over the chain-link fence. It had been a warm September, so they were still pushing up blooms. I nodded to be polite, but it didn't make the place look any better to me. The house looked too quiet. It had no stoop for people to gather on. Nobody was playing out front. And it had those white scrolled bars on the window that scream, *Break-ins happen here!*

Lila circled my waist.

"Only a block away from the school," she whispered in my ear.

"That's a selling point?" I asked.

"Okay, maybe not, but at least it's a short walk."

I could see Daniel Jones High clearly from the front

door. The school takes up half a block and is painted the pale green of disinfectant. There are grates on the windows and blacktop with a long cement wall covered in drawings and neon tags: *Julius 174. 10-ass-itty. Slinky.* Art and barrio all mixed in.

"Here we are!" With a click and a bow, Mr. Wu finally threw open the door. "Utilities included, too, *señoras.*"

He stared at Lila's butt the whole way up to the second floor.

Nothing deterred Ma. Not the ugly blue rug with the mysterious dark stain that I pointed out. Not the dead roaches turning to dust inside the cabinets. Not Mrs. Boika, a nasty Romanian lady downstairs who stared at us without even saying, *¿Hola, qué tal?* or anything. Not even when I asked her how we would move her scratched-up piano from our place to this. It's an upright Steinway that hasn't been tuned in all the years we've had it, but suddenly I was protective.

"It's not like in the cartoons, you know, where movers lower it out a window," I said. Ma ignored me—was she planning to leave it behind after all these years? I wondered—and said the new apartment was perfect. There was a bus stop right outside the door—and no loud neighbors or slobbering dogs to make a mess of things.

"Those were her exact words," I told Mitzi on the phone. "'It's perfect.'" I was sitting on our fire escape later

that day, miserable. In the summer, Mitzi and I used to paint our nails out here. Now I picked paint chips off the metal and dropped them over the edge.

"Maybe you'll like it better," she said. "You never know."

"Be serious. I'm switching schools in September of sophomore year. The new place has barred windows. I won't know anybody. How is that 'perfect'?"

Silence.

"Are you still there?" I asked.

"Yeah, sorry. At least school just started, right? Anyway, I need to work on this stupid lab report for physics."

I sighed. A five-alarm fire wouldn't get between Mitzi and her homework. Her dad was a doctor in Honduras, even though here he only works in the lab at a clinic. He has plans for Mitzi to be a surgeon. She'll probably like it, though. She's the only kid I know who didn't make naked Ken and Barbie kiss. Instead, she would amputate their limbs with blunt-edge scissors, their putty-colored little feet lined up on the front stoop.

"What time is it?" she said. Papers shuffled in the background. "*¡Ay!* I gotta go to practice."

"Practice for what?" I asked.

"I'm playing badminton for school."

"The game with the little net thing? That's a *sport*?"

"Yeah, can you believe it? And I suck."

"So why are you doing it?"

"Why else? Mami wants me to make friends."

This made us both laugh. Mitzi has always been kind of shy, her mother's exact opposite. It got really bad when the boys in our class went insta-stupid over Mitzi's boobs in elementary school. After that, it was me who had to tell the boys to shut their filthy mouths — and ask for the movie tickets and the explanation for the homework, too.

"You coming to Queens soon?" I didn't want to say *I miss you* because she already knew that.

"The first weekend that I don't have a game. Maybe we can go shopping for your birthday present."

I couldn't answer through the tight feeling in my throat.

"Look, Piddy, don't worry. It's going to be okay," Mitzi said before we hung up. "Take it from me. You can't do anything about moving, anyway, so try to make the best of it. Besides, people always like you. You're going to kick butt."

I was already missing Lila as the three of us packed up our old kitchen a week later. I was sitting at the piano bench, plucking at the stuck keys.

"Ay, Clara, tell this kid to stop with the sad face; she's breaking my heart." Lila taped newspaper around two plates and kissed my forehead. "Your *mami's* right. You can't stay here." She wiped the lipstick off my skin with her

handkerchief and tucked it back inside her bra. "The whole place is turning to dust."

Ma looked up and frowned at me.

"Piddy, stop that racket and help us. And quit moping. You should be thankful." She yanked tape over a box of pots. "The new apartment's not far, and — did you see? — it even has a yard."

I gave her a stony stare.

"That patch of dirt?"

"It has *roses*," she said. "You can sit outside with a new friend from school and smell their perfume," she continued. "That's good for a young girl."

"Ay, Ma . . ." I muttered.

"'Ay, Ma,' what?" she mimicked.

I sighed.

Ma is always inventing endless things that are "good for a young girl"—which means, specifically, me. Hemming pants. Washing out underwear by hand because "What decent woman puts her private things in a public washer?" Learning to fry chicken so it isn't bloody near the bone. Speaking rudimentary French. Cross-stitching pillows—I kid you not—so I'll know how to stitch my baby's initials into its bibs someday. All sorts of pointless things that are supposed to improve me "for the future."

Too bad I have other plans in mind.

Ma doesn't know it, but I'm going to be a scientist. I

want to work with animals, big ones like elephants, maybe even live halfway across the world. It's weird, I know. The only elephants I've ever seen were in the zoo. But we have the National Geographic channel, so I know they're smart and they can feel and hear things people can't. They can keep a herd's whole history—all the good and the bad they've ever seen—in their memory. If I told this to Ma, her screams would touch the sky. “¿Elefantes?” She'd nag about malaria and the smell of dung I'd never get out from under my nails. She'd ask me what kind of decent girl is interested in elephants. And so on.

It's times like these I wish I were Lila's daughter instead. Not that Ma doesn't love me—or that Lila likes elephants. It's just that Lila doesn't *bother* me. She's never had kids of her own, thank God, so she doesn't have the slightest idea of what's good for me. She doesn't ask me if I've done my homework or where I've been. When Ma works late, we fill up on butter cookies for dinner and watch the good shows that Ma calls trash. If I were Lila's kid, life might actually be fun.

“Forget smelling flowers,” Lila said. “A pretty girl like you? Boys will be sending you roses of your own!” Then she wiggled her eyebrows. “The good news is you'll have your own room. Just think, now you'll have *privacy*. Every sixteen-year-old girl needs that.”

“She's not sixteen yet,” Ma muttered.

"A few weeks . . ." Lila said, winking.

I looked around at the packed boxes and felt my throat go dry. I already hated the new apartment and Daniel Jones High School. I hadn't felt this bad since Mitzi's moving van pulled away from our street.

But I held my tongue. Getting my own room *was* the only shining piece of good news in this whole thing. It meant I wouldn't have to share a sofa bed with Ma, who snores and takes my covers. Still, the "pretty" part was ridiculous. I've never been one of the pretty girls. Mitzi's the good-looking one, all curvy like a guitar. I'm tall and skinny. My eyes are wide set and the color of mud. Joey Halper says I look like a toad, presumably now one with a booty. Sometimes he croaks *ribbit* from his window when he sees me outside and wants to say hello.

"That's right," Ma said. "Your own room. No more lumpy sofa bed." She paused over a bowl with a melted rim. "Maybe now you won't slouch."

Through the window, I could see the empty lot next door and the bowl of milk I had left there that morning. I moved the jade elephant on my chain back and forth nervously. Sometimes the sound of my necklace makes me feel calm.

"What's going to happen to the kittens?" I asked. The mother tabby I'd been feeding near the cellar had been roaming with a low belly for days. She'd grown to the size

of a raccoon. The litter would come any day. I thought of what could happen without me: dogs, the cold, rotten kids, even the super with a shovel. He's an idiot that way.

"Cats are wild at heart, *mi amor*. They figure out how to survive." Lila came to the window and closed her hand around my cold fingers. "Now, give me a hug. Good things are waiting for you, Piddy. I promise."

CHAPTER 3

My key is stuck in the lock. Again. At the old place, Lila had a spare key whenever I needed it. Here I'm on my own. The weather turned cold today, chilly enough outside to make my nose run and my fingers feel stiff. It takes me five minutes of jiggling and pushing to get the lock to release.

Mrs. Boika watches me from her perch behind her kitchen window as if I'm a burglar. If she didn't blink every so often, I'd swear she was already dead and stuffed, like one of Lila's customers did to her pet Chihuahua, complete with glass eyeballs and everything.

The steps to our apartment are right beside the old bat's back door in the hall. It takes all I've got not to give her door a good kick.

"Hello, Mrs. Boika," I call, just to point out her rudeness. She doesn't respond.

I climb the steps and unlock our door. Nobody is home, of course. It's Friday, and Ma will be at Attronica

until nine tonight. She works in the shipping department, where lifting flat-screen TVs is killing her. A person's back can only take so much, she says. Tonight I'll have to rub her shoulders with Iodex until the whole apartment smells of wintergreen and my hands are shiny with oil. If this isn't a pathetic life, I don't know what is. I can't even talk to Mitzi to tell her what happened and see what she thinks. She's trapped at her cousin's house in New Jersey until Saturday, so I text her instead.

Having an ass problem, I type.

?? You have an ass? Call me Sat pm! Gotta go.

The apartment is still cluttered with half-emptied moving boxes that I kick out of my way to get to the kitchen. Ma and I work at unpacking every day, but somehow it's like new boxes spring up overnight, and we never seem to finish. Who knew we owned so much junk? Worse, nothing is labeled. That was Lila's job; we should have known better. She got distracted and forgot. "I can't think when I'm emotional," she explained. So now everything we unpack is a surprise. When we need something, we arm ourselves with a box cutter and go hunting as though we're at the flea market on a Saturday morning. Two nights ago, I found my old CDs mixed with my winter coats in the bathroom. Ma unearthed the teakettle in her bedroom.

I grab a cereal bar from the kitchen and head back to my room, music piping through my headphones. It still smells of roach spray and fresh paint in here, compliments

of the landlord. I prop open the window with my wooden ruler and throw myself on the bed. It's all I've got in here besides the ugly dresser that Ma and Lila dragged home on Large Trash Day.

I can't get Yaqui Delgado out of my mind. Plenty of girls shake their junk. How is that enough to make somebody hate you? It's crazy.

I turn up the music to chase Yaqui out of my head, and dig out my English notebook. Naturally, I can't find a pen to use for my homework. I'm sure there are some in a box somewhere. Time to go hunting.

Boxes are stacked everywhere on the upright piano and its bench to form a kind of mountain. Not that it matters. Ma is the only one who can play, and she says she never has time. Still, she gave the moving guys fifty bucks extra to drag it up these stairs.

"If you don't play it, why should we bring it?" I asked.

"A piano makes a house looks classy," she snapped.

I grab a box from near the foot pedals and find Ma's old handbags and shoes, even a little beaded evening bag I've never seen before. The next box has old phone and rent bills folded neatly inside plastic bags. It's Ma's extensive bookkeeping, down to the last penny. Then I find loose photographs. For a minute, I don't reach for them. Looking at old pictures sucks me in—and not in a good, nostalgic way. Most people feel happy looking at old photos. Me? I just feel lost and jumbled. For all of Ma's

organization and bookkeeping, she's never figured out a way to keep pictures straight. Pictures are supposed to tell your story, but our story looks like it doesn't make sense. I dig my arms in almost up to my elbows and pull one free. Ma and Lila toasting Cokes to the camera. They're young and laughing. You can see they're good friends. I dig in again and pull free a class picture: Mitzi and me in Mrs. Resnick's class, me with oversized front teeth, standing by our diorama, the best one in the class. Another dig and I pull free a fuzzy shot of us at Rockaway Beach under a striped umbrella with Mr. and Mrs. Ortega. Again, and I find an old one of me in a high chair with smashed-up tamales on my cheeks.

I play this game for way too long; it's almost dark by the time I stretch my legs and stand up. If Ma knew what I was doing, she'd be mad. "What are you looking for?" she'd snap, even though she knows the answer: a picture of my father. Ma and Lila made sure there was no evidence left with the help of a Bic lighter. I could dig to China, and I won't find any photos of him. It's like he never existed at all.

I close the box and give it a little shove into the corner. Then I smash my fingers along the piano keys as loudly as I can. *Hello, Mrs. Boika! Like the tune?*

The pens, I suddenly remember, are in the box with the Ajax beside the bathroom.



"The trouble probably isn't your ass. I'll bet it's a guy." Mitzi holds up a shirt. We're shopping on Sunday. She's got thirty dollars, she says, enough for my birthday present — elephant earrings! — *and* a new shirt if she's careful. "My God, I'm so sick of my uniform, and it's only October," she mutters, putting the shirt back.

Almost as soon as she got off the N-16 bus this morning, I told Mitzi what Vanesa said and about the lunch-room tables. I even walked ahead of her down the street so she could tell me the truth about my walk. On a scale of one to ten, she gave me a seven in shake. I stare over the rack and wrinkle my nose.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You ever wear knee-length polyester all day?"

"Not that. What do you mean 'a guy'? There are no guys in this picture."

"Yeah, sure. That's what *you* think." She sounds a little sad when she says it. A boy hasn't looked Mitzi in the eyes for years. Their eyes stay glued to her chest. "I'll bet her boyfriend noticed you or something stupid like that. But if that's what happened, you're done."

"That's not my fault. Jesus, I don't even know what *she* looks like."

"So find out."

"Creep on her?"

"Exactly."

"How am I going to do that?"

Mitzi cocks her head and gives me a look.

"¡*Por favor!* Use your brain. Nobody's a match for that." She pulls out another shirt. This one is loose and roomy the way she likes. "Ooh. *Now* we're in business."

We share a dressing room. I try on a clingy blue dress in an African pattern while she tries on the shirt. The whole time I'm thinking about the boys at the lunch table. Maybe Mitzi is right. Maybe one of them actually noticed me. Stranger things have happened.

"What do you think?" I say, stepping out and circling in front of the mirror. It's not a little-kid dress, that's for sure. Ma would take one look and say something about short skirts and immorality.

"Perfect," she says.

"You ladies finding everything all right?" the store manager asks, smiling. He's pretty old—like thirty or something—but he's cute. Mitzi flushes and stares at her shoes.

"We're fine, thanks," I tell him.

Mitzi grabs my arm as we head out a few minutes later with our bags. The manager waves through the window.

"Behold the devastating power of your new booty," she tells me, sighing.

I give her a shove. Laughing, we run all the way down the street.

CHAPTER 4

I read somewhere about a mathematician who said he could solve difficult equations in his sleep. He claimed that his subconscious could figure out problems he couldn't solve when he was awake.

I'm not a genius, but it must work like that for me, too.

When I wake up on Monday, I have a perfect plan for stalking Yaqui.

"Where are you going so early?" Ma asks as I zip up my sweatshirt at the door. "I made you eggs."

"School," I say, holding up the cereal bar I snatched for my pocket. "There's a club meeting."

Ma looks so happy, I almost feel bad about lying. The truth is that the only people who get to DJ early are the ones eating the free breakfast. Me? I won't spend a minute more at school than I have to. In this case, though, it's better that she thinks I go to a school like Mitzi's, where people practically live full-time.

"What club?" Ma asks.

"Library." I hustle out the door before there are any more questions.

Nobody much is in the school yard when I get there, except for a few guys hanging near the fence. I recognize a couple of them from the forbidden Latin lunch table. I walk fast, trying not to be noticed, but, of course, they have to go out of their way to call me out.

"Move that junk, *mami!*" one of them calls, making squeezing motions with his hands. I don't turn around to give him the finger, though I probably should. Instead, I hurry up the steps two at a time.

The library looks deserted as usual. The only time I've seen kids in here is when their teachers bring a class, and even then they look like zombies. I head to the nonfiction stacks, my eyes scanning for my target. If I weren't in such a hurry, I might browse. I actually like libraries. Not this one, of course, but the fancy ones like New York Public on Forty-second Street, where everything is marble and wood—and free. Mrs. Resnick took our class there once when Mitzi and I were in elementary school. We went to hear story time, and then we ate hot pretzels on the big steps near the lions. I threw big chunks of mine to the pigeons. But what I most remember is all those little lamps on the tables and that scary quiet that let you hear our squeaky sneakers as we walked through the reading room,

fingers to our lips. Mrs. Resnick whispered, "You can learn anything you want in a place like this."

We'll see.

"Can I help you?" The librarian's voice startles me. I turn around slowly and find a tiny, round lady looking at me over her glasses. She looks shocked to see a living, breathing person in here. Maybe she thinks I'm a spirit.

"Just browsing," I tell her, heading around the corner to the next set of stacks.

It doesn't take too much longer to find what I'm really looking for. It's on one of the top shelves in the reference section. It's the collection of school yearbooks, back all the way to the 1960s. I find the most recent volume, slip it under my arm, and head for the front desk.

"Sorry, that's noncirculating," the librarian tells me. Her hawk eyes are fixed on the words stamped on the inside cover: NOT FOR CHECKOUT.

My lightbulb goes on just in time, and I flash her my brightest smile.

"Oh, sorry. I'm new here. Mrs. Gregory in the guidance office sent me to borrow it," I say. "Just to see the clubs I might join. You have a library AV Club, don't you?"

I know: Genius.

"Seats, everyone! We have a lot of ground to cover." Ms. Shepherd rushes in with a pencil stuck behind her ear and a planner crammed with ungraded papers. As teachers go

at DJ, she's good. She still decorates her room like we're little kids and brings snacks on Fridays. She calls us the "bright spot in her day."

I take my seat in the last row near the windows, far enough away from her to be safe. That's my favorite spot in all my classes these days, unlike Darlene, who likes to sit up front, where she can see in the teacher's grade book.

Ms. Shepherd scans the room. Today our *Julius Caesar* projects are due. Mitzi helped me sew my toga before she went home Sunday. We braided silk-and-plastic ivy into a wreath. "Who's first?"

I sink into my seat as Ms. Shepherd picks her first volunteer: (you guessed it) Darlene. She's written a sappy suicide note from Portia to Brutus and is doing a dramatic reading, complete with crocodile tears.

I hope Ms. Shepherd doesn't pick me to go today. Unfortunately, she calls on me all the time, and I can't seem to dodge her. Last week I didn't know what to write about for our descriptive essay. Finally, in desperation, I wrote about the crapping boxer from our old building. How it belongs to the Iraq War vet in 4C who looks like Jesus Christ. Ms. Shepherd made a big deal about it—writing long comments in the margins and reading out the part when the boxer gets to the stoop and sways on his old legs, with his nose in the air, like he's trying remember better days. I almost died. Not that I'm not glad she liked it. But couldn't she see my red face and know it was time to

back off? Let's face it: standing out can only make a new kid public enemy number one. Then what? I'll be accused of being stuck-up *and* a suck-up. Better to blend into the herd. (Elephant wisdom never fails.)

I glance at the clock nervously, hoping she doesn't pick me, even though I know Brutus's speech by heart. I have more important things to worry about, namely, Yaqui Delgado.

Luckily, lots of other people volunteer, so I lay low and page through the yearbook in my lap as the drone of voices fades into the background. One presentation moves to the next, but I'm barely listening. A few kids have produced newspapers reporting Caesar's murder. Another kid made a diorama, although he could have used a little help from Mitzi and me. It's got LEGO people stuck in place with Play-Doh, and the crooked columns are made of packing Styrofoam. He's better at math, he explains. Not much of an art fan.

Darlene is outraged. Her sharp voice makes me look up.

"How can that [air quotes] 'project' even count for a grade?" she demands. "Anybody can stick dolls into clay. I did that in second grade!"

"We all have our artistic strengths, Darlene." Ms. Shepherd's smile always gets a little tight when Darlene comments. "Who's next? Anyone?"

Sally Ngyuen makes her way to the front of the

room. I'm about to start looking through the yearbook again when I notice something else for the first time.

SKANK is scribbled in ballpoint pen on my desk. I don't exactly know why my heart starts to thump. It's not like there aren't messages and other handiwork all over this school. Take auditorium seat J-8. I found out during last week's Expectations of Excellence assembly that it's got a faded image of a penis carved on the armrest. No one likes to sit in the Pecker Chair for an assembly. People make fun of you the whole day after that. Ask Rob.

Am I sitting in the Skank Chair, and I didn't even know it? Even when I cover the word with my binder, it feels like everyone knows, like the message was meant for me. That's what Yaqui called me, isn't it? Could she have spies in this very room? Could *she* be creeping on *me*? I glance around the room for suspects, but everyone has the same bored expression.

I open the yearbook and start paging through it as fast as I can. Basketball games, Ping-Pong, Yearbook Club, Drama. I check the cover to make sure it's not a mistake. It's like I'm reading about another place entirely. The school in this book has nothing to do with the place where I spend my days, the place where three in ten of us won't graduate. It doesn't show the empty air around me as I wait alone in the school yard, the bathrooms I won't go into, or the dead look I have to keep on my face as I go from class to class.

I turn pages furiously, running my finger down each row until I finally find her.

Yaquelin Moira Delgado. Moira? Quite a name, I note with satisfaction.

She's a thin girl with small eyes and hair pulled into a tight bun. She's staring right into the camera, her head tilted in a silly photographer's angle. Someone might call her pretty. I look closely, trying to memorize her grainy two-inch face. She sits at the lunch table with all the Latin kids. I remember her now.

I hate you, her eyes say.

"Earth to Piddy."

Ms. Shepherd is looking over her glasses, and the class is silent. She smiles with that hopeful look on her face, and I realize she's been calling my name. I slide the yearbook back inside my desk and sit up taller.

"Sorry."

It's no use. I'm busted. She glances at my lap from where she's standing midway up the aisle.

"What have you got there?"

My face is hot.

"Nothing."

She waits for a minute and walks closer, holding out her hand.

"It's just the yearbook," I say, handing it over. "I was just trying to . . ." My voice trails off.

Ms. Shepherd tucks the book under her arm. Everyone has shifted around to look at me, and my stomach starts to twist.

"Are you ready to present?" I can see she's saved me for last today, like dessert.

My hands feel heavy and wet. The clock says there are only seven minutes to the bell, almost time for the halls again, where Yaqui might be lurking.

"Piddy?" Ms. Shepherd asks. "Are you prepared?"

I keep my face blank as I push the bag with my costume farther beneath my desk. I don't know if it's stage fright or being in the Skank Chair or the fact that all at once Yaqui feels real. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I shake my head slowly as my fingers go to my necklace. The elephant goes back and forth, back and forth.

"I have a knife," a voice says from the other side of the room.

Ms. Shepherd whips around, momentarily terrified. Then she sees Rob standing up. He lifts his foil dagger out of the bag and shows her.

"Reynolds Wrap, I swear," he says. "I can go next. I'm ready."

Everyone laughs. At Rob? With him? I'm not sure.

"Very funny, Rob," Ms. Shepherd says, relieved. "Quiet down, everybody."

She turns back to me and writes something in her grade book as Rob makes his way to the front of the room.

"Come prepared tomorrow, or I'll have to make it a permanent zero," she whispers to me. "I don't want to do that, okay? It's killer on your average."

I stare straight ahead, trying to look like her disappointment doesn't bother me. The truth is I've never been given a zero. I've been second in line to Student of the Year since, I don't know, maybe third grade. (Mitzi always won.) Ma has all the honorable-mention certificates in a folder with her important papers.

This zero makes me feel weird, though. A little ashamed, sure, but also a little tough, especially with Darlene and the others looking on.

Soon Rob is stumbling over each line, murdering the soliloquy worse than Brutus did Caesar. He grips his dagger and jabs it hard in the air. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he was talking right to me.

"O judgment! Thou art fled to brutish beasts. And men have lost their reason . . ."

I grip my charm tighter. All I can think about is Yaqui Delgado's eyes, about what kind of cloak she wears, what kind of dagger she'll run through me.

CHAPTER 5

"Are you crazy? Crushing on *Alfredo*?" Darlene has me cornered at my locker. I can smell her Juicy Fruit gum. "Do you have a death wish or something?"

"Alfredo? What is it with this place and people I don't know?" I ask. "I'm not crushing on anybody."

That's a bold-faced lie. It's true that I have no idea who Alfredo is, but I do have a total crush on Mr. Grandusky, the student teacher in global history. He's got hipster glasses and a SAVE THE ELEPHANTS tie. When he asked me, "What defines something as a revolution?" I nearly fainted.

She crosses her arms. "Well, I heard you were talking to Alfredo in the school yard this morning. Just so you know, he's been Yaqui Delgado's boyfriend since, like, forever."

"I wasn't talking to *anyone* in the school yard." Then I think back to the two guys catcalling me. A sickening tug starts to work through my gut.

"You look guilty," she adds.

"No, I look annoyed." I slam my locker shut.

Darlene shakes her head.

"There's nothing to worry about, Darlene," I say firmly. "I've never even spoken to Alfredo. Now, let's go. We'll be late."

"What?" Mitzi shouts into the phone. "You have to speak louder! I'm in the gym."

She's at a badminton tournament, and I'm at the coin laundry down the street, trying to fill her in on my day.

What's wrong with this picture? Mitzi has always hated gym—until now. Unless I was the captain, she'd been picked last for every team except spelling bee since kindergarten. I should be happy for her, I guess, but I'm not. In fact, I'm irked. It's stupid to swing around those little rackets.

"You were right. It's a guy!" I shout.

"A lie?" she repeats.

"Never mind," I say. "Call me when you get home."

I hang up and stare miserably at the mesmerizing pin-wheel of soapy clothes in the machine. Ma has picked up some more hours at Attronica, so now the laundry is on my plate, too.

"What? You have more important things to do?" Ma asked when I pointed out that I already make us dinner. "I'm making a living so we don't starve, Piedad. It's the least you could do."

Nobody is ever beating off starvation at Mitzi's house. Her parents are so utterly boring, old-fashioned, and ordinary. Her dad works at the clinic, and her mom volunteers, does the laundry, and cooks. Everybody does his or her job — and Mitzi's is only to study. I decide *that* annoys me, too. What would my life be like if my dad were still around? Easier, I bet, just like hers.

When I was little, I played a private game called Who's Papi? I could play it anywhere. The supermarket. The bus. Out on the street. I'd spot a man and imagine he was my dad in disguise, following me from a safe distance. I'd pretend he would introduce himself and say, "Piddy! I'm so sorry about everything. I've been thinking of you all these years." One day when we were back-to-school shopping, I almost followed a stranger into the men's room at a department store, pretending he was my father. "Where are you going?" Ma asked. She gave him a dirty look and ushered me away.

When the washer stops, I realize that my unhooked bras have hopelessly tangled in the laundry. One strap is so tight around the agitator that I have to climb halfway inside to get my stuff free. I've forgotten Ma's golden rule about hand-washing our personals. *Somehow she's always right*, I think, and that makes me feel even angrier.

The attendant looks up from her paper.

"Trouble, honey?"

"No. I'm fine," I grunt.

In the end, I don't try to pick it all apart. Instead, I shove the ball of clothes in the dryer and stuff extra quarters in the slot, hoping it will all dry anyway.

I open my history book and get to work. It's hopeless, even when I try to think of other things, like Mr. Grandusky asking, "What constitutes a revolution? Who's to blame for an uprising?"

I stare at the dryer and lose myself in thoughts that are just as circular.

What constitutes a crush? What constitutes talking to somebody? Who is to blame for my social failure?

CHAPTER 6

Two days later in the lunchroom, I learn a new game.

Yaqui Delgado teaches me.

It's called fastball, and you play it when none of the teachers are looking. This is a sport that is not included in our yearbook, but it is very real just the same.

Two teams: my lunch table vs. an enemy cloaked in invisibility. Equipment: a container of chocolate milk and a cinder-block wall. You don't have to ask to play or wait in humiliation as teams are chosen. In fact, if you're a loser, you're picked first.

Darlene is in the middle of complaining about our physics pop-quiz grades when an Elmhurst Dairy container comes whizzing through the air. It hits the wall right behind me and explodes like the big bang. Every genius at my table is doused in milk. For a second, no one moves. Rob looks as though he's crying chocolate tears. Darlene, dripping, stares at her hands through murky lenses. People

around us start to point; a few that have been splattered at nearby tables curse on their way out the door.

I scan the blur of faces in the lunchroom, looking for the pitcher of today's fastball, but I already know exactly who it is. Most of the girls at the Latin table have their backs to us. All, that is, but one.

Yaqui.

I recognize her immediately thanks to her yearbook picture. She doesn't crack a smile as our eyes meet. She's sitting next to Alfredo. After she's stared me down, she turns back around slowly.

Meanwhile, Miss Posey, the lunch aide, comes running before I'm even on my feet. She's huffing with the effort of moving across the cafeteria so fast on her bunions. Chocolate milk is dripping down the walls, over the edges of the table, and onto the floor. She stares at the scene with disgust.

"Who threw it?" she demands, as though we're the guilty ones. None of us answers, too stunned to speak. "Custodian!" she barks into her walkie-talkie. "Custodian, do you copy?" She stops me from trying to get up. "Don't move. Any of you."

Inside, I'm flipping her the bird. Chocolate milk seeps through my shirt and jeans to my underwear.

The custodian rolls his bucket of murky water across the floor. His name is Jason, and he's young enough to still have acne on his neck. I try not to look at him as he works.

Not at him. Not at the guys all over the lunchroom who are pointing and cracking up. Milk drips from the ends of my hair. I'm a loser for all to see.

"Pick up your feet," he says.

I know what he thinks as he starts pushing his Pine-Sol mop in circles: we're easy targets. Weak. Weakness means that you deserve to be hated, that you deserve everything you get.

My fists are clenched; I want to punch someone. Rob is perfectly still, like his spirit has risen out of his body and nothing is left. Darlene rummages through her bag for her striped gym-suit top.

"My shirt is ruined," she fumes. "It was expensive, and now I'm going to *clash*."

I grab her arm before she storms off to the lockers.

"*What?*" she snaps.

My voice is almost a growl.

"I need to find out more about Yaqui Delgado."

Darlene rolls her eyes and cocks her head.

"Gee, ya *think?*"

CHAPTER 7

I walk home that afternoon in a daze. My shirt smells like baby vomit, and my hair has stiffened to peaks that I can't comb through. Chocolate milk is one of those things I remember loving as a kid. Now that memory's ruined.

"Hey."

When I look up, I'm surprised to find myself in front of the old building. My feet must have gone on autopilot. I'm like one of those African elephants that finds her way home, no matter how far she's roamed.

Joey Halper is sitting on the stoop, eating a frozen Popsicle, even though the October cold is biting through my jacket. He's grinning at me in that way of his. He has a new haircut—buzzed close to the scalp like a prisoner. He tries to look vicious, but it never really works. Even the day the cop car brought him home for shoplifting, he looked like a scared little kid to me. I'm pretty sure he was crying.

I never asked him about it, though. I don't ask Joey about a lot of things. And now his hair is so wispy that it looks like duck down, so soft you want to touch it. I know better, though. It's been a long time since Joey and I sat around catching caterpillars on the ends of twigs.

"Hey back," I tell him.

He squints, like it's an effort just to think about me, but at least he doesn't make any crack about my stained clothes.

"Didn't you move?" he asks.

"You noticed."

I can see the damaged staircase through the dingy glass. A plywood ramp covers the steps. Yellow CAUTION tape is pulled tightly all around, as if it's a murder scene. An unopened box of tiles is stacked in the corner.

"They still haven't fixed the steps?" I ask.

He shrugs.

"Who cares? But don't think I forgot that you owe me five bucks. I won the bet."

This makes us both smile. The day before the stairs went kaput, Joey and I had swayed on them like surfers.

"Five bucks says they don't last more than a week," he'd said as we rocked. It was like we were little again, back before Ma labeled him trouble and forbid me to cross the threshold to his apartment. I should have known that a kid like Joey could predict disaster better than I could. He has

had a lot of practice watching for it. His dad drinks and drinks until his anger explodes. For Joey, timing a disaster is a science.

"So why are you back?" He chomps off a bit of Popsicle. "You miss me or something?"

My cheeks flush. He's cute for a future convict—even Mitzi used to think so—and the question catches me off-guard. Joey does that sometimes. Like the time he said, "What's worse? Having no dad or having a mean son of a bitch like mine?"

"Well?"

His question makes me feel especially silly in my chocolate-milk shirt. I think fast and point at the row of dented mailboxes inside.

"I came to pick up our mail and stuff."

He flashes a big smile. One of his front teeth has a tiny chip that I like.

"No way. People write to you, Toad?"

"Funny. Who writes to *you* besides your JD officer?"

"Ribbit," he says.

So much for a homecoming.

I step past him and press Lila's bell, but I can feel him watching me. Maybe it's my shaky ass at work again. I don't mind, though.

"Who is it?" Lila's voice is breaking up through the static.

"Piddy. Buzz me in," I say into the intercom. It feels weird not to live here anymore, not to have a key to unlock the lobby doors. I'm about to say so to Joey, the one kid I've known my whole life besides Mitzi, but when I look back through the glass doors, he's already gone.

The TV is blaring in Lila's apartment. She's a *novela* junkie, and *Los Diablos y el Amor* is her favorite. Three p.m., Monday through Friday, she's tuned in.

Lila blows on her wet nails and waves me in from the living room.

"Hurry up! You're just in time!" she says. "I think she's going to get her vision back today." On-screen, Yvette, our heroine, is in a hospital bed, her eyes bandaged. She's flanked by her husband—and her mother-in-law, who secretly engineered the accident a few episodes ago. There'll be hell to pay any minute, just the way Lila likes, with lots of yelling and threats. I drop my things and flop down on the sofa, not too close in case she gets a whiff of me. It feels good to be home.

Lila pushes a plate in my direction without a word. It's our usual afternoon snack: a sleeve of saltines and can of Goya Vienna sausages that Ma calls poison. I stuff my cheeks and slip off my spattered shoes. Heaven.

When the commercials come on, Lila turns to me.

"What do you think?"

She holds up her perfect almond-shaped nails. They're

painted black with a hint of red sparkles. “‘Wicked’. It’s new in the catalog this fall.”

Cotton balls stained with her usual red polish are littered on the coffee table. The smell of acetone is a bad mix with sausages and sour milk. I try not to sit too close.

“New shipment?” I ask.

She plucks a cracker off my plate with the pads of her fingers and arches her brow as she takes a dainty bite.

“It arrived just this morning. And I should tell you that we’re running a special, Miss Sanchez.” Lila is using her businesswoman voice. She likes to practice on me before she wears down her good heels knocking on doors. “This polish is only \$3.99. Regularly five dollars.”

I try to picture vampy black-and-red nails on any of the tired-looking ladies on our block, but I realize Joey Halper would make a much better prospect. Black nails might look good with his do-it-yourself knuckle tattoos. Poor Lila. Ma’s right. She’s her own best customer.

“Hey, what happened to your shirt?” She scrunches up her nose at the stink. “And your pants?” There’s a chocolate starburst pattern on my right thigh.

“Food fight in the cafeteria,” I lie quickly. “What else have you got?”

“Have a look,” she tells me, and turns back to the TV. “But don’t steal all my samples like last time.”

Her Avon case is open at her feet, and I’m happy to dig in. We’ve always called this case the Treasure Chest. Going

through it makes me feel like I'm six again—in a good way. It's an old-fashioned model that looks bulletproof—black and hard on the outside. Lila could get a modern one, but this is the one she likes. She says it's the only way to keep all those pressed powders and glass bottles safe.

I pull out a small bottle shaped like a girl in a hoop skirt. She comes apart at the waist if you twist her hard enough. Her skirt is filled with a heavy jasmine splash. When she's drained, Lila will add her to the collection of bottles decorating her windowsills. Dried-out geishas, roses—breakable things of every kind that she can't bear to throw away.

The music swells on-screen, and I look up just in time to see that Yvette's bandages are being removed. Lila's eyes go wide in anticipation; she holds her breath, grabs my sticky knee. Even I can't help but stare at what's coming next.

The camera does a close-up on the girl who can miraculously see again. It cuts to the mother-in-law, then to the clueless husband. All at once, the credits run.

"¡*Maldito sea!*" Lila shoves the coffee table with her foot. "We have to wait to see that hussy get what's coming?"

"Please. You know what's coming." I rub perfume on my wrists and sniff. It's better than sour milk, and it reminds me of fancy department stores where I can only browse. I stuff a few samples in my pocket. "It's going to end the way all the *novelas* end. Everybody happy."