



MEG MEDINA

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*For Alice,
a true and lifelong friend*

Chapter 1

Mr. MacInerney drives way too slow, which is weird for a man who spends his life running into burning buildings. It could be that being a fireman has made Kathleen's dad a safety freak, but I think it's really that he likes to show off his Impala. He calls it his baby, after all. It's gold with a convertible roof and whitewall tires. The chrome is sometimes so shiny that Kathleen and I can put on lipstick in its reflection. If you ask us, though, its best feature is the backseat. It's wide and springy, a nice option should the right guy ever happen along. Not that Mr. Mac needs to know—or that we've ever had the chance to test out our theory.

Kathleen fidgets. She just got off work, and we're running out of time before the matinee starts at the Prospect. She leans over the cream-colored seat and rests her chin near his ear. "Dad, step on it. Aren't you supposed to be at the station by now? *Hurry.*"

I see his blue eyes in the rearview mirror. They're clear and smart, just like hers.

"All in good time," he says, smiling.

That's Mr. Mac. Calm, easy. You'd never guess that he's a fireman. He's skinny, with boyish red hair and a quiet voice, not exactly a testosterone specimen, if you know what I mean. Still, he's tougher than he looks, which comes in handy. When the Chiclet gum factory in Sunnyside blew to smithereens in a chemical explosion last fall, Mr. Mac had to dodge chunks of concrete and melted gum that rained down on him as he saved workers whose skin had burned off. He smelled of cinnamon and ash for days.

We've had a lot of fires in the city lately, actually—and not just because old ladies forgot their stoves. Arson fires are smoldering all over the place.

He points at the theater when it finally comes into view up ahead. The line of people snakes all the way down the block. "Looks like you'll have a wait."

"Ugh." Kathleen rolls her eyes. "Drop us off here," she says, pointing at the corner bus stop. "We'll walk the rest of the way."

She grabs my hand and pulls me out to the curb.

Mr. Mac powers down his window before we get too far.

"Be home by dark," he tells us.

Kathleen turns and gives him a look. "Oh, come on. We're nearly eighteen."

"You're *seventeen*, and you promised your mother. She worries."

"Yes. About everything. Don't be crazy."

"By dark," he says again, suddenly looking serious.

I shift on my feet in the pause that follows. I know what the fuss is about, even though no one will say it. It's

that shooting that happened not too far from Kathleen's job. Back in January, somebody shot and killed a secretary while she was kissing her fiancé in his car. Nobody knows who did it. Kathleen and I actually know the exact block in Forest Hills where it happened, since we go there all the time. Sometimes when I meet her after work, we hop off the train at Continental Avenue and walk around that neighborhood, fantasizing about life there. The Tudor houses are huge and sit back on wide lawns that don't have a single kid playing on them. That's nothing like where we live, of course. I live in an apartment, with Mima and my brother, Hector. The MacInerneys have a small yellow house around the corner from our building. It's the one nearest the tracks. Their windows rattle like loose marbles every time the Port Washington train passes through.

Anyway, I step in to save Kathleen.

"We'll be home right after the movie, Mr. Mac. Promise," I say. "Now, be careful out there."

Mr. Mac smiles at me and shakes his head. I've been saying good-bye to him that way since I was in second grade. It always gets him.

He kisses his fingertip and taps the figurine of St. Florian he keeps on his dashboard. "I have your word, then, Nora. Have fun."

He pulls out nice and slow, so everyone can see.

"This is depressing," Kathleen says, looking around at the line. It's a mob of cuddling couples. The pair behind us is even making hamster noises as they kiss.

“Relax. Didn’t we already agree that dating is a pain in the horns?”

She makes a face, but she knows I’m right. One way or another, guys always complicate things for us. When she starting going out with a guy named Lou last year, she got so swept up by his weight-lifting pecs and green eyes that I practically became invisible. Turns out, he was cheating on her the whole time with a girl from the Mary Louis Academy. When it all went down, I was secretly relieved. It sucked to see her cry, but I’d been missing my best friend for a while.

Besides, it’s not as if there aren’t lots of guys waiting to fill his spot. Kathleen has legs like one of those Nair commercial girls. Her boss at Macy’s took one look at her gams and *begged* her to model in the mall’s fashion show last year. She agreed—despite being “objectified”—because she got to keep the clothes. Me? I’m not that lucky. The only thing I model is pastrami when I’m working the slicer at Sal’s Deli.

“Uh-oh,” Kathleen says, pulling me close. “Idiot alert.”

I follow her gaze.

Who’s coming toward us? My own ex, Angel—yet another poster child for crappy boyfriends everywhere. He’s holding hands with a curly-haired girl in a tight T-shirt.

Why, God, *why*?

“Hey, look. It’s Betty and Veronica!” Angel stops at our spot and grins. He’s always found it funny to compare us to the blonde and brunette in the Archie comics, since we’re always together. He likes to add that we have the same tits. This pretty much sums up his brains and reading powers.

“No cutting, pal,” says a guy behind us.

“Take it easy,” Angel says. “We’re all together. I was just parking the car, right, Nora?” He flashes a smile and steps closer to me.

“Do I know you?” I ask.

Kathleen gives him her frostiest glare. “He doesn’t look familiar at all.” She hates Angel almost more than I do, never forgiving him for what she calls “his inexcusably dickish ways.” Angel was my first experience with a guy, a fact that I try to forget daily. I blame it on the fact that he has the same puppy eyes as Freddie Prinze, may he rest in peace. But Angel is nothing like the character I fell in love with on *Chico and the Man*, all kindhearted and sexy. Nope. One minute we were kissing in Angel’s room, and a little while later he was driving me home, my shirt buttoned wrong and a wad of toilet paper in my underwear to catch the blood. I cried to Kathleen that whole night, worried about babies and all the scabby diseases Miss Sousa covered with great gore during Health and Hygiene. But mostly, I already knew in my gut that Angel had used me, and sure enough, he spread the word to anybody who would listen. I was easy.

“Good-bye, Angel,” I say.

His smile fades. “Dykes.”

He slings his arm over his girl’s shoulder and moves toward the back of the line.

“Smart and classy as always,” I say sweetly.

I look up at the marquee and try to shake him off. We’ve got slim pickings: *Carrie* or *Rocky*. I already sat through *Rocky*

twice with Hector when it first came out in November. (It was his birthday, and I felt bad.) Since then, he has sneaked in and seen it four more times. Now he can quote you every little scene in annoying detail. His favorite part is when they take razor blades to Rocky's swollen eyelids.

"Not *Rocky* again," I say. "I beg you."

Kathleen frowns. "But that leaves *Carrie*." Her voice sounds doomed.

We haven't been much for horror ever since we read that Stephen King book during freshman year. I spent months having nightmares about being burned to death in our school gym. Kathleen was no better. She hates anything about the occult. I think it's all the church her parents make her attend.

"Show?" the ticket guy asks through the window.

"Adriana saw *Carrie*," Kathleen warns me. "She told me the eyes on the statue of Jesus at St. Andrew's glow just like the ones in the movie."

"She's a nutcase," I point out. Adriana Francesca wears black and believes she has been reincarnated from the sixteenth century. She is also, inexplicably, the smartest girl in our English class.

"Come *on*!" somebody yells from the back of the line.

I glare at the guy who said it and turn back to the ticket man. "Two for *Carrie*."

"I don't know about this," Kathleen says as we take our change from under the glass.

"We'll be *fine*," I say.

* * *

Well. I stand corrected.

Kathleen's screams were ice picks to my eardrums, especially when Carrie's blue eyes got wide and she unleashed her telepathy.

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" Kathleen screamed as Carrie, dripping in pig's blood, slammed the gym doors shut and set off electrocutions and fires.

"I will never forgive you," Kathleen says when we finally reach the lobby again. Her hands are still shaking; her face is pale.

I put a finger in my ear and wiggle it. Her voice sounds muffled, the way it does after we've been to a concert. I don't pay much mind to her threat, though. She said the same thing to me after we saw *The Omen*. The cameraman's decapitation scene nearly did her in. She wore a rosary as a necklace and slept with her parents for a week.

"Some prom, huh?" I say.

"You girls piss yourselves?" Angel's voice makes us turn. His date must be in the john because he's outside the ladies' room, waiting. "Christ, Kathleen, you were loud in there," he says. "*Oh, God! Oh, God!*" he mimics. "It was like you were getting banged."

What I wouldn't give to unleash some telepathic powers myself right now. His private parts would be my first target.

"Really?" I ask him. "I couldn't really hear her over *your* prissy screams, Angel. Did Curly have to hold your hand? Or were you busy pawing her?"

Just then, his date comes out, waving her hands to dry

them. She gives me a cool look and pushes out her chest. She'll learn soon enough, I guess.

"Let's go," I say as I pull Kathleen away.

Kathleen keeps glancing at her watch as we eat at Gloria Pizza next door. It's only five thirty, but she's antsy.

"You realize that we haven't had a home-by-dark curfew since the summers of junior high," I say. "It's like we're twelve-year-olds instead of high-school seniors. You're lucky I like you."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's ridiculous," she says. "I don't know what the hell is up with them."

"The dead girl."

Kathleen gives me a look. "Please. This is New York. It's not like she's been the only person killed this winter."

I bite into my pizza. True enough. People are getting offed all over the city; I heard it's the worst crime year on record already.

"Maybe we should look on the bright side," I tell her. "We could have truly psycho mothers like Carrie's."

Kathleen looks stricken. "God, she *was* scary." She shakes red-pepper flakes onto her slice of Sicilian. "What kind of mother tries to plunge a knife into your chest?"

I chew on that for a second. There are other ways to kill your kid, a little bit every day. I think of the days Mima loses her cool. "*Son unos demonios*," Mima says about me and Hector, just loud enough for us to hear. We're devils. "There are little knives," I say.

“Huh?”

“You look fat today. That tight dress makes you look like a *cualquiera*.”

She nods slowly and mimics Mrs. MacInerney’s voice perfectly. “Oh, sweetie, you broke out again. . . .”

“Exactly.” I yank on a long string of melted cheese until Kathleen breaks it with her finger. “And your mom is one of the *nice* ones.”

We finish up as soon as we can, but by the time we step outside, the sky is deep purple, and the neon signs for the shops are bright. We hurry along, but my guess is that we’ll have fifteen minutes, tops, before it’s officially dark. Mrs. MacInerney will turn up their police scanner and start pacing. I hate that thing. It makes it an all-day crime show at their place: four channels, one for the firehouse where Kathleen’s dad works, and the other three for police stations nearby. No wonder they get worked up.

“We’re going to miss it,” Kathleen says, pointing at the bus ahead. We run full speed, but just as we reach the stop, the doors snap shut and the driver pulls away.

“Hey, wait!” I pound on the door, still jogging alongside. But in a great display of MTA customer service, he just plays deaf and keeps going.

“Crap,” Kathleen says, waving off the cloud of diesel smoke left behind. We’re both out of breath. “Now I’m going to hear crime statistics all night.”

“Let’s take the 28 instead,” I say, looking down the street. Another bus is idling at the corner, and the driver

is still reading his newspaper by dome light. The 28's route has a stop a little farther from home, but at least we won't have to waste twenty minutes waiting. "We'll get off by St. Andrew's and walk."

The only other passengers with us are three Indian women wearing bright saris the color of spring flowers. They're clustered near the driver, where they are looking unsure of where to get off. Kathleen and I have the backseat to ourselves.

We pass Murray Hill Bowling Lanes, its gigantic bowling pin reflecting in the window. You'd never know it, but Small's Adhesives, where Mima works, is directly under that place. Twenty women packing tape all day long, or at least as long as their boss, Mr. Small, will pay them. When I was little, I thought it was the best place to work. I loved the neon pin and how the bowling balls rumbled like thunder overhead.

"We should have gone bowling instead of going to that dumb movie," Kathleen says as the bus drives by. "How am I going to be able to sleep?"

"You want a real nightmare? How about picking up athlete's foot again from those shoes? *No, gracias.*"

"You just hate to lose."

Not true. I hate everything about bowling. The dim lights of the alley, the nubby little pencils, the boozy men who check us out when we reach down for the ball. I don't even keep the score straight: all those x's and slashes for spares and strikes. Most of the time, I just draw smiley faces and give Kathleen all the points she wants.

Personally, I can't wait for summer, when there will be a

lot more to do. High school will finally be behind us, hallelujah. And to kick things off, we can celebrate our eighteenth birthdays. Kathleen and I were born only one day apart, although people always think I look older than the twenty-four hours I have on her.

The bell tower of St. Andrew's finally comes into view as we round the bend. You can see its relief sculpture of the crucifixion against the sky for blocks.

"This is us." I yank the signal cord. "Come on."

Kathleen is quiet as we hop out the back exit and start for home, but her eyes keep drifting upward the closer we get to the church. Suddenly she stops and reaches for my hand.

"What?" I say.

"His eyes . . ." she begins. Her face starts to twist into panic mode.

"Stop it," I tell her. "You're imagining things."

"I am not," she whispers. "I've been dragged to this church every Sunday my whole life. I know what the damn statue is supposed to look like." She squeezes my hand tight. "Adriana was right. Jesus's eyes are turning bloodred right now. Look."

I don't wait for more.

Suddenly we're running like horses startled by a pistol. We race for the corner, round 158th Street, and head down the hill toward home. I haven't moved this fast since elementary school, though, and I guess I'm out of practice. In no time, a stitch in my side stabs at me, and pizza sauce starts to rise from my stomach. I'm going to puke.

“Wait,” I say, gasping.

We bend over and strain for breath. When my heart finally slows enough for me to speak, I straighten.

St. Andrew’s is far behind us, but no one is out, as far as I can tell. It’s completely dark now. In the daytime, this is a quiet stretch, lined on either side by a few old houses with tiny front yards. We’ll have to walk beneath the train trestle, after which comes the block of buildings where I live.

I think sheepishly of Mima, who always tells me not to walk this way alone, especially not at night. A thousand times she’s warned me, and I always sneer at her dramatic lectures about this patch of weeds and broken glass, about the dark corners where a girl could be pushed, dragged off to the dead end, and then God Knows What. It has always seemed so stupid, so *Mima*.

But now . . .

I stare ahead at the gaping shadows we’ll have to walk through and wish we had just waited for the next bus. I think of the graffiti and the broken bottles in there, the smell of urine that sometimes chokes you when you walk by. Suddenly I think of the murder in Forest Hills.

“We just need to get past the underpass. We’ll get close and run,” I whisper as Kathleen and I link arms.

I practice our sprint in my mind the way athletes do. We’ll race through that patch and break through to the other side, victorious. It will take only a few seconds, no more.

But as we get closer, my feet slow down, and it feels as though I’m trying to walk through molasses. Kathleen

slows down, too. Each tree trunk we pass makes us skittish. Anyone could be hiding behind there in the shadows.

I hear a man's voice in my head.

Hey, girls.

Click, click, click, like a gun cocking over and over.

It's just our boots, I tell myself, closing my eyes. *Move faster.*

But behind my eyelids, an ugly picture waits. Kathleen's pretty white coat is soaked with blood as she lies on the ground.

"I don't want to," Kathleen whispers suddenly. "Let's go back. We can call my mom from a pay phone. She'll be pissed, but she'll get us."

I pause, unsure. Northern Boulevard seems so far behind us, and the shops are all closed and dark. We're already at the trestle. We'll only have to run twenty, maybe thirty steps. We're practically adults, aren't we? Nearly eighteen, as Kathleen always says. Not scared little girls.

"We're almost there," I say stubbornly. "We're just psyched out from the stupid movie."

And with that, I pull us into the darkness.

The temperature has dipped again for the night, and the spring chill makes me shudder. "We're fine," I say.

"We're fine," Kathleen repeats.

Click, click, click.

But Kathleen stops again. This time, she raises her finger and points ahead without a sound. A parked car has come into view. It's up on the sidewalk, headlights off. Why didn't we see it before?

Someone is definitely inside.

The door opens, and I suck in my breath as a tall man slips out of the driver's side and faces us.

Everything happens quickly after that. A bright light shines in our faces, blinding us. In that fraction of a second, I see a gun at his waist, one of his arms outstretched. I don't even have time to scream. Instinctively I yank Kathleen to the ground and cover my head, waiting for the blast.

But a second later, instead of gunshots, I hear footsteps running in our direction. And another person—a woman—stands over us. She's young, with long dark hair, and she flashes a silver badge from inside her jacket.

"Police," she says.

I stare at her from the ground, confused. My mouth is completely dry, but I'm soaked in a chilly sweat.

I struggle to my feet, trying to make sense of things. Police? These two cops staring down at us look barely older than we are. They're in jeans and boots, like us. If it weren't for their NYPD badges, it could be a joke.

"You looked like you were running from something. Anything wrong?" she says as she helps Kathleen to her feet.

I'm too stunned to answer. Sure, I've watched plenty of *Charlie's Angels*, but I've never had a live encounter with a female cop. This one is nothing like Farrah Fawcett Majors with her big hair and lip gloss.

Kathleen is the first to speak. "We were just . . . running, I guess." She taps her cheek and winces at the blood on her fingertip. There's a scrape. She must have hit the ground hard.

“Just running?” the cop asks. “Not drinking or tipsy, right?” She pauses as Kathleen and I exchange looks. “You girls have ID?”

My heart is pounding now. It’s no big deal for Kathleen — her dad’s a firefighter. But you can’t always trust a cop, especially not if you have the wrong skin color or a last name like López. Look at that kid in Brooklyn. A cop shot him in the head on Thanksgiving Day for the big crime of being black and standing in front of his building around the time somebody else reported a robbery. Randolph Evans was fifteen.

Kathleen fumbles in her purse for her license as the blood starts to drip down her face.

“We’re not drunk,” she says. “You scared us, that’s all.”

I hand over my school bus pass, which is all I’ve got to prove who I am.

“MacInerney.” The cop holds her flashlight to read the cards. “López.”

I try not to look nervous. Cops brought Hector home last summer. They picked him up at Kissena Park for carving graffiti of a penis into the park benches. He told them the benches were so old and broken down, his artwork made them look better.

Would they remember that, or make the connection?

Kathleen puffs up a little. “That’s right. My dad is Patrick MacInerney, with the fire department. He’s with Engine Company 258 in Sunnyside. We live right around the block.”

I hold my breath. *Good thinking, Kathleen.* I once watched Mr. Mac get out of a speeding ticket by mentioning

he was a firefighter. Apparently there's a network of civil servants giving one another a free pass when they break laws.

The cop hands back our IDs.

I look from her to her partner, waiting.

"You're going to have a nice lump," she finally says to Kathleen. "You need a ride home? I can explain to your parents."

My stomach seizes up. Very bad idea. What would Mima say if she finds out the cops stopped me under the trestle in the dark? Not to mention Manny, our super, and the neighbors, who gawk and gossip about anybody they can.

"I live in that building right over there." I point at the next corner. "We can walk. I'll get Kathleen cleaned up at my place."

"Yeah, I'm totally fine," Kathleen adds quickly.

Silence.

I try not to stare at their guns. "Can we go?" I ask. "It's kind of cold out here, and her parents are expecting us."

The cops look at each other, a secret message passing between them. "Go right home," the guy finally says.

We hurry off, too shaken to look back at them or ask any of the million questions running through our minds.

"Holy crap," Kathleen whispers when we finally step into the lobby of my building. The bump on her cheekbone is bright red. "What are they doing hiding like that? There's nobody to arrest around here, is there?"

We look at each other, but neither one of us mentions the girl in Forest Hills aloud.

I take a look at her scrape. Sure enough, a lump is rising fast. "Wait here."

I run upstairs, pop a few cubes out of the ice tray, and am back out the door before Mima can even ask what I'm doing.

Kathleen presses the compress against her face for a few minutes, as we think of a good explanation for her parents. It's never easy with underdeveloped lying skills like hers, but I coach her as best I can.

"Just say you fell, and leave out the part about missing the bus," I tell her. "It's easy. You could have fallen getting off the Q12, see? Those stork legs of yours could have tripped you up, right? Tell them you're late because I was patching you up."

I stand behind the glass doors and watch her race around the corner for home. When she's gone, I climb the stairs slowly. I don't stop on my landing, though. Instead, I go all the way up to the roof and prop open the door.

It's blustery up here, but I can still see the cops' darkened car under the trestle. The sight of them leaves me uneasy. I've watched enough episodes of *Baretta* to add things up. They're decoys, I'm sure of it, and they're here to lure somebody in.

Two cops dressed to look like teens are being used as bait?

I cross back over the roof and head for our apartment, thinking. I won't sleep tonight, but it's not because of *Carrie* or the eyes of some statue turning red.

It's because I know plenty about bait, thanks to all those times I've been fishing with Kathleen and Mr. Mac.

Fake lures don't fool the prize fish you're trying to catch.

It's always the real worm, hopelessly writhing on the hook, that draws what you want from the dark.

Chapter 2

“Nora!”

Ms. Friedmor, our head guidance counselor, is on bus duty when she spots me leaving school on Monday. I’ve got no cover. Kathleen hitched a ride home with a guy named Eddie. She said she didn’t want to ride the bus with the bruise on her cheek. I tried to tell her it didn’t look too bad, but she knew I was lying. She wore sunglasses on the ride in, but people still stared.

“Leaving already?” Ms. Friedmor checks her watch as she catches up to me.

The bus pulls away from the stop, stranding me until the next one. “Senior privileges, remember?” I say.

My schedule is amazing, at last. I have exactly two classes left in my high-school career. Wood shop is first thing in the morning, which is actually okay, followed by English IV with Mr. Darius, a flat-out coma inducer. I’m home every day by noon.

Ms. Friedmor nods and pulls her jacket around her. “Making any progress on your college application?”

She is such a pain. She's always bugging us about filling out our postgraduate action plan. She's big on *being intentional*. "Knowing what you want is ninety percent of the battle," she always says, as if we're warriors.

Well, I wish to defect, madam.

I've already tried to explain to her that what I really want to do is get a job and an apartment instead. Plenty of people do that, but you'd think I was explaining that I was going to throw myself in front of a train.

Last month she dragged me to her office. She pretended to listen to me, but she was really just scowling at my FOXY LADY T-shirt. When I was done, she leaned across her desk and pointed at my lapel button. It's from Mrs. MacInerney's endless collection of women's-lib pins. A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE WORLD. Kathleen and I have a pretty good spread on our jean jackets. You'd be surprised how they come in handy. When we need extra bus fare, we can hock a few buttons at lunch, easy.

"So, are these just fashion slogans or what?"

"What do you mean?"

Ms. Friedmor shook her head. "You're a smart young woman. Life is more than disco dancing with your friends. Get your education first. *That's* where you'll find power and independence."

"I'm not much for books, Ms. Friedmor. You know that."

"So? You love working with your hands, don't you? I saw Mr. Melvin's display of his students' work. Maybe wood-work or construction is your passion. If it is, follow it," she told me.

“No way am I going to Apex Tech. Have you seen the commercials? Pure cheese!” Apex is a tech school in Long Island City that’s always begging for students. *Call and get started on your new career right away.*

“Think bigger for yourself, Nora,” she said, sighing. “Thanks to Title IX, a lot of women are moving into non-traditional jobs. That’s where the money is.” She reached for a folder and handed it to me. “Apex is *not* the only option for you. How about New York City Community College, in Brooklyn? You can get a degree in construction technology and even go on to a bachelor’s degree from there. Who knows? You might run a business yourself someday.”

I stared at her. Me? Have a job where I could call the shots and make goons like Angel fetch me coffee? Not a bad idea, even for Ms. Friedmor.

“Life gets hard and more complicated later, Nora. Get your education while life is still fairly easy. Otherwise, you might not go back.”

More complicated? The thought plagued me all day.

Right now she’s eyeballing me, so I know she hasn’t forgotten. I shift on my feet. The application to NYCCC is still in my bag. “I’m having trouble finding a typewriter,” I tell her.

She crosses her arms and gives me a pained look. “There are plenty of machines available for use in the typing lab, and you know it. You just have to schedule with Mrs. Pratt.”

Will this woman never let up? Can she not see the signs of senioritis? I’ve explained several times now that it is an established condition.

“Oh, good,” I say. But in my mind, I’m typing her a little message.

[Shift. Cap lock.]

I AM OVER THIS. [Return.]

“Deadlines, Nora,” she warns. “And one thing more, please.”

I take a deep breath and turn around. After four years, I am actually starting to hate her. If she says one word about aspirations, I will scream.

“Your brother,” she says.

Oh, even better.

Now what? Hector hasn’t exactly made many fans among his teachers over the years. Luckily only a few of them still care enough to call home to tell Mima about his late assignments, his absences, his general attitude problem—or, to be more accurate, to tell *me* so I can explain it to Mima in Spanish. But now I can see they’ve called in the big guns. He’s a guidance case.

“Did Hector do something?” I ask innocently.

“No. That’s the trouble,” Ms. Friedmor says. “He’s not here. Again.”

“He’s been sick,” I say. That’s not technically a lie. He’s been coughing, though what can you expect if you smoke a pack a day?

“Please ask your mother to call me,” she says. “There are a few matters we have to discuss about his course work.”

“Sure, I’ll let her know.” Poor Ms. Friedmor. She has no idea that it will mean nothing.

“And you’ll speak with Mrs. Pratt, too?”

I give her an exasperated look. "Yes, Ms. Friedmor."

She pats my cheek. "Have the application on my desk in a week and I'll add my recommendation."

The following afternoon, I climb the stairs to our apartment. As soon as I turn the key and step inside, I can tell that I've landed smack in the middle of one of Mima and Hector's showdowns.

Crap.

If only I'd put my ear to the door first, I would have heard the muffled voices and waited out their argument. It's a pretty day; I might have been able to ride the city bus all the way to the island and back to kill time.

I try to back out quietly, but it's too late. Mima spots me. "*Aquí está tu hermana,*" she says, announcing me.

She's at the sink, elbow-deep in soapy water. Hector stands in the kitchen doorway, a lit cigarette dangling from his lips while he does hand tricks with one of his Zippo lighters. He can close it with a sharp flick of the wrist alone. Sure, it's impressive, but how many lighters does a person need? The answer is infinite, if you're a pyro like he is, and matches just aren't enough. I find Zippos rattling in the dryer after I do the laundry every week.

The truth is I feel a little guilty watching him smoke. It wasn't so long ago that Hector and I sucked on peeled Crayola crayons, pretending to be a movie star and a cowboy, all my idea. But now it's not a game. He smokes like a fiend. At first, Mima nagged him about his lungs and all that. Eventually she stopped because it pissed him off. Now,

along with smoking, he's acquired a new habit of overturning kitchen chairs to let you know when you're on his nerves. I had to swipe a tube of Mr. Melvin's best wood glue to keep on hand for the busted legs.

I hang up my coat in the hall closet and notice that the orange light from my turntable is on. Haven't I been perfectly clear? No touching my stuff unless I'm home. Hector's Led Zeppelin LP is still sitting there, too. I have a good mind to scratch it up for him.

"*No lo tengo*," Mima says. I don't have it.

"You do have it." Hector flicks his wrist and snaps the lighter. "You just don't want to give it to me. That's different."

Mima digs for the rubber stopper under the murky water. "I didn't get all my hours this week. You know that."

Her boss, the aptly named Mr. Small, has started closing his tape factory in the middle of the afternoon. He claims that business is bad because the City of New York, his biggest client, is nearly broke. Okay, everybody knows that's true. Even the teacher in 3D rushes to cash her paycheck on Fridays in case it doesn't clear at the bank. But how bad can it *really* be for Mr. Small if that little Napoleon still drives around in a new car every year? I think he's full of it. Still, Mima worries constantly about losing her job in "*un la-yuff*."

"And the rent was due last week, in case you don't know," she adds.

"So? You don't pay that." *Snap! Click!*

True. In theory, Papi's child-support check more or less covers the rent. Plus, Mima makes me pay her fifty dollars every month from my earnings at the deli to "teach me

responsibility.” I have mentioned that Kathleen still gets an *allowance*, but Mima says it’s another way Americans raise unappreciative children.

“Well, he hasn’t sent it,” she says. “He’s late. As usual.” She shakes her head and sprinkles Ajax into the sink.

“Then call him.”

Mima sighs and stares at the ceiling. Then she turns to me with a pleading look.

I see where this is going. My parents haven’t spoken directly since the day they signed their divorce papers. Guess who’s their messenger pigeon?

“I don’t want to call him,” I say, squeezing past Hector to get to the refrigerator. Slim pickings, as usual. I reach for the cheese and fan away the cloud of cigarette smoke that has filled the room. “Jesus, Hector. Have a heart. It’s not like we can open a window in this cold.”

“I need ten bucks,” he says.

“Yeah. Ha—me, too.”

He doesn’t know about my stash, thank God. I keep a little wad of bills hidden inside my old boots at the back of the closet. I’ve been socking away what I can so I can avoid asking Mima for anything. This month, seniors had to buy their cap and gown for graduation, plus, sue me, I splurged on a pair of Sasson jeans. So now I’m running low, considering that I should also be saving my money to move out. Mima would never understand, so she doesn’t know. She thinks girls should live at home in the *calor de su familia* until they get married, no matter what. I say family warmth isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, at least not in this family.

Hector inhales deeply. “Seriously. Ten measly bucks.”

“For what?”

“The Ramones are at CBGB’s in a couple of weeks. I want to go.”

I wrinkle my nose. The Ramones are nothing I’d spend ten hard-earned bucks on. They’re punk, best known for giving their audience the finger. I don’t know what he sees in them except attitude. Personally I like dance music, or what Hector refers to coolly as “disco shit.” Kathleen and I have worn out the needle on her turntable listening to Vicki Sue Robinson’s “Turn the Beat Around,” the best song on the radio. The violins mixed against a heavy dance beat make us hustle across the room until we’re dizzy. It’s a known fact that we’re good dancers, too. We’ve been getting in at the Arena for at least a year. Hector, on the other hand, says disco makes him puke. He likes to groan like Donna Summer singing “Love to Love You Baby” and grab at his crotch. Gross, but somehow it always makes me laugh.

Mima has no idea who the Ramones are, of course, or even who Donna Summer is. Her understanding of American music pretty much ends at Lawrence Welk. But she smells trouble. She starts muttering in Spanish, not looking at either one of us. *The subways are a death trap at that hour. Murders are the order of the day.* Her mind is swirling in ugly waters. And maybe she’s right. The club is on Bleecker Street, in the Bowery. If the pimps and junkies don’t jump him, he’ll still have to ride the subway home at midnight. Then again, maybe it’s the other riders who should worry. I wonder if Mima has ever stopped to think that Hector isn’t

exactly defenseless. Has she forgotten last summer? He bought nunchucks from who-knows-where and practiced on the sidewalk scaring kids until their parents complained to Manny. Mima had to throw his little toy down the dumb-waiter chute when he wasn't looking. "Sometimes boys like to show off like they're big men," she whispered to me as it clattered down four stories. *Really?* I wondered. *By threatening to bust little kids' brains out?*

I try an evasive maneuver. "You have to be eighteen for that place."

"Idiot. It's sixteen plus two IDs. Besides, Sergio knows the guy at the door."

I take a bite of my cheese and fall silent. Sergio lives in the basement apartment of the building behind ours. He's technically Manny's "assistant," but that's only because Sergio's uncle owns the building. He's always checking me out with his mole eyes and talking shit. A sleazeball through and through.

"Sergio?" I ask. "Since when are you two buds?"

Hector doesn't answer. "Gimme the ten bucks," he says, turning back to Mima.

The flatness in his voice makes the hair on my arms bristle. We're sliding into a hole, and I have to figure out how to hold on to the edges. It's one of my few gifts: trouble radar, like one of those dogs that can sniff explosives before the big *ka-boom*.

"Niño, I told you, I don't have it." Mima turns to me. "Talk some sense into him. *Háblale*."

But I don't get the chance. Hector snaps like one of his

lighters. His cheeks go blotchy, and he shoves past me into the entry hall, where Mima's purse hangs in the coat closet. He grabs it and digs inside, tossing out her eyeglass case, her pens, her citizenship card, used tissues.

"¡Pero hijo!" Mima stands helplessly at the doorway as he empties her purse. Soapy water drips from her hands onto the floor. "¡No lo tengo!"

My stomach squeezes into a familiar knot as I try to figure out the puzzle, fast. I could give him the ten bucks to cool things off, or I could hide in our bedroom and let them combust. The neighbors will complain, though, and I'll still have to deal with it all week. Last time we had a "family discussion," people stared at me in the hall for days.

I go on instinct.

"Shhh!" I hiss at Mima. "Hector, what do you want her to do? She doesn't have it." My voice is even as I try to pull him back to calm.

He gives me the finger and keeps searching.

I'd love to slap him. Or better, I'd like to see Mima walk over to him for once, yank her purse back, show him who's boss. She's supposed to be in charge, isn't she? But I know better. Mima's never been able to stand up to him. Not when he bit the kids at the playground when he was four and not when he told his principal to fuck off in middle school. Not even when she had to take me out of school last year so I could translate with the security staff at Alexander's department store. Hector had been picked up for shoplifting, of all things, cuff links. It was the start, the cops warned him, of his yellow sheet.

I try again in an even softer voice. “Buy the album next week when she gets paid,” I offer. “It’s better, anyway. You can listen to them whenever you want.”

But it’s too late. Hector has slipped into that strange place where he can’t hear anyone. Finally he yanks out her wallet and flips it open. There are only three singles inside. He stares at the bills, mute with rage. For a second, his expression reminds me of that Christmas when he was six and he found a pack of socks from Woolworth’s beneath our tree instead of the Matchbox track he really wanted.

He hurls the wallet across the room. When it hits the wall, pennies explode into a supernova.

“This is bullshit!” he shouts, the veins in his neck thick. The door slams, and his army boots echo down the stairs.

Mima stands in the sudsy puddle that has formed around her feet. She looks about a hundred years old.

I don’t meet her eye as we bend to pick up the coins. I dig out dimes from around the stove and force myself to think of the bright side, the glass half full and all that shit the MacInerneys and other happy people say.

Nobody screamed loud enough to get Manny to call the cops. Mima still has her three bucks. We didn’t do the Chair Fandango, so the furniture is still in one piece.

So, really, all things considered, it went pretty well.

Chapter 3

Sometimes after school, Hector balls up pages from the newspaper and lights them. He holds the edges until I'm sure the flames will catch his sleeves, and then he drops them out the window. The first time I caught him, I ran over, yelling at him to stop. All these years listening to Mr. Mac's fire stories made me worried. But standing there next to him, I could see what he liked. The flame balls spun in the air like fiery birds being consumed. They turned to harmless ash before they ever hit anything below.

I don't know if Mima knows about Hector's flame birds. Probably not. But would she mind? It's hard to know. Mima is tough to read sometimes, but she says the same about us. She complains that she can't understand what we say if we speak English too fast, and she can't tell whether David Bowie is a man or a woman. Last year when she sat me down in the kitchen for what I thought was going to be the long-overdue sex talk, she told me that drug use would lead to a life of prostitution on Times Square. That very specific

information might have been helpful to know, if I actually ever bothered to get high. It's Hector who partakes, not me. I'm too cheap to waste money on weed.

But how Mima sees Hector is what is strangest of all. She lives here, doesn't she? She has eyes and ears. She deals with Hector's foul mouth, his bratty fits, and yet she actually gushes to her friend Edna all the time about him. How clever he is, how handsome, how adventurous and unusual.

¡*Mi madre!* Okay, fine, he's *guapo*—even with cystic zits—but she's leaving out a few important things that might dampen the glowing review, if you ask me.

Like his habit of treating her like crap.

"Men are reckless, Nora," she likes to tell me. "They're born that way, impulsive, but eventually they find a good woman and outgrow it. You'll see."

It's a nice fantasy, I suppose, although why she's so charitable to men I'll never know. It's not like Papi did her any favors. I was almost four the day Papi's silver razor just went missing from the toothbrush rack and his big shoes weren't crowding the door. I remember that night because Hector pitched an epic fit and tore the linoleum from the floor with his fingers. We still have the holes near the bathroom. Mima stayed in bed for a long time after that, too.

It's no use talking to her about real life, though. She just doesn't participate in it. Take her stories about her life back in Cuba before *el desgraciado* Fidel. She says it was about *familia*, about freedoms, about beautiful palm trees and a simple life. I don't argue, but I can't help but notice that she never mentions that they nearly starved during the

Depression, that her father shot himself in a field, that all they ate was corn-mush *harina*.

That was perfection?

I'm thinking all of this when I flip on the TV news, hoping Hector will come through the door on his own before Mima starts in on me, the way she always does when he's roaming.

A yearbook picture of a pretty brunette flashes before us. The news anchor fills us in:

"The university coed was gunned down early this evening in Forest Hills. . . . She has been identified as nineteen-year-old Virginia Voskerichian, who was discovered near Dartmouth Street, her purse untouched. Witnesses report hearing screams . . ."

I listen uneasily as the camera pans the crime scene, and it's like *déjà vu*. This is only a couple of blocks from where the other girl got murdered in January. Cops are lingering around, smoking. A pair of boots sticks out from the bottom of a sheet on the ground.

I look over my shoulder at Mima, who's staring at the screen, trying to cobble the story together from across the room.

"¡Señor *ampáranos!*" She crosses herself and starts to sweep again. "There are devils all over this city." The bristles sound like someone sharpening knives. She's been cleaning for hours, her favorite task when she's nervous. So far,

she's cleaned the baseboards, wiped down the plastic slip-covers on the sofa, and scrubbed the bathroom. Our whole place stinks of Clorox. "Filth, not poverty, is the sign of low people," she always says. As chilly as the apartment is getting, streaks of perspiration still run down her neck. Finally she leans the broom against the wall and peers out the window.

"The whole city is going crazy! And your *hermanito* is out there." Her jaw quivers. "Did he take a coat?"

"I don't remember."

"What if something has happened and he's cold? What if he doesn't have spare change to call home?"

I ignore her.

"And what is his fascination with this screaming music? Why are a bunch of grown men yelling and jumping like that, anyway?"

Pass.

I turn up the TV and pretend to concentrate as the news drones on. I can't stop thinking about this girl's rag-doll body, the police standing over her, the strange angle of those stylish boots. I'm thinking of the decoy cops who might be sitting down the block right now.

Maybe I *should* be worried.

Mima sits down. For a second I think she's calming down, but just then a fire truck goes by. The spinning lights fill our kitchen as the siren wails. She crosses herself and crumbles again. Mima believes in omens, after all.

"*Ave Maria purisima*, what if he's dead? There's a murderer out there!"

I give up. She will not quit until he's home. I flip off the TV, pull on a sweatshirt over my pajamas, and stick my bare feet into my sneakers. Does anybody care that *I* am going out to find my brother with said murderer on the prowl? *No, señores*, apparently not.

"Try the roof first," she says as I slip out the door.

A hunter looks for tracks. Hector has left clues on the roof—old cigarette butts, an *X-Men* comic, beer cans—but nothing's fresh and there's no sign of him.

Damn.

I cross the rooftop and peer over the ledge to the street below. The moon is half full tonight, so I can see pretty well. Unfortunately, Hector is not walking home from either direction. At least the unmarked car is under the trestle again. The cops are nearby.

I head back inside, dejected. This leaves only one logical place to look.

Sergio's Den of Darkness.

I have to run all the way around to the back of our building and down a flight of concrete steps to reach it. It makes sense that Sergio lives underground like a rodent. He's got the beady eyes, the yellow teeth.

I knock and wait, hopping from one foot to the other to keep warm. Sergio's car is parked right across the street, so I know he's home. These days, he thinks he's big shit driving that Monte Carlo, which I'm pretty sure he funds with his

side business of selling nickel bags outside the Satin Lady Lounge. He's always peeling out so people will turn around and ogle. I try my best to avoid him, but I still run into him on the block every once in a while when he's lugging his toolbox to somebody's apartment to make a repair. He always tries to chat me up. "*Noooooora! Can't you say hello?*"

I knock again.

That's when I hear a whine. From down here, I can see only the legs of anyone who might walk by on the street above me. But there's a dog sniffing at me from the sidewalk. It's the wiry stray we all call Tripod, on account of his having only three legs. We all sort of feed him, but no one knows who owns him. When it's bitter cold, he hangs near the dryer vents, which is how he survived the bitch of a winter we just had. But the rest of the time, he likes to wander.

"Hey, buddy," I tell him. "What's the matter?"

He perks his ears and looks off into the distance, growling. Then he hops off, spooked by something or other. Is somebody coming along the street? It suddenly occurs to me that I'm boxed in down here at the bottom of Sergio's stairwell.

"Excuse me, miss," a stranger might say, and then—*pow*—my brains will be splattered all over this door.

"Sergio!" I bang with my fists. "Open up!"

The door finally flies open. Sergio is barefoot and in jeans. He's got a pigeon chest and hairy nipples, I notice. Yuck. It takes a second for him to recognize me. Then he breaks into his oily grin.

"Nooooora!" He leans an arm on the doorframe. *How can anyone have this much pit hair?* I wonder. He lowers his voice and coos, "What brings you to me?"

"Is my brother here?" I'm too shaken to be polite, especially since he's also ogling my boobs. I wrap my arms around myself tighter. "It's late, and my mother wants him home."

His grin doesn't change as he puts an unfiltered Camel to his lips and lights up. "You always look so uptight, Nora, you know that? You never relax, but you'd be really pretty if you smiled." He picks at his tongue absently and spits a thread of tobacco near my feet. "There's stuff to help with that, if you want some."

I glare at him and call into the apartment. "Hector?" I have no plan B, of course. If Hector isn't here, I'll have to go back home empty-handed. Then what? Mima will end up in the loony bin once and for all, like she's always threatening. "*Hector!*"

"Take it easy, Nora." Sergio motions for me to come inside. "He's in my room."

The place smells like a bag of Fritos. A brown velour couch with a big burn mark on one cushion is pushed up against the wall. Sergio holds up his ringed fingers and points toward his bedroom in the back.

For a second, I stay put. What if he's lying?

Luckily, the buildings on this block are all the same. The layout of this apartment is almost exactly like ours, except that the bathroom is on the opposite wall. I walk backward and keep my eye on him. When I reach the bedroom door, I push it open with my foot.

“Hector?”

There’s no answer, but I spot him. He’s lying right beside the unmade bed, headphones on, drumming with imaginary sticks against his knees. His eyes are closed. Relief floods through me, but honestly I don’t know whether to hug him or kick him in the gut. I stand over him and lift the ear pads to get his attention.

“Time to go.”

Hector blinks. His eyes are glassy. Shit; he’s stoned. His expression reminds me of the day I taught him how to float at Rockaway Beach. I held my arms under his back, promising that he wouldn’t sink if he put his head back and breathed. It took all afternoon for him to believe me, but finally he lay back and looked almost peaceful.

I can feel Sergio watching us from the doorway. Hector isn’t budging, like maybe his pride is still pressing him to the floor. “Please,” I add quietly.

He grins up at the magic word and tosses the headphones on the bed.

“This song sucks, anyway.” He hops to his feet and grabs his jacket from the mess of sheets. “Later,” he says to Sergio as he heads out the door.

I try to squeeze past Sergio, too, but he steps out. “Nooora,” he whispers, reaching for my hand. I pull it away, watching as my brother dashes up the steps.

“Stay away from him,” I say.

Sergio grins. “He came to visit me, remember?”

“Leave him alone, Sergio.” Then I run to catch up to Hector.

We don't say a word as we step inside the lobby. I let Tripod in behind us, hoping Manny won't kick him out of his hiding spot near the mailboxes until morning.

Our place is on the top floor, so it's a steep climb with lots of time to think. There are a million things I could say to Hector as we go from landing to landing, our footsteps echoing against all those closed doors.

That it's dicey to get wasted with the likes of Sergio.

That he shouldn't treat Mima like shit.

That a killer just shot a nineteen-year-old girl on her way home.

That I'm sorry about not giving him the money for the Ramones.

But neither one of us says a word.

Instead, we step back inside our apartment. Mima is in the kitchen, frying an egg, although it's past midnight. Hector doesn't say a thing to her. He just pulls open the sparkling refrigerator and starts to root inside. Mima turns off the flame and slides a chipped plate onto the table.

"Eat something. You're still growing, *hijo*," she says. And then, without a word to me, she heads off to bed.

Chapter 4

Kathleen grabs me at the bus stop the next morning. I'm barely awake. It took me a while to go to sleep after finding Hector. Every time I dozed, I kept seeing that girl's rag-doll feet on the ground.

Kathleen looks wide-awake, though. If I didn't know better, I'd say she dipped into the Café Bustelo I taught her how to brew at exam time.

"I almost called you last night, but it was late, and I thought your mother might freak," she blurts out. "I can't believe I've had to wait eight hours with this."

I stifle a yawn and try to focus. "With what?"

"Dad called from work last night."

"What burned now?" Mr. Mac works two twenty-four-hour shifts in a row, and then he's off.

She waves me off impatiently. "Did you see the news about the Forest Hills murder?" she asks.

I check down the street for the next bus. "Yep. I'm not going to wander around Continental for a while, that's for sure."

She pulls me close.

"It's worse than that." Her eyes have that look she gets when she's hoarding a secret.

"What are you talking about?"

She looks over her shoulder at the other people waiting at the stop and pulls me off to the side. "You know how my parents have been acting overprotective and weird for weeks? There's a reason. And it's big."

I spot the bus in the distance. It's pulled over at the stop a couple of blocks down, so I fish in my bag for my bus pass. "Bigger than a shooter?"

She takes a breath. "The news said the cops found no connection between the two murders in Forest Hills, right?"

"Yeah . . ."

"That's bullshit. The cops just told the papers that because they don't want people to panic."

I feel a flutter in my stomach that I don't like. Around us, people start to line up as the bus idles at the light. "Panic about what?"

She lowers her voice even more. "Dad said they've suspected for a couple of months now that we might have a serial killer."

"Kathleen," I say uneasily. It wouldn't be the first time her imagination went wild. "*A serial killer?*"

She gives me an exasperated look. "Think back," she says. "Not just the girl in January. Remember the couple that got shot at Halloween? The ones in the VW?"

I'd almost forgotten. One of Mr. Mac's friends is a detective at the 109th Precinct, on Union Place. Around

Halloween, his daughter and her date were shot on Depot Road, not far from here.

“And how about the girls in Bellerose?”

Again my mind goes back. A man came up and asked for directions while they were sitting on their stoop. He opened fire, and now one of them is in a wheelchair.

“Holy shit.”

“And there’s probably more,” Kathleen says. “They’re checking for bullet matches.”

The bus pulls over and throws open the door to let people board. For a second, neither one of us moves.

“Well?” the bus driver says. “You getting on or what?”

We climb up without another word, but I suddenly feel wary around all these strangers. The whole ride, I look around at the bored faces, wondering if one of them might have something to hide.

I just can’t shake what Kathleen shared. Even climbing the stairs after school feels scary. I reach each landing and look around to make sure nobody is lurking in any dark corners. Then I run for the next set of stairs.

“Nora.”

Mima nearly gives me a heart attack.

She’s sitting on the sofa, still wearing her work clothes. Her hands are folded in her lap, like she’s waiting for a bus or something. What’s she doing home?

“¿*Qué te pasa?*” I ask. What’s wrong? I can feel something buzzing in the air, even though Hector isn’t home. “Are you sick?”

Mima swallows and looks over at me with that expression that tells me she'll be taking to her bed with one of her daylong headaches.

"My hours were cut again," she says. "I'm down to half time. Edna is going to try to put in a word for me, but it doesn't look good." She shrugs and stares into her lap. "Nobody is hiring," she mutters.

Then she points at the table, where the bigger trouble is waiting. I see the pink paper and know what it is right away. Manny has left us an overdue notice.

Rent in the amount of \$275 was due on March 1, 1977, for the period of: February 1–28, 1977 for unit 4E, which you are currently occupying.

Please deliver your rent promptly to Mr. Emmanuel Barros, building superintendent. You may disregard this notice if payment has already been made.

By the time I finish reading it, Mima is already heading to her room. She's got dark circles under her eyes and a run in the back of her hose.

"I'm going to lie down," she mumbles.

The last time I talked to Papi was Valentine's Day. It's easy to remember because Papi only calls on official holidays. He has a lousy memory for dates, which is why he almost never remembers our birthdays, and probably why he's always confused about exactly how old we are or what grade we're in. He makes up for it by calling on holidays that

have big symbols on his calendar: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Memorial Day, and the Fourth of July.

"What do you expect from a man who can't even remember his own name?" Mima always says. What she means is that Papi's given name was Federico. Everybody in the whole world once knew him as Fico, but all that changed when he married Linda. He goes by "Rick" now.

Apart from our holiday chats, we don't see each other much. He lives in the city with Linda and their kid, Pierre, who's five. I wonder if the kids at school make fun of *that* stupid name. Anyway, the last time Hector and I visited them, Pierre was still in a stroller and wearing Cookie Monster slippers. It wasn't exactly a great day, either. Hector fed Pierre all the plastic pieces from an Evel Knievel Colorforms set until the kid nearly choked. Linda rolled up the welcome mat after that.

I take a deep breath and try to sound calm and pleasant. I was kind of grumpy last time we talked. I had my reasons, though. Valentine's Day is tough for a loveless girl like me. I had just lived through the annual carnation sale at school that raises money for the prom, which I have no intention of attending. At least Kathleen got a carnation from Eddie and some from mystery admirers, plus the one I sent her. The only flower I got was from her. She wrote, *From the foxy ghost of Freddie Prinze. I'll always love you.* Ricky, the Student Council president, delivered it to my homeroom. The smart-ass just looked at me with pity. "Sad," he said.

Anyway, Papi sounds a little surprised to hear from me when he picks up.

“Hi, Papi,” I say. “It’s me. Nora.”

“Nora! What a surprise,” Papi says. “I was just thinking about you. I was telling Linda that maybe you could come spend a Saturday with us. We could take you shopping at Bloomingdale’s. Buy you something nice.”

“Sure,” I say, but I don’t let myself imagine all those pretty clothes or those shiny black counters. Papi has big ideas all the time, but that doesn’t mean anything. Disney, Great Adventure, a baseball game at Shea Stadium, he’s offered all of them at one time or another, but we’ve never actually gone on those trips, as Mima likes to point out. Something always wrecks the plan. Pierre gets sick. Papi gets called into work. Linda heard people are getting jumped at the Central Park Zoo. One way or another, the trip gets canned.

I twirl the phone cord and zone out as Papi tells me about all the things Pierre has been learning in kindergarten this week.

“Your little brother is so smart,” Papi says. “Especially at numbers.”

At first I think he’s talking about Hector, but then I realize he still means Pierre. Could Little Pepé Le Pew really be smarter than Hector? Probably not. Hector is hard to beat, especially if you factor in the criminal-mastermind angle.

I glance at Mima’s door, which isn’t closed all the way. She’s still napping, or maybe she’s just eavesdropping as I do her dirty work, as usual.

“School is fine,” I tell Papi when he finally asks. I pile it on thick, like I’m somebody on *The Partridge Family* or something. Yes, spring semester of senior year is really fun. I *love* it. Yes, I’ve already put in my application to college. I should hear any day now.

It’s all a lie. I am counting down the days to be done with high school so I can move out. No matter what Ms. Friedmor says, it will be easier than going to college. I’m just not into it, and why should I be? I’m not like Kathleen, who’s going to escape to a dorm decorated with a comforter and matching pillows. Even if I get in, come September, the only change in my life will be getting a bus to Brooklyn. Being a commuter student isn’t the same. I’ll still be stuck with Mima and Hector. And that’s if I even figure out how to pay for it all. It used to be free to go to any of the colleges that were part of City University, but broke as the city is, now you have to pay to be tortured. Four hundred bucks a semester! I looked at the financial-aid papers a while back and nearly threw up. It will be a bitch trying to translate it all for Mima, so I’ll have to answer most of the questions myself. I’m not even sure whose name goes under “Head of Household.” Isn’t that supposed to be the person who calls the shots? That position is more or less empty around here.

Still, if I don’t apply for aid, where am I going to get \$800 a year, plus books? *Papi*? Ha! He’s busy paying Pierre’s private kindergarten for geniuses.

Papi pauses on his end of the line, and I can tell he’s running out of things to say. “So, everybody’s good?” He

always asks about this mysterious everybody. It's everyone and no one at the same time. Neat trick.

"Yep." I close the door to Mima's bedroom just in case she's faking it and listening in. I don't like an audience when I grovel. "Mima's at work, and Hector is staying after school with track." (What a whopper!) I take a deep breath and try to sound casual. "So, Papi, I think something might have happened to the mail again, because Mima didn't get your check."

There's a rustling on his end and a long pause that I hate.

"Really?" He sounds genuinely surprised, which is kind of impressive, considering how often this happens. "I'm almost positive I sent it. Are you sure?"

"You know how the mail is," I say vaguely.

We actually have excellent mail. Our carrier is a lady named Sheila. She pushes her overloaded postal cart up and down the block at four p.m. like clockwork, and she always says hello.

I think about Papi and Linda's fancy digs in the city. They've got good mail in their building, too. It was Linda's place before they lived together, up on First Avenue. The doorman is a Dominican guy who holds the door open for the tenants and accepts mail deliveries all day long. He calls Papi *Mr. López*, although I'll bet he secretly wants to call him Fico, too.

"Well, I'll send it again," Papi says. "No problem. Be watching for it."

I stand in the window staring up the block for the unmarked cop car, but it's not there. Maybe they found who

they're looking for, or have decided that there's a better place to look. That's a good sign, right?

Just then, I spot Hector coming up the block toward our stoop. He's wearing his sweatshirt, hood up against the chill. It's too short in the sleeves on him, and his shoulders are shrugged up against the wind. I almost forget how mad I was at him this morning for keeping me up late looking for him.

Papi's voice is loud in the receiver. "Well, I've got to get back to work. But I'll call you next week about Bloomingdale's," he says.

My throat squeezes tighter. He'll call me on Easter, not a day sooner, but why point out his lie? It will make us both feel weird, and I don't want him to hang up.

"Hey . . ." Words swirl in my head, but I can't pull them to my lips in the right order. *I need . . . We need . . .* I want to tell him that I'm a little scared of the shootings, that we still need him, but it gets jumbled inside.

Papi waits. "Nora? Hello?"

"I'm here." I send him the rest of the message in my mind. *Mima's hours got cut and she needs your help with Hector, who's jacked up worse than usual. Maybe you could talk to him? Yes, I know the arrangement. You pay rent and Mima covers everything else. But could you help, this once, maybe not tell Linda?*

But my mental connection doesn't work.

"Look, *mija*, I've got to go," Papi says cheerfully. "Spring break is coming. Maybe I can get away and we'll go to Florida. I'll check into it when I get a minute."

The lobby buzzer sounds. Hector's key, I notice, still hangs on the hook by the closet.

"Nora? Are you still there?"

Pierre's high voice sounds in the background at Papi's place. I'm remembering long ago, when Papi was still here, how he swung Hector high above his head, laughing. And then those later days when Hector was Pierre's age, big brown eyes, no front teeth, kicking too hard or pinching when we played.

"Listen, Nora," Papi says, "I have to go. I'll put the check in the mail as soon as I get off the phone. You watch that mailman, okay?"

"Okay." I wait to hear the click before slamming down the phone.

Then, bracing myself, I let Hector in.

Chapter 5

There's been drama in the building.

Mrs. Murga's apartment, 1A, was burglarized last night while we all slept. What a week. If it's not scary enough to think about a killer lurking around, now we have this. It figures that those stupid undercover cops were gone when we really needed them.

From the looks of the splintered frame, the crooks pried open a window and climbed in from the street. According to Stiller, the head of the tenant association—who already came by with a petition for security cameras and upgraded windows—they made off with Mrs. Murga's color TV, a transistor radio, and the Social Security check she hadn't taken to the bank yet. It doesn't sound like much, but that's pretty much everything that was worth anything in Mrs. Murga's place. I've fed her cat a couple of times when she's gone to visit relatives, so I know. The place is a museum of old-lady crapola: crocheted doilies on her sofa's armrests, crystal bowls filled with stale candy, plastic roses.

“¡*Qué horror!*” Mima says. “They could have slashed *la viejita*’s throat if she woke up. They could have violated her! They could have killed any one of us in the hall, too!”

Bad is never enough for Mima. We must go to gruesome. But now that we might have a serial killer roaming around, maybe her worries aren’t so crazy.

Mima’s words worm inside me all night. What makes someone a burglar and someone else a killer? I wonder. Where’s the switch that lets someone look you in the eye and pull the trigger anyway?

I toss and turn as I try to fall asleep, but I keep imagining sounds outside my window. Is it the wind, or is someone climbing the rusted rungs of the fire escape? The blinds move, but it could be a draft. I don’t dare get up to check. Instead, I back against the wall and stare at the blinds, waiting for the sound of a crowbar splintering wood. When I finally drift to sleep, a stranger follows me into my dreams.

He’s not a burglar. It’s the serial killer.

Click! Bang! Blood splatters the wall like it did in *Carrie*. I try to scream, but no one hears me at all.

The very next day, Mrs. Murga is gone. Just like that, her son has packed up her museum and moved her out to Levittown. When I get home at noon, the U-Haul is pulling away.

Manny has wasted no time, of course, in making plans to rent the place again. The painters are already sitting in their van, parked out front, eating lunch while they wait for the coast to be clear. Vultures.

The men stop eating and watch me go by in that way

that always makes me want to gouge out their eyes. What is it with horny men? Are there no women their own age? And why are they everywhere in this city? Construction sites, the schoolyard, even dressed up in business suits at the bus stop (but only if they think no one else is listening). *Hey, Mami. What's up, beautiful?* When I complain to Mima, she tells me to ignore them. "Besides, you'll miss the attention one day when you're old and shriveled."

Sometimes I want to send some of Mima's advice straight to the No Comment column at *Ms.* magazine. It would fit right in with the other sexist ads readers spot and submit each month. The reigning champ so far is a bowling ad: BEAT YOUR WIFE TONIGHT.

"Good day at school?" one of them calls. He's practically Papi's age and has the bloated face of a boozier, clearly not the type of man with a healthy interest in the quality of my academic experience. Normally, I pretend to go deaf and ignore guys like this, but this time I pause at the lobby doors. What if the serial killer is a sleazy painter who gets back at girls who ignore him? I could be an eyewitness that helps lock him up.

I turn around and study his face for a second. He licks his fat lips and waves hopefully as I register his features. Then, to his obvious disappointment, I let myself into the lobby to get the mail.

I scan the envelopes for Papi's handwriting. Nothing yet. If Manny knocks on our door, I'll have to pretend no one is home, watch TV with no sound.

I take the first flight of stairs but stop at Mrs. Murga's

open door. It's kind of sad to see how fast nothing of her remains except a few rumpled tissues and dust bunnies on the floor.

"Hello?" I walk all the way in to get a better look.

It's a studio, so the kitchen, living room, and bedroom are all in one. This wouldn't be a bad place to live if I fixed it up nice. Small, sure, but I'd buy shag carpet and beaded curtains to make a bedroom. I'd burn incense, too, and leave a big space in the middle to practice dancing.

It's all a dream, though, unless I can get the cash together to make it happen, which means, unfortunately, that I have to get to work, pronto. I'm scheduled today from 1:30 p.m. until closing.

Thumping music sounds through the walls. At first I think it might be coming from a car driving by, but no. I recognize the Ramones. Hector is upstairs blaring "I Don't Wanna Go Down to the Basement" through my stereo. Any minute, somebody will complain. I turn to go, but I don't get far. Someone has followed me inside.

"*Noooooora!*" Sergio is holding a toolbox in one hand and a new toilet seat in the other. He checks me out from the doorway, lingering at my chest, and grins. "You looking for me, babe?"

"Absolutely not."

Even from here, I can smell him. His blue work jumpsuit reeks of cigarettes and BO, same as always.

"Come on, don't be like that."

"Like what? I'm late for work, Sergio." I head for the door, but he puts his arm out to block me. "Move," I say.

He doesn't budge. Instead, he leans toward me and croons along with the Ramones.

His smile reveals a piece of tobacco lodged near his gums. "Great song, right? But maybe you and me could go down to the basement instead, huh?"

I'm planning a well-executed shot to Sergio's nuts when Manny appears in the hall. For once, I am happy to see that man.

"You're not finished with the john yet?" he barks at Sergio. "I sent you over here half an hour ago."

Sergio plucks the thread of tobacco off his tongue. "Going." He winks at me and disappears inside.

Manny sighs. I'm pretty sure he can't stand Sergio either, but he's stuck with the boss's kid, I guess. Anyway, I try to slip away, but he stops me before I get too far.

"I've been looking for you," he says.

"I've been looking for you, too," I lie. "Mima has a check for you. I'll bring it by later."

He gives me a doubtful look. He's about to say something when the music seems to get even louder. The little veins in Manny's temple start to get pronounced, and I can see the familiar look of irritation forming. We have a permanent spot on Manny's shit list, after all. I've known it since we were really little. Nobody fools a kid's barometer when it comes to how adults really feel about them. He's one of those fussy supers. He barks at you for stupid stuff like stepping on his newly seeded grass or feeding burnt toast to the squirrels from the window. But Hector's antics get him completely undone, and I can't really say I'm surprised. Hector

once threw one of my metal roller skates off the fire escape. It missed Manny by mere inches, and, boy, was he mad.

I was too scared to tell Mima what happened. But that night, Manny rang our bell and gave it to her from the hall.

“Your son could have killed someone!” He held up the offending roller skate, now dented.

Mima slid her eyes to me in an accusation. I knew what she was thinking. It was my skate, so somehow it was partly my fault. I’d left it out, a temptation, maybe, the reason Hector had gotten the idea.

Naturally Mima didn’t argue with Manny. To her, Manny, like every man in the world, is the boss.

“¡Ay qué vergüenza!” She told him how sorry she was, how ashamed. She pleaded her case. Boys were always getting into mischief, weren’t they? She’d try to get him under control, but it was hard with no father around.

Hector and I were playing Clue on the floor. He pored over his cards and made a wild guess about Colonel Mustard in the library with the lead pipe. I scowled at him, angry that he’d gotten me in trouble. But then he crossed his eyes at me and farted—the long, peeling kind that you could hear all the way out in the hall. I couldn’t help it; I started to laugh.

Anyway, since then, we’ve been marked.

Like right now.

“He’s going to have to turn down that racket,” he says. “It’s disturbing the peace.”

“No problem.”

“And another thing, Nora. Remind your mother that the

first of the month will be here again in three weeks. I can't keep making allowances for people. I've been a nice guy long enough."

Nice guy? Really?

He walks past me in a huff and disappears into the apartment.

I hope Sergio and my other neighbors haven't been listening in, but who am I kidding? There aren't many things you can keep secret in a building, thanks to heat pipes, peepholes, and thin walls.

Sure enough, I don't go three steps when I hear a lock click open in the hall.

It's Stiller, Manny's archnemesis. Sometimes I swear she waits behind her peephole, itching to make an ambush.

"Hey, Nora." She's wearing a tie-dye shirt with a huge peace sign.

Mima has given me strict instructions not to talk to Stiller even though she is the head of the tenant association.

"How are you doing, Stiller?"

I don't know why Mima is so scared of her, but every time Stiller comes to our door, she makes me keep the chain on. Stiller always has to hand me her tenant petitions through the chain.

"I know that look," Mima whispers, as if we're surrounded by spies, a leftover from her last days in Cuba. "Communist, through and through." She points to what she considers irrefutable evidence: Stiller is black and nearly six feet tall. She supports feminism and wears a big 'fro. Mima informs me that women like Stiller "infiltrate" society,

foment unrest, and before you know it—*wham-o!*—you’re wearing gray and living as part of the evil Soviet empire.

Really, Stiller’s just an activism junkie with a capital A, as in Anti-War, Anti-Imperialism, Anti-Misogyny, and so on. There’s not a cause she won’t defend if it means giving it to the establishment. And there’s no cause she likes more than housing. Before she started demanding better windows this week, she was on a kick about “clandestine eviction tactics.” She claims that building owners want to boot out tenants like us and turn these old places into luxury condos. “Only rich white cats will be able to live here one day; you’ll see!”

I always think of the drafty halls, the roaches in the cellar, and the old glass doorknobs that break off in my hand if I turn them too hard. This place? A luxury condo? You’d have to be a miracle worker.

“A shame about Mrs. Murga, right?” she says. “But I know what’s going on here. If we’re not careful, Manny will jack up the rent in her unit. Don’t worry, though. I’m doing some research on the limits.”

“Oh.”

Hector’s music fills the hallway.

“I’m sorry,” I tell Stiller, following her glance at the ceiling. “He likes this song, I guess.”

Stiller waves her hand like the music doesn’t matter. Then she steps into the hallway and makes sure Manny is out of earshot. She’s no fan of Hector—no one in the building is—but she likes Manny even less.

“He can’t harass tenants, you know,” she says, towering over me. “Renters have rights in this city. Officially, it has to

be past nine p.m. to make a noise complaint.” She checks her watch. “It is now one p.m., so you are well within your rights, honey.” She leans even closer to me and glances over her shoulder again. “And in case you don’t know, all tenants have until the tenth of the month to pay rent. After that, there’s a whole *process* involved in collecting it, not just bullying teenagers in the hall. It pays to know your rights, Nora. I can help your mother fight if she needs me. I know some people.”

Oh, boy. I don’t have the heart to tell her that her pinko reputation has doomed that plan forever. Plus I’m a little embarrassed that she knows we were late on rent again and that she’s talking about it, even though she means well.

Still, it *is* kind of comforting to hear someone offer to stand up for us. I wonder what would happen if Manny ever showed up at Stiller’s door to complain about something. I’ll bet he’d lose some teeth; Stiller takes absolutely no shit. Even funnier to imagine: What if Mima could be turned into a badass like Stiller? What if she grew her hair and told Manny to stop harassing her kids or she’d feed him his balls for dinner, the way he deserves?

It’s the stuff of dreams.

Just then, Sergio comes back into the hall, whistling and checking me out again. Stiller whips around and impales him with one of her cold stares. She couldn’t care less who his father is. In fact, it might make her loathe him more.

“Is there a problem with your eyes, son?” she snaps. “Because I *know* you would not be disrespecting a woman and objectifying her in my presence.”