



STEF SOTO, Taco Queen

JENNIFER TORRES

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chapter

1

Papi had pretty much promised to stop bringing Tía Perla to Saint Scholastica School, but when the last bell rings on a Monday afternoon, there she is just the same, waiting for me in the parking lot: Tía Perla, yet again. Tía Perla, like always. Tía Perla, huffing and wheezing and looking a little bit grubby no matter how clean she actually is. Tía Perla, leaving anyone who comes near her smelling like jalapeños and cooking oil, a not-exactly-bad combination that clings to your hair and crawls under your fingernails. Tía Perla, Papi's taco truck, stuffed into a parking space meant for a much smaller car. A normal car. A station wagon! Something beige or black or white, with four doors and power windows.

I must look as annoyed as I feel because just then, my best friend, Amanda Garcia, stops explaining how she turned an old T-shirt into a new headband and wags her finger. "Watch it, Stef," she warns in her best scolding-abuelita voice. "Keep rolling your eyes like that, and they'll get stuck up there."

I roll my eyes at her so hard they almost bounce off my forehead. She snorts, pulls the headband over her ears, and jogs off to soccer practice, leaving me to deal with Papi and old Tía Perla on my own.

I didn't mind the taco truck when I was younger, and seeing Tía Perla in the parking lot of my Catholic school meant corn chips and cold soda for all my friends. Back then, when Papi lifted me up into her front seat, I was playground royalty. No one *else* got picked up in a taco truck.

But now hardly anyone else gets picked up *at all*, let alone in a taco truck.

I've been negotiating for months, trying to persuade Mami and Papi to let me walk alone—not even all the way home, just to the gas station a few blocks away from Saint Scholastica where Papi parks the truck most afternoons. I'd head straight there, I swore. Wouldn't stop for anything; wouldn't talk to anybody. I could tell they weren't crazy about the idea, but this weekend, Mami and Papi had finally given in.

So why was Tía Perla in the parking lot, with Papi in the front seat, waving?

I drop to the ground, pretending to tie my shoelace and thinking, Maybe if I'm down here long enough, Papi will remember our agreement, *leave*, and meet me at the gas station like we planned.

Instead, he honks the horn and waves even more wildly.

"Uh, isn't that your dad, Estefania?" Julia Sandoval asks, louder than she really needs to.

Just perfect. I stand up and gush, "Thank you, Julia. *So* much. You are *always*. *So. Helpful.*"

She just tilts her head and flashes her sparkling-sweet smile.

I walk across the parking lot, eyes glued to the ground and arms crossed sourly against my chest. I don't look up—not even when I'm climbing into the truck—until Papi asks, like he asks every single day, "Aprendiste algo?"

Did I *learn* something? That I can't trust him to keep his end of a deal, maybe. I keep my mouth shut while I sift furiously through my mental glossary of irritation, searching for words to tell him exactly how frustrated I am. Not coming up with any, I instead shoot Papi a glare that says, *Are you kidding me right now?* I hope that's clear enough.

His shoulders drop, and he shakes his head. "What can I tell you, m'ija? Those guys at the gas station must have forgotten their wallets or their appetites. Maybe both. I couldn't wait around for customers any longer. Let's see if they're hungry

downtown.” I don’t know what to say to that, and before I can think of anything smart, I hear a *bam, bam, bam, bam* on my door.

“Huh?” I’m confused for a second, and then I realize who must be knocking. I crank down the window, and sure enough, it’s Arthur Choi, all four feet ten inches of him—an even five feet with his hair included. He looks up at me and yanks his headphones down around his neck. They are bright orange and so big he looks almost like he’s wearing a life preserver.

“Hey, Stef. Think I can get a ride to the library?” Usually, Arthur’s mom picks him up from school, not because she doesn’t trust him to walk alone, but because he lives so far away. When she has to work late, he goes to the library to wait for her, finishing his homework, reading his magazines, listening to his music. Without a chaperone. In peace. Arthur and I have known each other since kindergarten, back when his mom and my dad teamed up and trailed the school bus in her minivan anytime our class had a field trip. Unlike my parents, though, Arthur’s seem to have noticed that he isn’t five years old anymore.

I turn to Papi.

“Órale.” He nods. It’s a word that comes in many flavors. Sometimes it means “Yes,” and other times “YES!”

Sometimes “Listen,” and sometimes “I hear you.”

This time it means “Of course!” and I slide to the middle of the bench seat as Arthur hops up next to me.

Finally, Papi starts the engine, and as soon as he does, his banda music comes bouncing out of the speakers and pouring—I'm sure of it—right through the open windows. Unfazed, Arthur bops his head right along to the *oompah-pah* rhythm. I slam mine back into the seat and squeeze my eyes shut.

“Please, can we just go now?”

chapter

2

Papi pulls over at the curb across from the library. I expect him to leave the truck running while Arthur grabs his backpack off the floor of the cab, but instead, he parks, unbuckles his seat belt, and steps outside.

We can't be stopping here, I think, taking stock of the neighborhood on the other side of Tía Perla's windshield. No shoebox-shaped office buildings full of lawyers or accountants or real estate agents, their stomachs grumbling for a late-afternoon snack. No auto-repair shops with impatient walk-in customers looking for ways to kill time while they wait for their oil changes and smog checks. Nothing but neat houses with neat lawns, a basketball hoop in every other driveway.

Just behind the library, there's a small playground with a tire swing, a slide, and a couple of benches, and if you weren't an expert in taco truck terrain, you might consider it promising. But I know from experience that you could park for hours at a playground like that and be lucky to see even a dog walker or two. One of them might come up to the window, but just to ask for a free glass of water.

"Arturo," Papi calls.

Arthur lifts his nose out of his backpack, where he's been fishing for his library card. He squints at me, his scrunched-up eyebrows asking, *What's going on?*

"No idea," I say.

He opens his door, and we both climb down, following Papi's voice to the back of the truck. We find him at the cutting board, about to chop a bunch of green onions. Papi works quickly, dicing a tomato, sprinkling pepper. When he's finished, he presents Arthur with something that looks like a burrito, only it's wrapped in a giant lettuce leaf instead of a tortilla. "Prepared especially for you," he announces with a flourish. "The wheat-free, dairy-free, egg-free, nut-free, and meat-free super burrito."

Arthur is allergic to basically everything and is a vegetarian for environmental reasons. Sometimes, between customers, Papi experiments with new Arthur-friendly dishes, claiming the challenge keeps his kitchen skills as sharp as his knives. We add the best recipes to the Official Arthur Choi Menu,

a note card taped to the door of the fridge. So far, there's a mango salad with charred corn and slivers of red onion; avocado halves stuffed with rice, green chili, cilantro, and bell peppers; and an almost-overripe banana, cut into coins and sautéed in margarine, brown sugar, and cinnamon until each crispy slice is floating in a rich, caramel-colored sauce.

I'm wondering what inspired this afternoon's lettuce-leaf burrito when I realize that if Papi had time to dream it up between customers, he really must have had a slow day with Tía Perla after all. *Aaaand* it's possible I overreacted about the whole gas station thing. I glance over at him. Papi looks up at me and winks before nudging Arthur to have a taste.

"Ándale," he says.

"Yeah, go on," I add, curious now. "Try it."

Arthur considers the burrito for a moment, then devours almost half of it in one enormous bite. Papi and I watch, hungry for his reaction.

"*Aww-ooooohm*," he mumbles, cheeks puffed like they're hiding Ping-Pong balls. He swallows.

"Pretty good, Mr. Soto. Not as good as the bananas, but pretty good. Thanks."

"*Pretty good?*" Papi crosses his arms and cocks his head. "Pués, does it go on the menu?"

Arthur looks at me, looks at Papi, and grins.

"It goes on the menu."

“Órale!” Papi thunders, holding out his hands for Arthur and me to slap. “It goes on the menu. Specialty of the house.”

As Arthur goes back to devouring his burrito, Papi locks Tía Perla’s kitchen door and gives it a quick tap—the way you might congratulate an old friend with a pat on the back—then hops into the cab and settles into his seat.

Two bites later, when he’s done eating, Arthur flashes me a peace sign and pulls on his earphones. Stick-straight tufts of spiky hair spring up around the orange band. “See ya,” I say. Papi and I watch him cross the street. Not until the library doors part to let Arthur in, then close again safely behind him, does Papi start the truck.

“Vámonos?” he asks me.

“Let’s go.” I nod.

We drive to a convenience store downtown where the owner lets us use his parking lot as long as we send customers inside to buy their sodas. It’s a fair deal. The little shop isn’t the busiest stop on our route, but we know we can count on some regulars: commuters who pull in for tortas and tacos to tide them over on the drive home; gray-haired men in starched shirts who come to the store for lottery tickets and decide a burrito is a good bet, too.

While Papi lifts open the canopy, warms up the grill, and unfolds two steel chairs on either side of a salsa-stained card table, I drag my backpack to the spot at the cutting counter

that he always leaves clear for me to finish my homework. He notices me sneaking a handful of corn chips, and before long, a quesadilla, cut into wedges and arranged around a dollop of chunky guacamole, appears on a plate next to my math book. People always ask if I get sick of taco truck food, if I'm bored eating the same thing night after night. But what they don't know is that it's never the same thing. Somehow Papi always prepares exactly what I'm craving. On the hottest days, when my bangs stick to my forehead, there are salads drizzled with lemon juice. When I leave school exhausted after a particularly tough history test, there's the comfort of a plain flour tortilla smeared with nothing but melting butter.

I spoon some guacamole onto my quesadilla and wonder what Mami's up to at home. Getting ready for work, I guess. She's a cashier at the open-all-night grocery store. You would never believe, she always says, what people need at one o'clock in the morning: a box of pancake mix, a birthday card, a cantaloupe. Most of the time, she doesn't get home until I'm already in bed, and since Mami and Papi won't even *think* about letting me stay home alone, I'm parked with Tía Perla until the dinner rush lets up—it feels like forever.

Finally, though, Papi taps me on the shoulder. He has scooped the last glob of sour cream onto the last super burrito of the day, and it's time to pack up Tía Perla. We take her to the commissary, where drivers from all over the city store their supplies and keep their food trucks overnight. I help him wipe

down the countertops and rinse out the big plastic containers we use for storing onions and tomatoes. When we're finished, he tucks my backpack under his arm, and we walk together to our pickup. The lights in the parking lot blaze bright white against the inky sky. I'm wondering how I could re-create the effect with paint and paper when Papi jokes, "Say buenas noches to Tía Perla." I yawn and wave—she looks a little out of place parked next to so many other trucks with flashier paint jobs and shinier chrome bumpers, her tired headlights pleading with us not to leave her behind.

chapter

3

I can remember the day Papi brought Tía Perla home and parked her in the driveway early on a Saturday morning. Mami had been pacing the living room. She wore her green silk dress and black heels as though she were on her way to a party, or to meet someone important. I sat on the couch in the itchy gray skirt I usually saved for church. When she heard Papi honk the horn, she squealed, tucked a stray curl back behind my ear, and grabbed both my wrists.

“They’re here!” I yelped.

“Aquí están!” she echoed. The two of us ran outside together.

Mami cleared all three front-porch steps in one eager hop, then stopped short on the lawn and wrinkled her nose. After listening to Papi gush about the truck—the flattop grill and four-burner stove, the stainless-steel walls and brand-new tires—we were expecting a beauty, a champion purebred. This truck looked more like a scruffy shelter rescue, in need of a warm bath and a loving home. The tires *were* brand-new, but everything else seemed dented or dusty. Still, Papi stood smiling in front of the truck, his chest puffed up proudly, his hands planted on his hips. Mami and I looked at each other, then we smiled, too.

Until that Saturday morning, Papi had worked as a house-painter for a big construction company. He had to leave the house early, sometimes before the streetlights had flickered out, and he always came home with aching shoulders. At night, after he and Mami had sent me to bed, I would hear them whispering at the kitchen table: “But if I could start something of my own...”

After a while, those kitchen-table whispers grew into a roar of plans and daydreams. Standing over the stove, refrying beans, Papi would suddenly burst, “When I open my restaurant, I’ll serve all kinds of beans—not just refritos, but black beans and frijoles de la olla, too.” His mother, my abuelita, had taught him to cook when he was my age. She didn’t know where he might travel someday, she told him, but wherever

he went, he would have her recipes to bring him back home. Now, nothing made Papi happier than sharing that warm at-home feeling with others.

Mami would spoon Papi's homemade salsa onto her breakfast eggs, take a bite, and then, with her mouth still half-full, exclaim, "Mi amor! At your restaurant, you *must* make your own salsa. Promise me, nothing from a jar."

And one sunny afternoon, when I poked around the refrigerator looking for something cool to drink, I asked, "Papi, can there be strawberry soda at your restaurant?" He swept me off the floor and lifted me over his head.

"Órale!" he shouted. "Strawberry soda! Orange soda! Grape soda!"

I giggled, my braids dangling over Papi's nose. "Lime soda! Mango soda! Cherry soda!" Mami shook her head at us and poured me a glass of ice water.

That's when we started saving. When the daydreams became so real we could taste them, as sweet and fizzy as strawberry soda.

Scrimping was harder than I thought it would be, but also a little like a game with all of us pitching in to pinch pennies. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner we ate plain beans wrapped in corn tortillas—so many that I still can't stand them. Mami stitched patches over the rips in my jeans instead of buying new ones. She also took in sewing projects from the dry cleaner's around the corner, gathering needle and thread after

dinner and settling down to repair a seam or fasten a button. I thought I could make some extra money, too, maybe walking dogs or pulling weeds. Mami and Papi said no to that. Instead, they put me in charge of making sure we never left the lights on in an empty room, and agreed to let me chip in the nickels and pennies I had stashed in my piggy bank. I poured a silvery stream of coins onto the coffee table, and as the three of us sorted them into cardboard rolls from the bank, Papi put his hand over mine and said, “Gracias.”

We worked and saved, worked and saved—for a little more than a year—until one day, while she was reading the newspaper, Mami stopped and said, “Hmmm.” She waved Papi and me over and pointed to a small ad in the corner of the page:

FOOD TRUCK FOR SALE. USED, GOOD CONDITION.

“Hmmm,” Papi and I agreed. It wasn’t a restaurant, but it would be ours and we had saved just enough. “It wouldn’t hurt just to look,” he said.

Two weeks later, the truck was in our driveway.

The previous owner had called it *La Perla del Mar*, the Pearl of the Sea. The name was painted in loopy blue letters across one side of the truck, and it was the only thing that Papi thought really needed fixing. *La Perla del Mar* sounded like seafood, he thought, and that wasn’t the food that brought him back home. We sat on the lawn, Mami spreading Papi’s jacket out between the grass and her green dress, and tried to come up with a new name.

“Señor Salsa,” Mami proposed.

I groaned.

“Holy Frijoles,” Papi suggested.

I threw a clump of dried grass at him. He ducked and laughed.

And then it came to me. “Tía Perla.”

My parents looked at each other, not sure whether we were still joking. “No, really,” I said, standing up and dusting off my skirt. “Listen.” It was a name that sounded like home, I told them. Like food cooked from scratch by your favorite aunt. “Plus, we won’t have to repaint the whole thing.”

Mami tilted her head right to left, my idea rolling around her mind like a marble. “Tía Perla,” she said.

Papi nodded, slowly at first and then feverishly. “Órale!” he growled, hugging Mami and me tight. “Órale!”

We congratulated ourselves for a few happy minutes until Papi slapped his palm to his forehead. “Almost forgot!” He climbed back inside the truck and returned with three bottles of strawberry soda. Tía Perla was home and officially part of the family.

Over the next few weekends, we painted over the seascape that had been airbrushed onto the truck’s side, replacing it with bunches of red and white roses. We covered up most of the old lettering, too, everything but PERLA. Papi had lifted me onto a stepladder and handed me a paintbrush. In careful blue strokes, I wrote TÍA.

Five years later, our paint job is faded and chipped, and palm trees from the old seascape are peeking through in places. It needs touching up, I think, as I sketch in the margins of my social studies notes. But who's going to do it? I certainly don't want to spend any more time with Tía Perla than I absolutely have to.

chapter

4

Julia's house, behind a tall wrought iron gate, looks like it belongs on a different planet than mine, which is small and painted pink. But really, it's only a few blocks away. Our grandparents were friends back in Mexico, and it was Julia's dad who owned the construction company where Papi used to work. When we were little, before Tía Perla, Mami used to drive Julia to school every morning and bring her back to our house every afternoon. Julia and I would haul Mami's old purses and dress shoes to the front porch and pretend we were actresses. Or bankers. Or spies. Julia always decided, but it was always pretty fun.

Then, when we got to seventh grade, Julia decided she was

too old for a babysitter and persuaded her parents to let her take the bus to school. Not the school bus—the *real*, public bus. She's the only one in our class who does, and it's just about her favorite thing to talk about. She flutters into class seconds after the bell rings, blows her bangs off her forehead, and sighs, "Oh, Ms. Barlow, I'm so *sorry* I didn't get here in time, but my *bus* was running late." Like it's her own personal bus. Or at lunchtime, when she stands at the end of a table, tapping her foot on the linoleum until we all take a break from our conversations and look up. "You'll never *believe*," she begins, after she's sure she has everyone's attention, "what happened on my *bus*." Like anyone is even interested.

But the thing is, a lot of people *are* interested. Even me. It's like she's living the seventh-grade version of the glamorous lives we used to act out on my front porch.

On Tuesday afternoon, I see Julia in the hallway, yanking books from her locker and shoving them in her backpack. "I can't *believe* he kept us after class," she fumes to Maddie, who's leaning against the lockers and coiling glossy black hair around her finger. Maddie is new this year and glued herself to Julia on the very first day. Arthur knows her from Sunday school, but still, she pretty much left her old reputation behind when she came to Saint Scholastica. Was she first pick or last when they chose teams in PE? Was she ever sent home with head lice? Did she always win the spelling bee? If she started wearing feathers in her hair, would everyone else start

wearing feathers, too? We don't know. Maddie has nothing to live down and nothing to live up to. I'm more than a little jealous.

"Urrgh," Julia grumbles when she can't get her backpack zipped. "I'm going to miss my bus."

I consider pretending I didn't hear, but she seems really upset, so I stop next to her locker. "Julia, if you need a ride, my dad can take you home."

Julia and Maddie lock eyes for a moment. "No, thanks." Julia blinks. She slings her navy-blue cardigan over her shoulder and goes back to wrestling with her backpack.

I shrug and walk down the hall. I'm only a few steps away when I hear Maddie ask, "Why don't you just go with her? Didn't you used to carpool or something?"

Julia slams her locker shut. "Seriously? There's just no *way*. I mean, Stef and her truck smell like old tacos. What is she, the Taco *Queen*?"

I don't turn around. I pretend not to hear, but my cheeks burn. Julia's always been bossy and kind of a show-off, but never straight-up mean. I glance right and then left. No one's looking, so I pull my ponytail over my shoulder, bury my nose into it, and take a cautious sniff. Vanilla citrus-blossom shampoo. So there.

But I have to admit, isn't there just the faintest whiff of burnt tortilla mixed in? As soon as Papi and I get home a few

hours later, I change out of my uniform and throw all of it—white blouse, plaid skirt, blue cardigan—into the dryer with three lavender-breeze dryer sheets just to be safe.



I try not to let Julia get to me, but after a week, I'm still not convinced I don't smell like Tía Perla. Before school starts, I wait outside our classroom with my sweater balled up under my arm. I stop Arthur and Amanda before they can step inside. "Come over here," I demand, taking them by their wrists and dragging them around the corner.

"Now smell this." I shove the cardigan under their noses. They look at each other, then back at me. "Go on," I say, shaking the sweater. "Smell it."

They both take a sniff.

"OOO-kaaay?" Amanda looks up. "That was *awesome*, Stef, and totally not weird at all. Are we allowed to go to class now?"

"But does it smell like tacos?" I demand, shaking the sweater again. "Am I the Taco Queen?"

Arthur had just taken a gulp of orange juice from a cardboard carton. It shoots out of his nose and across the tile floor as he bursts out laughing. "Taco Queen?" he sputters, wiping his hand across his lips.

Amanda considers it, then leans in for another smell. “Not tacos,” she confirms. “But I like it. What detergent do your parents use?”

I roll my eyes. No help at all. As we’re walking to Ms. Barlow’s room for language arts, I tell them what I overheard Julia say. Arthur can’t stop laughing, but Amanda groans. “Why would you even listen to her? You know she just likes being the center of attention.”

I nod. “Yeah. I know, right?” Still, Julia’s words cling to me like a stale smell. Amanda has her soccer team, Arthur has his music, Julia has her independence, and it seems like all I have is Tía Perla. Somehow, I have to find a way to wipe off the stains she’s leaving on my reputation.

chapter

5

Ms. Barlow is finishing a bagel and sipping from a cup of coffee when we find our seats a few minutes before school starts. She wipes a splotch of cream cheese off her lip as she smiles to greet us. “We’re going to start with a writing exercise, so go ahead and take out your journals while we wait for the bell to ring.”

I dig mine out of my desk and find a spot on the cover that I haven’t already filled with doodles. It’s almost always easier to draw my thoughts than to find words for them. The last time we wrote in our journals, I sketched a sailboat bobbing along atop curling blue waves. Now I add a sea monster, surging from the sea to swallow it whole.

"Niiice," Christopher drawls. "Do my backpack next?"

I glance up and find four or five other kids looking over my shoulder. "Yeah?" I'm not sure Christopher is serious. I've been trying to spend more time working on my art. Sometimes I think I might even be getting better, but I'm not sure anyone else notices.

Suddenly, Julia's squeal from the back of the classroom yanks everyone's eyes off my drawings and reels them back to her.

"No way!" She shakes her head at her cell phone's glowing screen. She's the only seventh grader who's allowed to take it out of her backpack in the classroom—her parents had insisted. They gave her the phone for safety reasons, like if she runs into trouble on the bus. She's supposed to text them when she gets to school and again when she gets home so they know she's all right. Not that she's told us all about it a million times or anything.

"What?" Christopher asks.

Julia doesn't answer. "No *way*!" she screeches again. "No way, no way, no way!"

She screams and hugs her cell phone over her heart.

Even Amanda is curious now. "Seriously. What is it?"

"This is going to be *so* amazing." She sighs, sinking breathlessly into her chair but still not giving any hints about what she's talking about.

I roll my eyes. If Julia doesn't want to say what's so amazing, fine. I'm not going to beg.

But that doesn't stop anyone else.

"Come on," Maddie pleads. "Tell us. What's going on?"

"Oh, no big deal," Julia finally teases with a toss of her auburn hair. "Just that Viviana Vega is coming to town and I'm getting front-row tickets to her concert."

Maddie screams.

"No way," I whisper to myself. I look over at Amanda, whose eyes are wide with envy or disbelief. Probably both. Only Arthur seems unimpressed. He shakes his head and opens up a music magazine. The only singers he cares about are singers no one else has ever heard of. And everyone has heard of Viviana Vega.

The bell finally rings, and Ms. Barlow settles the classroom down to call roll.

"All right, all right. That's enough, everyone. Julia, I'm not sure Viviana Vega qualifies as urgent—put the phone away, please. Find your seats. Let's get started."

When Ms. Barlow had passed out our journals on the first day of school, I had expected the usual "how I spent my summer vacation" kind of assignment. Wrong. The writing prompts she puts on the board are always surprising and sometimes strange.

WHY ME? she wrote once with no further explanation.

IF YOU HAD TO SPEND A WEEK LIVING INSIDE ANY BOOK,
WHICH WOULD YOU CHOOSE AND WHY?

WRITE A THANK-YOU NOTE TO AN UNCLE WHO SENT YOU A
CAN OF CHICKEN SOUP FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY.

Compared with that one, today's question seems almost
normal: IMAGINE YOU CAN TIME TRAVEL, BUT YOUR PARENTS
DON'T BELIEVE YOU. HOW WOULD YOU CONVINCE THEM?

I can't convince my parents of anything. I feel like I have
plenty to say about today's question, but every time I bring my
pen down to write something, the words vanish. Instead, I sit
scribbling robots and rocket ships in the margins of my jour-
nal until Ms. Barlow comes down the aisle in her white canvas
sneakers, taps me on the shoulder, and whispers, "Just start
somewhere, Stef. *Anywhere*. Sometimes starting is the hardest
part. It's easier after that."

I nod and begin. "I can't convince my parents of anything."

chapter

6

After language arts, I have math, and after that, a ten-minute break before science, where Mrs. Serros divides us into pairs for an experiment—with baby diapers.

“We’re going to continue talking about polymers, which you’ll remember are long strings of molecules that can have some very interesting properties,” she explains, walking up and down the aisles and around the desks. “Some bounce. Some stretch. Some are tough and rigid. Today you’ll work with a superabsorbent polymer. See if you can figure out why it’s called ‘superabsorbent.’”

We cut our diapers open, revealing a grainy white powder

that we collect in Ziploc bags. When we drop water onto the powder, the granules swell into big blobs.

“Talk to your partners,” Mrs. Serros says. “Besides in a diaper, where else might a superabsorbent polymer be helpful? How might you use it in a garden, for example?”

My partner, Jake, pokes at the glob of diaper gel on our table. “Sick,” he says. I don’t know if he means “gross” or “cool.” It’s kind of both.



The subject of Viviana Vega doesn’t come up for the rest of the morning, but by lunchtime, the whole school knows about her concert, and tickets are all anyone is talking about.

“So,” Amanda says, smacking her lunch tray down on the table where Arthur and I are already sitting. “According to *Julia*, the ‘cheap’ seats”—she puts air quotes around “cheap”—“are forty dollars each. I have ten dollars left over from my birthday. Where are we going to get the rest?”

“You could try selling a kidney,” Arthur mutters drily, taking his veggie burger patty out of its bun. “You have two.”

Amanda sticks her tongue out at him, then turns back to me. “I’m serious, Stef. We have to be there. I don’t want to hear all about it from *Julia Sandoval*. We’re figuring this out. Like, today.”

Just like that, she stands up again, jamming a granola bar in her pocket before I can say anything. If Amanda were a polymer, she'd definitely be the kind that bounces.

She's right, though—it's a lot of money. But paying for tickets isn't our only problem, maybe not even our biggest problem. There's no way Mami and Papi are going to let me go to that concert without them—and there's no way I'm letting them come along with me.

We go from lunch to PE, which seems cruel. All I want to do is nap. But at least it's just kickball today. After PE is social studies and finally, because it's Tuesday, art.

Most people, if you asked them what their favorite day of the week is, wouldn't say Tuesday. It's still early in the week, and Friday is a long way off. There's nothing special about Tuesday. Except, for me, there's art class. And in art class, I never hear Mami's voice telling me I'm too young, or Papi's nagging me to be careful. *I* am in charge of the blank piece of paper in front of me, and I can turn it into something as vivid and adventurous or as quiet and calm as I want. There aren't any restrictions. Except Mr. Salazar's, of course. But that's different.

Pinned to the walls of Mr. Salazar's studio are a decade's worth of sketches and paintings, some yellowing, their corners creased. Smears and spatters of paints and pastels stain the tabletops, and dried-up clay is ground into the tiled floor. But our paintbrushes are always clean, organized by shape and size

in old soup cans. We sit on tall stools at broad tables instead of desks and chairs. We can talk as much as we want as long as we get our work done.

We hang our backpacks off a row of hooks just inside the door to keep them clean and out of the way. Then we pick out smocks from a bin near Mr. Salazar's desk. The smocks are actually old button-down shirts with ink stains on the pockets or holes in the elbows, donated by parents or by Mr. Salazar himself. I pick out one with pink and green pinstripes and put it on backside-front.

"Grab a brush and fill up a cup of water on your way to your seats," he tells us. Then he asks me to pass out watercolor trays. I come up short, and he frowns. "Maddie, will you share with Julia?" The girls nod. "And, Stef, do you mind sharing with Amanda for today?"

Once we've all settled on our stools, Mr. Salazar takes a basket full of white crayons and sends it around the classroom. We each take a crayon and pass the basket along as he tapes a piece of watercolor paper on the whiteboard and begins the day's lesson.

"Who can tell me what 'resist' means?" he asks, his back to us while his hand darts over the page. Whatever he's drawing is invisible from where I sit, white wax on white paper.

"To fight back!" Arthur calls out, pumping his fist in the air. Mr. Salazar nods, without looking away from his work.

"Anyone else?"

“To push away?” I venture.

Mr. Salazar turns around and points a finger, first at Arthur, then at me. “Right and right. Very good, both of you. Today we’re going to be practicing a technique called wax *resist*.” He swizzles his paintbrush in a plastic cup of water, then dabs it on a cake of paint. “And here’s why.”

He brushes a wash of violet over the paper, then switches to blue and then to green. The colors bloom on the page. They spill into one another in liquid bursts—except for where Mr. Salazar had sketched with his crayon. The mystery drawing turns out to be a spiderweb, its strands gleaming white through all that color.

Is the wax holding back the free-flowing paint, keeping it from going where it wants to go? No, I decide. It’s something else. The wax is shining through, bold and bright and refusing to be painted over. Julia seems to have read my mind.

“It’s wax *resist* because the wax is resisting the paint!”

“Exactly!” Mr. Salazar claps. He tells us to spend a few minutes planning before practicing the technique ourselves. But I already know what I want to paint: parking lights glowing against the dark purple sky over the commissary at night.

chapter

7

As usual, Tía Perla is waiting for me when school is dismissed, but this time, Papi has her parked just across the street. Progress. I wave to show him how much I appreciate it. Instead of waving back, Papi points his finger up and down the street and then points at his eyes, which I take as some signal to look both ways. So much for progress. Amanda follows me out, talking so fast about Viviana Vega tickets that it's hard to keep up. I'm surprised when she starts crossing the street with me.

"Hold up." I clamp my hand on her shoulder so she'll stop and take a breath. "Don't you have practice?"

"We have to run an extra lap for every minute we're late." She checks her watch and shrugs. "Worth it."

Papi is standing next to the truck holding sodas when we get to the other side. Amanda shakes her head. "No, thanks. Practice." Then she launches right back into concert talk.

"Okay, so I know Mom and Dad aren't going to just *give* me money for Viviana Vega tickets, but maybe, like, an advance on my allowance? Orrrrr, I don't know, a yard sale? I could get rid of all those stupid stuffed animals. And your drawings! You could sell some, Stef. That's at least a few bucks."

"Yeah," I say weakly, wishing she wasn't doing this right in front of Papi. I need some time to prepare my case, even if it *is* hopeless.

I feel Papi staring at me. If I can't keep up with Amanda, he must be completely lost. "What's all this about?" he asks in Spanish. "Who is this Viviana Vega?"

Amanda answers for me. "Mr. *SO*-to, everyone knows Viviana Vega."

"Es una cantante," I say quietly.

"Not *just* a singer. Pretty much the best singer ever," Amanda continues. "And there's a concert coming up, and Stef and I *have* to be there."

Papi nods but doesn't say anything. He just gets back in the truck.



Over the next few days, Amanda tries everything she can think of to raise the ticket money. I go along with her thinking wishfully, Papi hasn't said no.

At lunchtime, she goes without milk every day for a week—she even talks Arthur into giving up his orange juice—but when we count the change, it adds up to less than four dollars. Amanda teaches me to make her handmade headbands, and we sell a couple to girls on her soccer team but have to stop when we run out of old T-shirts. Amanda offers to babysit her little brother for five dollars an hour, but since she already has to do that for free, her parents just laugh.

By the time tickets go on sale, we're not even close.

There's really no way we could just forget about the concert, but it would be a lot easier if Julia wasn't reminding us all the time, wondering—too loudly, considering we're in the library—what she should wear and whether she should give Viviana flowers or a teddy bear when she goes backstage. Because, *of course*, she gets to go backstage.

With the concert sold out, Amanda and I try to decide what to do with the money.

"You have enough to download her new album at least," Arthur whispers. "I mean, if you don't mind listening to pop trash."

"Hey, Amanda," I say slyly.

"Hey what?"

"I think he wants us to download the album for him."

Amanda considers for a moment. "No," she says very seriously. "Give Arthur some credit. *I* think . . . he already has it!"

"And knows all the songs by heart?"

"Yeah, and sings them in the shower!"

We're trying so hard to hold back our giggles that they come out as tears. Arthur blushes, groans, and puts on his earphones, but not before the librarian catches him and gives him a stern look. Sheepishly, he slides them into his backpack.

I sock him lightly on the shoulder. "Don't be such a music snob." He socks me back.

chapter

8

It's been so long since I've slept in on a Saturday morning that I don't really need to set an alarm clock anymore. Most days, my eyes just open at five o'clock. I stretch, change out of my pajamas, twist my hair into a lazy bun, and find Mami and Papi already in the kitchen. She has the newspaper open. He's pouring coffee into a thermos. Lots of parents spend Saturdays at ballparks and festivals and flea markets. Papi does, too. Only, he's there to sell tacos and burritos, tortas and tostadas. Saturday is his busy day, and it takes all three of us to make sure he's prepared.

The farmers' market is our first stop, and we leave as soon

as I gulp down a bowl of cereal. Papi pulls a notebook from his shirt pocket and leafs through it to find this week's grocery list while Mami walks over to a food stand. She comes back with three steaming cups of hot chocolate and hands me one. The first sip burns my tongue, but it's worth it. "So, what do we need?" I ask, feeling warmer and finally awake.

We gather onions, garlic, lettuce, tomatoes, and beans. We have everything else we need back at the commissary. When we get there, I head straight for one of the enormous refrigerators in the prep kitchen, my reflection fuzzy and warped on its stainless-steel door. I find the drawer assigned to Papi, pull out a bunch of cilantro, take it to a counter, and start chopping. Meanwhile, Papi, wearing disposable gloves, ladles salsa into teensy plastic containers. We leave the onions to Mami. They never make her cry. No one else is in the cavernous kitchen yet. The only sounds I hear are the soft thuds of knives on cutting boards until, after a while, Mami starts to hum.

"Estefania," Papi says finally, clearing his throat. "If you don't have any other plans, I'd like for you to come and help me today."

I don't have any plans, but if I did, they wouldn't involve Tía Perla.

"Well, I mean, there's homework, and I..."

"Órale," he insists. "I can really use your help, m'ija. We'll start at the park. Maybe you'll see Amanda play."

I guess I don't have a choice. "Fine."

Finished in the kitchen, we pack up Tía Perla and drop Mami off at home. It's still morning when Papi and I get to the park, but already the sun is beginning to bake the grass fields. "Good thing we restocked the soda," I say.

"Órale," he answers. I take orders while he cooks on the flattop grill—first, eggs and sausage for breakfast burritos, and a few hours later, chicken and steak. He wipes sweat off his forehead with his sleeve and whistles along to the radio on the counter.

"Two super burritos, no beans, and one chicken taco, extra jalapeños," I call back to him. "Eleven fifty, please," I tell the lady standing at the order window. "Any lime or salsa?" She fans herself with a baseball cap while waiting for her order.

Between customers, I watch Amanda's game at the far end of the park. From here, the players are just blurs of orange and green, but I recognize Amanda's two brown braids flying out behind her. I figure she's spotted Tía Perla, too—who can miss her?—and that later she'll jog over for a postgame bottle of cherry soda. I bury one way down at the bottom of the ice chest so it'll be slushy-cold when she gets here.

Amanda started coming to Saint Scholastica in fifth grade, but since we weren't in the same class, I didn't really meet her until sixth grade, when my parents signed me up for soccer. Amanda and I ended up on the same team. I had

hardly even kicked a ball before, but Amanda had been playing soccer almost since she learned to walk. She was fast, and her passes always landed exactly where she wanted.

Scrimmaging at practice one afternoon, Amanda broke away at the half line with no one but me between her and the goal box. As she dribbled past, I turned, flustered, to our coach. "Catch her!" he yelled.

I took off, running as hard as I could, Coach yelling, "Go! Go!" behind me. I closed some of the gap between us, but I could tell I wasn't going to get out in front of Amanda—she was just too fast. We ran a few strides side by side, and then, just as she was about to speed off again, I kicked blindly, hoping to find the ball and send it out of bounds.

Instead, I found Amanda's cleat, knocking her legs out from under her. She landed with a smack and a howl and had to sit out the rest of the season. I figured she would stop showing up for games and practices after that, but she was there for every one, glaring at me from the sideline, her broken arm resting on her lap. I tried to avoid her. But one morning, as I was shuffling off the field at halftime, she said, "Hey." I looked over to where she was sitting, still suited up in our team uniform, complete with shin guards, even though she wasn't going to play. I was surprised and a little scared.

"You're kicking the ball with your toe," she said, picking at the grass instead of looking at me.

“So?”

She looked up. “So, you’re supposed to kick with your shoelaces.”

“My shoelaces?”

Amanda stood, found a practice ball, and demonstrated. “When you kick with your shoelaces, it’s easier to make the ball go where you want.” She kicked, sending the ball straight to my feet.

“Wow. Thanks.”

Amanda shrugged.

“It’s cool you got a blue cast,” I blurted. I had noticed it right away, of course, but had been too afraid to say anything until then. “Was it to match our uniforms? If you want, I can draw a soccer ball on it after the game.”

She smiled. “Okay.”

“And I’m sorry I knocked you over.”

“I know.”

I didn’t play soccer anymore after that season—our Saturdays were just too busy with Tía Perla—but Amanda and I stayed friends.

Now, as the referee blows his whistle long and loud at the end of her game, I see the teams huddle and cheer, then line up to shake one another’s hands.

“I’m going to take a break. Okay, Papi?”

“Stay close, m’ija,” he says, still pushing bite-size chunks of chicken around the grill. I grab the radio and Amanda’s

soda and wait for her outside the truck. Her parents say she can hang out with us until her little brother's game is over and it's time for them to go home.

We sit cross-legged in the grass, Amanda sucking the juice out of an orange wedge as I twist the radio dial, listening for a break in the static. I finally find a clear station playing, naturally, Viviana Vega. I sigh, pick up a twig, and start tracing little pictures in the dirt while Amanda chatters about her assists and the fouls the referee should have called but didn't.

Then I hear something that makes me sit up straight and hold my hand out to shush her.

"What?"

I shake my head and point to the radio. "Listen."

"Oh, I know. Viviana Vega? I'm starting to think Arthur's right. I'm so over it. I just want her stupid concert to be done with already so we can talk about something else for a change."

"No, *listen!*" I snap.

Amanda stops talking as the DJ announces he's about to give away two tickets to the sold-out Viviana Vega show. "Be the fiftieth caller, and the tickets are yours."

"A phone!" Amanda barks.

I jump to my feet, scramble into Tía Perla's cab, and yank Papi's cell phone from the glove compartment. I should probably ask first, but there isn't time.

I dial the radio station, my fingers shaking, then press the speaker button. We listen: *Beep. Beep. Beep.*

"Busy." I sigh, hanging up.

"So try again!" Amanda orders.

This time it rings. And rings, and I don't believe what I finally hear on the other end.

"Congratulations, Caller Fifty."

No way.

"Hello? Caller? ... Anyone there?"

I don't know what to say.

"Oh my god!" I mouth soundlessly as Amanda snatches back the phone to talk to the DJ. My mind is racing as I hear Amanda say, "Is this for real? ... Thirteen.... Oh, my mom can do it! ... Thank you!"

She taps a button to end the call. "That's it," she says. "We're not eighteen, so my mom has to go pick up the tickets at the box office. Can you believe this? We're gonna see Viviana Vega!"

I pull her up from the ground by both arms. "We're gonna see Viviana Vega!"

We scream so loudly that Papi comes running out of Tía Perla, a spatula raised in his right hand.

"What's going on?" he asks, looking frantic and eyeing his cell phone where we tossed it on the ground. "Qué pasó? What happened? What's wrong? Estefania, is everything all right?"

I stop jumping and frown. Why does he always have to worry so much?

I let go of Amanda's hands. "*Nothing's* wrong." I huff. "We're just happy." I pause and take a breath. I'm going to have to be careful about how I explain this. "You know that concert? The one next weekend? Amanda just won a ticket! She gets to go!"

Papi squeezes his eyes shut and sighs. "Qué bueno, Amanda," he says, relaxing his shoulders.

"Yeah, but what's *really* great is we have *two* tickets!" Amanda bursts before I can stop her. "Stef can come, too, right? You *have* to let her."

I look at the ground and erase my little dirt drawings with the toe of my sneaker. I wish I'd had a chance to talk to my parents—to convince them that everything would be fine—before Amanda had said anything. But maybe, just this once, they'll understand what a big deal it is. Maybe they'll trust me enough to let me go. I look up at Papi.

He is already looking at me, confused and maybe a little sad. I seem to be getting that look a lot lately.

"I see," Papi says slowly. "We'll have to talk about that. For now, m'ija, it's time for us to go. Good game, Amanda. Come on back to the truck and take some tacos for your parents."

Papi walks back to Tía Perla, and Amanda whispers, "They're going to let you go, right? I mean, Stef, this is, like, once in a lifetime."

After Papi hands Amanda a brown paper bag stuffed with tacos and salsa and tortilla chips, he and I leave the park and

drive to the flea market. His lips are pressed together in a tight, straight line. Once, at a stoplight, I look up at him. I want to tell him I'm smart enough, mature enough. But the words feel like paste in my mouth, and I swallow them all back down as the light turns green.

chapter 9

We spend the rest of the afternoon at the flea market parked next to a truck called Gyro Hero. Our menus are so different, Papi had explained, that we're not really competing with each other, just giving customers more options. Late in the afternoon, he sends me over with two carnitas burritos. I come back to Tía Perla with two pitas stuffed with chicken souvlaki.

The line outside our window is never very long, but orders are steady enough to stay put. Not until we've sold out of carne asada do Papi and I leave the flea market and head back to the commissary. It is after dark, but still warm, when we finally

pull in. I can't help daydreaming about the Viviana Vega concert: I've never won anything in my whole life—not even a goldfish at the school carnival. It was obviously meant to be.

And then I remember how hopeless it is, and my chest goes tight.

Papi shuts off the engine. "M'ija," he says, "you can wait here until I'm finished if you want."

A break from cleanup duties? I'm about to say yes, but I have a second thought.

"Nope," I say, straightening up and unbuckling my seat belt. "I can help."

I have only a week to show my parents I'm not a little kid anymore. I have to make them see how responsible I am, to convince them I'm not too young to go to that concert.

Papi looks surprised, but he nods. "Órale," he says, leading the way. I restock napkins and empty the trash. As I'm carrying a tub of sour cream from the truck back into the commissary refrigerator, I notice Papi and some of the other drivers huddled around a bulletin board, squinting at a letter that must have been tacked there sometime this afternoon.

"Regulations?" asks the owner of Tacos al Grullense. "Regulations mean they want to drive us out of business."

"Es nada," Vera Padilla insists. She swats at the letter as though shooing a fly. She and her sister, Myrna, drive Burritos Paradiso. Usually parked outside the gym, it's famous for

Myrna's caramel-topped flan. "They try this every few years. Nothing ever happens. Trust me; don't worry."

Papi sees me watching and waves me over. "Estefania, ven."

I join the others in front of the bulletin board, and he points to the letter. He doesn't have to say anything for me to know he wants me to translate. He speaks good-enough English, but when it comes to important conversations and official-looking paperwork, he doesn't trust himself. He always asks me. I translate at doctor visits and parent conferences, when letters come in from the bank or from the electric company. I'm used to it, but it still leaves me with a nervous pins-and-needles feeling in my stomach. When Papi says he needs my help with Tía Perla, I know he just wants some company. When he asks for help with English, it's like he really *needs* me.

I look up at the posting. MEETING NOTICE is printed across the top in bold capital letters. "It's from the city," I confirm. "And it's about new rules. It looks like..." I scan farther down and read "renewable every year" and "clean and free from damage." Doesn't sound like a very big deal to me. Tía Perla might not be the prettiest truck in the parking lot, but she's clean enough.

I step back from the bulletin board. "There's going to be a special meeting. All of you can go if you have something to say."

"Ah, don't bother," Vera grumbles. "Like I said, nothing ever happens."

Papi pulls out a notepad—the one he uses to jot down which ingredients and supplies are running low—and copies the date and time of the meeting.

"All done, Estefania," he says. "Vámonos?"

chapter

10

Sunday is the only day of the week we spend all together, the only day Papi leaves Tía Perla parked at the commissary. And by Sunday, all of us need a break. Papi doesn't want to cook for anyone. Mami doesn't want to be on her feet. I just want to sleep in. So usually, on Sundays, after I finally wake up, we drive to Suzy's Café for the breakfast special.

But today, my alarm clock jostles me out of bed at five thirty. My parents are still asleep, and I go straight to work. I iron a week's worth of white school uniform blouses and hang them, smooth and starched, in my closet. I sweep the floors and start the coffee, and by the time my parents wander into

the kitchen, I'm chopping peppers and grating cheese to make us omelets.

"Don't worry about the dishes," I tell Mami when I see her glance at the growing stack in the sink. "I'll get to them after breakfast. Now, sit down, sit down. Siéntense."

Mami looks at Papi, who just laughs and sits down. I pour two cups of coffee—adding a splash of milk to Papi's—and set them down on the table.

"M'ija, thank you, but what are you doing up so early? What's all this?" Mami asks, tightening her robe around her waist.

"Oh, it's nothing," I say breezily, tucking a flyaway curl behind my ear. My hair falls loose over my shoulders the way Mami likes it. "You have such beautiful hair, so thick and full," she always tells me, trying to get me to wear my hair down. "Thick and full" is just a polite way of saying "wild and frizzy," so I usually pull it all back into a ponytail. But Mami has *also* said I look older with my hair down, so today I give it a try.

"I was just thinking," I continue. "I'm old enough to cook and clean a little." I open the refrigerator and grab the carton of orange juice. "Now that I'm getting *older*, you can trust me with more responsibility."

Mami looks confused, but she smiles and sips her coffee. "Well, thank you for breakfast, Estefania," she says. "I'm impressed."

Papi clears his throat. "And this doesn't have anything to do with the concert on Saturday night?"

"Concert?" Mami asks, stopping midbite to look at me.

I take a deep breath, sit down in my chair at the kitchen table, and tell Mami about the Viviana Vega tickets: They just have to let me go. The arena is totally safe, and I can take Papi's cell phone just in case. Plus, Amanda will be with me—I won't even be alone, really.

Neither of them says a thing. I try, but I can't stop the whine that creeps into my voice. "*Please?* Everyone else in seventh grade gets to go out by themselves. They go to the mall by themselves. They see movies by themselves. They stay home *by themselves*. I swear, you can trust me. I'm very responsible."

"Estefania, we know how responsible you are," Mami says gently. "But I'm just not sure about this. I don't think I like the idea of you being out there on your own. At a concert? And at night? All those people?"

Papi obviously agrees with her. Were they even listening? I hold my breath for five long seconds to keep from rolling my eyes. This is almost the same conversation we had when I wanted to go on the end-of-the-year trip to the water park last summer ("Those slides look so dangerous"); when Amanda's parents invited me to go with them on their family camping trip ("What if there's an emergency and you can't reach us?"); and when the neighbor offered me twenty dollars to babysit her daughter for a couple of hours one weekend ("Taking care

of little kids is a lot harder than you realize. Why don't you watch her here at home where we can help you?").

I let my breath out slowly. "Please. Just think about it," I say through gritted teeth as calmly as I can manage. My hand shakes as I pour myself some juice.

The rest of our breakfast is awkward and quiet. I take a few bites of my omelet and push the rest around my plate. It's not too bad, actually, but I'm just not hungry. After a while, Mami gets up to take a shower, whispering, "Thanks again, m'ija," and Papi opens the newspaper. It hardly seems like there's any reason to wash the dishes anymore—it's not going to make a difference with my parents—but even I think it would be pretty childish not to at this point, so I start filling the sink.

If it was a normal Sunday, I might be waking up right about now. We would come home after breakfast at Suzy's. Mami would call my grandma, handing me the phone to tell her about school. Papi would go out to his flower beds, and I'd usually go out and help him, or at least bring him a hat and a glass of ice water if the weather was warm. For dinner we'd eat leftovers, straight out of their Tupperware containers, and afterward, the three of us would fold laundry in the living room, catching up on the telenovelas we had recorded over the past week. Right now we're in the middle of *El Malcriado*. It's about a poor but beautiful housekeeper (of course) who falls in love with the rich but spoiled son of her employer (obviously). I'm betting that, in the end, a letter will come for the

housekeeper, telling her she's inherited millions from a long-lost uncle. Mami thinks she'll end up saving the rich man's life, causing him to see how foolish he was to have ignored her all those years. "Then he'll beg her to marry him, right there in the hospital. Just watch," Mami predicts. Papi rolls his eyes at us, but we know he's just as eager as we are to find out what happens next.

But tonight, we don't get the chance. The uncomfortable hush that fell over us at breakfast lasts through the morning and into the afternoon. After her shower, Mami calls my grandmother, like she always does, and Papi goes outside to work in the garden. But instead of following him, I go to my room and close the door behind me. I finish the little homework I had left, then open my sketchbook. Drawing calms me, and I even start feeling hopeful. Mami and Papi haven't said no to the concert—maybe they're at least considering it. When I wander out of my room around dinnertime, I find Papi at the kitchen table with his grocery list and a reheated container of spaghetti. He looks up and holds it out, offering me a bite. I shake my head, and he goes back to planning for the week ahead. Not very hungry, I warm a tortilla on the stove, spread some butter over it, then roll it up to eat on the living room sofa. When Mami comes in with the laundry basket, I wipe my fingers to help her fold, but we don't turn on the TV.

chapter

11

Amanda is waiting for me in the hallway outside our classroom when I get to school on Monday morning.

“Well?” she asks.

“Well, what?”

“Well, you know what. What did your parents say? Are you coming to see Viviana Vega? Stef, you *have* to come.”

“Well, they haven’t said no,” I tell her, trying to sound optimistic. In my head I add, “*Yet.*”

“Well, I talked to my mom, and she says you can come over to my house for dinner on Saturday,” Amanda continues. “Then my sister will drop us off at the arena and *wait* for us right outside until it’s over. I mean, she’ll be *right* there,

practically with us. That *has* to make your parents feel better, right? My mom can call your mom if you want.”

“That’s okay.” I shrug. I wish that would help, but I don’t think it will. Amanda’s sister is seventeen. Almost an adult, but Mami and Papi won’t see it that way.

As far as Amanda’s concerned, it’s a done deal. She’s still talking about the concert and the songs she hopes Viviana Vega will perform as we walk into Ms. Barlow’s classroom. It takes me a few seconds to notice, but everyone stops talking as Amanda and I hang our bags off the backs of our chairs.

“What?” we say in unison.

“Amanda, were you on the radio the other day?” Jake asks. More questions fly at her, one after the other.

“Is it true you get to meet Viviana Vega?”

“Can you get me her autograph?”

“Who are you gonna take with you?”

Even Arthur, who still says he can’t stand Viviana Vega, pulls his headphones down around his neck to listen.

Amanda winks. “Stef. I’m going with Stef,” she says, pulling me toward her desk. “She’s actually the one who called. It was her phone.”

“Stef doesn’t even *have* a phone.” Julia sniffs without looking up from hers. But no one seems to notice. Before she can say anything else, class begins, and Ms. Barlow prints today’s writing exercise on the board: “Describe what it feels like to be wrong.”

After about fifteen minutes, she tells us that when we've come to a good stopping place, we can put away our journals for some free reading time. It doesn't happen very often, but ever since Ms. Barlow told me graphic novels count as books, I look forward to free reading almost as much as art class. I see Arthur slide his journal into his desk and pull a music magazine out of his backpack. The cover is ripped off, probably because his mom thought the picture was inappropriate for school. But she lets him read it anyway. Amanda grabs a book from Ms. Barlow's library, takes it back to her desk, turns a few pages, closes it, takes it back to the library, and chooses another. And then another, and another. I'm startled when the bell rings and I haven't even closed my journal. I've written three full pages, not on what it feels like to be wrong, but on finally convincing my parents I've been *right* about deserving some independence, and especially about deserving to go to the Viviana Vega concert.

We have a test in math, so there isn't time to talk about the concert. But in science, there's a substitute teacher, and while we fill in our worksheets, Amanda keeps whispering plans across the table. By lunchtime, I've caught her contagious optimism and can almost see myself at the arena with her. "I wonder if they'll let us take pictures inside," Amanda considers. Then she slumps—"I wonder if we'll be close enough to even see"—and recovers—"Oh well. I mean, at least we'll be there, right?"

"You can always try to sneak up closer," Arthur offers helpfully. Then he turns to me and tilts his head. "But, Stef, do you really think your mom and dad are going to let you go?" He knows better than Amanda what it's like to have over-protective parents.

"Of course they are—they have to," Amanda answers for me.

"They might," I say.

"Miracles can happen." Arthur shrugs.

And then, at the end of the day, an actual miracle actually happens.

I leave school and scan the parking lot, looking for Tía Perla. She isn't there. Not a trace of her.

No way.

Amanda jogs off to practice, and Arthur climbs in the front seat of his mom's sedan. I wave good-bye and start walking, a few steps behind Julia. She turns around when she hears me, and I flash a smile, even more sparkling-sweet than hers. She wrinkles her eyebrows and her nose—pretty much her whole face is scrunched up in confusion. Then she snaps her head back around, and her red-brown hair flutters down, smooth and straight over her shoulders as though nothing had ever disturbed it. She continues on to the bus stop without looking back. I smile again, for real this time.

I turn the corner and walk toward the gas station where I'm supposed to meet Papi. It takes me less than ten minutes

to get there, and just like I've always said, absolutely nothing even remotely dangerous happens along the way. I'm considering whether to give Papi an I-told-you-so speech, or whether it would be smarter to act as though leaving school on my own was nothing out of the ordinary, when I notice Tía Perla parked alongside two other taco trucks. And that's definitely out of the ordinary.

These trucks aren't like Gyro Hero; they might look a little different than Tía Perla, but their menus are almost exactly the same. I could probably guess what they serve without even looking: tacos, burritos, super burritos, tortas, tostadas. . . . It's not good for anyone's business for taco trucks to be parked so close together.

When he sees me, Papi waves me over to where he and the two other drivers are standing under the shade of Tía Perla's canopy, studying a piece of paper.

"Does it really say we need bathrooms?" asks one of the men, shaking his head. "And we have to move every hour? This is going to put me out of business."

"Estefania, go inside and get a soda, then come out and read this for me," Papi says calmly.

I decide the soda can wait. The letter is addressed to Papi. It is stamped with the city seal.

"Dear Mr. Soto," I read out loud. "You are receiving this notice because you are an officially registered mobile food

vendor. We are writing to inform you of proposed regulations that, if adopted, could affect your business. You are invited to attend a public hearing to discuss the attached proposals that we hope will maintain a quiet and clean environment throughout the city and will ensure the health and safety of all citizens."

On the next page is what looks like a list of rules for food trucks like Tía Perla. "Trucks must be parked within one hundred feet of a public restroom." Is that even possible?

"Operators must move their trucks every sixty minutes." That makes no sense. As soon as we set up everything, it would be time to pack it all in again.

"Permits must be renewed every year instead of every five years, and will be granted based, in part, on vehicle appearance."

I stop reading. This sounds just like that letter in the commissary. Maybe it really was serious after all.

"Papi?" I glance up, searching his face for clues about whether we should worry. He looks like he's still trying to decide, and even though I've just finished translating for him, I ask, "What does this mean?"

"It means we're all out of a job," one of the other drivers grumbles.

Papi takes the letter, folds it, and tucks it back inside the envelope. "It's going to be all right," he says finally. "We'll go

to this meeting, and we'll explain it to them. No one is out of a job."

The other drivers leave, and Papi, Tía Perla, and I stay at the gas station for the rest of the evening. I decide not to bring up the Viviana Vega concert, and Papi doesn't, either.