

chapter

12

When I hear Mami filling the coffeepot with water on Tuesday morning, I kick myself out of a tangle of blankets and sheets to join her in the kitchen. I've been up for hours, tossing and turning and playing out long, impassioned arguments in my head. Finally, I had resolved to demand an answer to the Viviana Vega question this morning, before leaving for school. My parents have already taken two whole days to think about it. That should be long enough. And anyway, Amanda needs to know whether I'm going with her. I pad down the hallway in socks and flannel pajamas, feeling sure of myself, ready to make my case.

Then I hesitate outside the kitchen door. As of this very moment, there's still a chance I might see Viviana Vega four days from now. After that, who knows? I'm not so sure I want to find out, but I take a breath and step inside anyway.

"You're up early," Mami says, half inside the refrigerator.

"Couldn't sleep."

She closes the door and turns to me. "Something the matter? You're not coming down with anything, are you?"

She steps forward and reaches out to press her hand to my forehead.

I duck away and sit down at the table. "*Mami*. No. I don't have a fever. I'm *fine*. It's just..."

Looking worried, she sets her coffee cup down and sits next to me. "What is it?"

I groan. What else can it be? "It's the concert. What about the concert?"

Mami sighs, but I can't tell what it means.

"Well? Are you going to let me go? Amanda gets to go. Her sister is going to be there. She'll be right outside the *whole* time." Suddenly, an even better argument occurs to me. "Julia is going, too. You *know* Julia's parents. They wouldn't let her go if it wasn't safe. . . . And I could borrow Papi's cell phone to check in."

Mami taps the edge of a spoon against her coffee cup. "Your papi and I have been talking about it."

"And?" I interrupt.

She raises an eyebrow. "And it's a very difficult decision, Estefania. He wants to talk to you about it himself. This afternoon."

I start to protest.

"This afternoon," Mami says firmly. "Now, go get dressed."



It's impossible to concentrate at school, where I spend all day trying to guess what my parents have decided. All morning, I'm feeling positive, convinced that if they weren't going to let me go, Mami would have just told me instead of drawing it out like this. But by the afternoon, I'm remembering how long it took just to persuade them to let me walk to the gas station after school. Asking to go to a concert is asking for a whole lot more, I think. And I decide it's a lost cause.

Only art class takes my mind off the concert. As we walk into Mr. Salazar's studio, we hang our backpacks on the row of hooks, same as we always do. But when we start picking smocks out of the bin near Mr. Salazar's desk, he stops us.

"No need for smocks, class. Our lesson today is going to be a little bit different. Please grab a seat and listen up."

Arthur and I choose stools next to each other. "Wonder what's going on," he whispers.

Once we've all settled, Mr. Salazar steps to the center of the room and asks Arthur, who is sitting nearest the supply closet, to open it up. I hadn't noticed before, but now I see right away that everything is running low. We're down to not much more than a stack of construction paper, a few jugs of tempera, and a dozen boxes of pastels—most of them missing colors.

"Not too many acrylics left," Amanda says to herself. It's true. There are only a handful of tubes, squeezed almost dry.

"Not too much of anything left," Mr. Salazar agrees. "And that's what I want to talk to you about."

It's a good thing that the supply closet is looking so empty, he assures us. It means we've been creating. Unfortunately, as we can see, there is very little left to work with and no money to buy more.

"I've been trying to figure out a solution for weeks," he admits. "Finally, I thought, You know, your students are intelligent people. Why not ask them for ideas?"

None of us says anything. Was he really asking for our help?

"Not all at once," Mr. Salazar jokes. Then he says he's sorry if he shocked us. "I thought that you were all mature enough to talk about this sort of thing—and I still do. I know that, together, we'll come up with a plan. So let's brainstorm: What do you think? What are we going to do to get enough art supplies to see us through this year and next?"

Maddie speaks up first. Twirling her hair around her finger, she says, "Maybe we can ask the art store to give us some stuff?"

Mr. Salazar nods. "The store made a large donation at the beginning of the year—that's where your new charcoal pencils came from. But, yes, Maddie, that's a good thought. We can ask whether they can help us out with some more supplies." He writes ASK FOR DONATIONS on the whiteboard. "What else?"

Christopher suggests we ask our parents for money.

"That's certainly an option. All of you have very generous parents," Mr. Salazar says. "But I was hoping you all could really take *ownership* of the problem."

Amanda raises her hand. When her soccer team needed to raise money to travel to an out-of-town tournament, she explains, they sold candy bars door-to-door.

I remember that. Mami and Papi bought a whole box that we ended up giving out for Halloween.

Mr. Salazar adds SELL CANDY to the whiteboard. "Any more?"

Amanda nudges Arthur. He thinks for a second, then remembers that when his church choir needed to buy new robes, they wrote letters to shops and restaurants asking for contributions.

"Good," Mr. Salazar says, scribbling WRITE LETTERS on the board.

Jake suggests a car wash. That's how his swim club raised enough to pay for repairs at their pool.

I think about how hard Mami and Papi and I worked to buy Tía Perla. The saving, the extra jobs, my piggy bank. I'm not sure how any of that would help our art class, though. Maybe if we all brought in our spare change...

But before I can say anything, Julia jumps off her stool, looking like whatever she has to say is about to bubble over like a shaken-up bottle of soda. "Okay. Guys. Those ideas? They're great and everything, but I've got it. I know what we should do."

She pauses, eyes sparkling as they flit from face to face. When she's sure she has everyone's attention, she bursts, "A dance! In the gym! We can charge admission."

The art studio begins to whirl.

"We can sell cupcakes!"

"We can make decorations!"

Even Arthur is out of his chair. "I'll do a playlist."

I have to admit, it's a pretty good idea. "I can draw some posters," I offer.

Mr. Salazar holds up his arms to quiet us down. "This wasn't quite what I had in mind."

We groan, and he holds his arms up again. "Hold on, hold on. Let me finish. It wasn't what *I* had in mind. But it's *your* class, your art supplies. I'll have to get approval

from the principal, but it sure sounds like we have a winning idea.”

Mr. Salazar dismisses us, promising to have an answer from the principal by the time we meet again next week. “You better be prepared if she says yes,” he warns. “You’re in for a lot of work.”

chapter

13

Outside in the parking lot, Tía Perla is missing again. That's two days in a row. Not to jinx anything, but this feels like a good sign.

When I get to the gas station, Papi is helping someone at the window, so I let myself into the cab to drop off my backpack. There, on the middle of the bench seat, is a small package wrapped in the comics section of the newspaper. Taped to the top is a tag with my name printed across it in block letters. Curious, I peel away the paper and find a cell phone. I turn it over, part of me thinking it might be a toy. But no. It's real. I can't believe it. I had wanted one for my last birthday but didn't think it was even worth asking.

It's not as nice as Julia's. But still, it's a phone. It seems to be mine, and it's not even my birthday. What could have prompted a gift like this? I'm trying to make sense of it when I remember that Julia's parents gave her a phone for safety reasons—so she can check in with them when she gets to school and when she makes it back home. My heart starts thudding. Is that why Mami and Papi got me a phone? So I can check in with them? From the concert?

I leap from the cab, run around to the back of the truck, pull open the kitchen door, and throw my arms around Papi's waist as he's sprinkling cheese on an order of tacos.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," I squeal as he hands the dish through the window to the customer below. "I can't believe this is actually happening!"

Papi thanks the customer, with an apologetic smile, then turns around to face me.

"M'ija, I'm so glad you're happy," he says, grinning.

"Happy? This is the best day *ever*. I have to tell Amanda. And don't worry. Everything's going to be fine. You can trust me."

Papi's smile droops at the corners. "Trust you?"

"Amanda's sister will take us straight to the arena, and she'll pick us up right after. You'll hardly even notice I'm gone. And, of course, I'll have the phone! I'll check in! As many times as you want!" I scream. "I can't wait until Saturday!"

"Wait, m'ija, wait," Papi starts, but I'm too excited to listen.

"I wish I could tell Amanda right this second. Wait! I have a phone! I can!"

Papi puts his hands on my shoulders. "M'ija, please. Stop."

Oh no. My stomach goes hollow.

"It's like your mami said the other night." He's almost whispering. "We think you're just too young for this. Maybe in a few years...but, for now, we wanted you to have something special. This phone is a privilege. You've earned it. You have to keep it turned off during the school day, of course. And we don't want you calling your friends late at night, but we trust you. Plus, this way, if there was ever an emergency—"

I had stopped listening, but that catches my attention. "It's not even for *me*! It's for *you*! So you can keep *hovering*!" My heart is still racing, but now its *thump, thump, thump* is low and furious.

My eyes sting. I push past Papi, jump down from the truck, and take off, dropping the cell phone on the pavement. Papi yells, "Estefania! Stef! Wait!" But I don't stop. After a few moments, I hear him start the engine to follow me.

It doesn't take him long to catch up. But when I hear Tía Perla's horn, I don't stop. I don't even turn around. I keep walking, Tía Perla crawling along behind me, until I realize with irritation that I can't make it all the way home from here. I have nowhere to go. I'm stuck with Tía Perla. I stop and slump down on the curb. There's no way I can get back in that truck, not yet.

Papi opens his door. He'll come sit down; his voice will be gentle; he'll try to make me feel better. Or maybe he'll tell me this has gone on long enough and drag me back into the truck.

He does neither. Instead, he walks around to the kitchen. I hear him opening doors and pulling drawers. Then there's a minute or two of quiet before he gets back in the cab and just sits there. I guess it's up to me to end the standoff. I swipe my hand across my teary face, get up, and open the door without a word and without looking at Papi. On my seat is a skinny, foil packet. I know without opening it what I'll find: a tortilla rolled up with butter inside. Just looking at it makes me want to cry again, so I shove it aside and slam the door shut.



The next time Amanda asks me about the concert, I just shake my head, and she understands. "You don't even want my mom to try calling them?" she asks.

"It won't help."

Arthur gives me a poster that had been stapled inside one of his magazines. It's a blown-up picture of Viviana Vega performing at a concert, hundreds of arms reaching for her as she strides across the stage.

That's the last time either of them brings up Viviana Vega for the rest of the week.

chapter

14

On Saturday, the day of the concert, I hear Mami and Papi in the kitchen, getting ready for the farmers' market. I don't get up to join them. I don't plan to leave the house. I might not even leave the bedroom. Still, I'm a little surprised when neither of them comes to wake me and Papi drives off on his own.

It's after ten o'clock when I finally get out of bed. I stretch and yawn and bury my bare toes in the shaggy brown carpet. I reach for the glass of water on my dresser and notice the cell phone sitting on top of it. I haven't seen it since that afternoon at the gas station and figured it was lost or broken or both. Papi must have snuck it inside my room overnight. For a

second, I'm embarrassed about my taco truck tantrum. Then I look up at Arthur's Viviana Vega poster taped to my wall and realize this is as close as I'm ever going to get to her.

My eyes start to water all over again. I take down the poster, open up my desk, and pull out a sheet of drawing paper and a box of colored pencils.

I do what I always do when I feel like drawing but don't know where to start: Spill the colored pencils over my desk-top, close my eyes, and pick a color without looking.

Orange.

Orange like a carrot? Meh.

Orange like . . . the sun? Maybe.

Orange like a blaze of angry flames? That's it. I start drawing.

Orange flames . . . shooting out from a rocket? No. Not a rocket, but a flying . . . taco truck. I roll my eyes. Not even in my imagination can I ditch old Tía Perla. But maybe, at least in my drawing, she'll fly out of my life for good.

Soon, cottony blue clouds swirl above Tía Perla on the page. And beneath her, bright green vines with curlicue tendrils stretch to catch hold of her tires but don't quite reach. Here and there, yellow birds and purple butterflies dart over and under the flaming truck.

After what seems like only a few minutes, I hear a cautious knock on my bedroom door. I look over at the clock. More than an hour has passed since I started drawing, and by now, my page is nearly filled and screaming bright.

"Yes?" I answer. Mami comes in and stands over my shoulder.

"M'ija, it's beautiful," she says. "It's Tía Perla, no?"

"I guess." If she's trying to make me feel better, it's going to take a lot more than that.

She sits on my bed and smooths the quilt with her palms. "Stef, I know you're angry."

"Whatever." I'm not going to make this easy for her.

"And what I'm about to say is going to make you even angrier."

What? Not possible. I spin around in my chair to look her in the eye.

"The assistant manager just called in sick, and they've asked me to fill in at the store. It's a good opportunity, Stef, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to drop you off with Papi and Tía Perla so I can go to work. You still have a few hours before we need to leave."

She has to be kidding. There's no way that, on top of missing the Viviana Vega concert, I'm going to spend my Saturday with Tía Perla. "Why can't I just stay here? I'm sick of you treating me like a baby, and I'm really sick of that stupid taco truck."

Mami raises an eyebrow but not her voice. She takes one of my pillows and hugs it in her lap. "I know you think we're overprotective, but can you imagine what it was like for us, for Papi and me, when we first got here? We were older than you,

but not by much. We didn't speak the language. We knew almost no one. We had almost nothing. Can you imagine what it's like to settle down in a place where you feel so... lost? To send a child into a world that still seems so far from home?"

"But..." I start to interrupt her. The world might be a big and scary place to them, with their just-good-enough English. But that's not me.

Mami shushes me with a pat on the hand. She stands up, then finds my hairbrush on the dresser and holds it out to me. "As for that taco truck, she helps pay for those pencils in your desk, those books in your backpack, that uniform in your closet, that paint in your art box. Have some respect for poor Tía Perla, Estefania. She's an important part of this family, and she will be for a long time if we're lucky."

Lucky? Not the word I would use. But it's no use arguing. I get dressed and pull my hair into a ponytail.

chapter

15

We catch up with Tía Perla at the flea market. She looks the same as ever, of course, but something about her seems different and a little unfamiliar. Her open canopy had always seemed to say, “Welcome!” Now it doesn’t say anything. Mami leans over to kiss my forehead, then waves good-bye to Papi before she drives away. Here we go again, I guess. I climb inside the truck to start taking orders.

When the flea market winds down and the line outside Tía Perla finally dwindles, Papi packs up the folding chairs while I wipe down the countertops. “Where to next?” he asks. It doesn’t seem possible, but they’re the first words he’s said to me all afternoon.

“The park?” I suggest.

But the fields are mostly empty when we get there. We watch the first few innings of a softball game, but when no one comes to place an order, we decide to move on. It’s the same at the convenience store and even at the gas station.

“Now what?” I ask.

Papi frowns. He taps his fingertips against the steering wheel and turns right at the next signal. The commissary, I think. At least we’ll be home early and I can get back to my drawing.

But then he makes another turn and we’re heading downtown again. What can he be thinking? We already tried the convenience store—all those downtown offices are closed for the weekend. We would have been lucky to get even a few customers this afternoon. Now that it’s early evening, there’s no chance at all.

It takes me a few more blocks to realize where we’re going, and I don’t believe it. A boulder lands in my stomach as Papi parks Tía Perla on the narrow street between a four-story parking garage and the arena where, in just a few hours, Viviana Vega will sing for everyone but me.

“No, no, no, no, *no*.”

“Estefania, I’m sorry, but we really need the business. Who knows what’s going to happen with these new regulations? We have to sell as many tacos as we can for as long as we can. We’re lucky we got here before anyone else did.”

I’m beginning to think my parents and I must have

completely different definitions of “lucky.” This isn’t lucky. This? This is a total nightmare. I can only hope that no one going to the concert notices me, the Taco Queen, stuck with Tía Perla. But, really, how can you miss us?

We serve a steady dribble of customers as the sun slowly sinks—early birds hoping for a glimpse of Viviana Vega and maybe even an autograph, desperate fans on a quest for last-minute tickets, even if it means paying a fortune. A little after five o’clock, Papi says he’s going to cook the two of us an early dinner so we won’t need a break when the real crowd shows up a little later. I want to tell him I’m not hungry, but the truth is, I’m starving. Just thinking about one of Papi’s super burritos makes my stomach growl.

I stay at my post in the window while Papi cooks. Looking out toward the arena, I can just make out what I imagine is Viviana Vega’s tour bus. I wonder what she’s doing this very second. Warming up for her show? Posing for pictures with Julia Sandoval and anyone else who’s *actually* lucky enough to have parents who don’t worry so much?

Just then, a customer clears her throat outside the order window. “Hello?”

It startles me.

“I’m sorry. I guess I was kind of out of it. Can I help you?”

“This is probably going to sound crazy,” she says. “But is there any chance you have anything on the menu that’s wheat-free, dairy-free, egg-free, nut-free, and meat-free?”

Behind me, Papi laughs. "Órale," he says. "Specialty of the house."

I squint through the order window, half expecting to see Arthur. But it's just some lady with the hood of her sweatshirt pulled low over her forehead. "Sure. We can do that," I tell her.

Papi drops handfuls of tomato, onion, and bell pepper onto the grill, then squeezes half a lemon over them, conjuring a little cloud of steam. While the veggies sizzle, he unfolds a giant lettuce leaf, bigger than my hand, on the countertop. He spreads layers of guacamole, then rice, then beans over it, and heaps the vegetables on top. After adding a drizzle of salsa, he rolls it up like a burrito and wraps it in crinkly yellow paper.

I drop it into a bag along with a napkin.

"Four dollars, please," I say.

The lady pulls a bill from her wallet and hands it to me. "Thanks a ton. Keep the change, okay?" She's gone before I can ask if she wants a lime wedge.

I open my palm expecting to see a five-dollar bill. It's a fifty. This has to be a mistake. I open up the window as wide as I can and lean out. "Wait!" I shout. "You left too much!"

But the woman just waves over her shoulder as she jogs back toward the arena. "Wow, she must have really needed a burrito," I mutter. I show the bill to Papi.

His forehead wrinkles until, finally, he gives up trying to figure it out. "Well, you heard what she said, m'ija. Keep the change. You've earned it."

He must be feeling really bad about dragging me out here. It's a lot of money, and I'm not sure what I'll do with it. Maybe a few more posters for my bedroom? I might as well start decorating, since I'm never going to get to leave, I think resentfully. Or maybe I'll give it to Mr. Salazar. I wonder how many tubes of paint you can buy with forty-six dollars. Not enough for a whole class, I guess. But some anyway.

Then I remember what Papi said about business and needing to sell as many tacos as we can. I know I complain about Tía Perla. A lot. But I guess I've never really thought about what we would do without her. I punch the cash button on the register, and when the drawer slides open, I leave the fifty-dollar bill inside. "You might as well take this, too," I whisper to her.

chapter

16

Eventually, the streetlights blink on, and a line begins to snake around the arena.

The line around Tía Perla is almost as long. There's no way Papi could have managed it without me.

"Four chicken tacos!"

"Two quesadillas!"

"One steak burrito, hold the beans!"

I'm calling back orders and counting out change with hardly a break between customers. The dinner rush is such a whirl that I almost miss Amanda and Arthur jumping up and down, waving their arms from the middle of the line. I'm

surprised at how glad I am to see them—and surprised to see Arthur at all.

I poke my head out the window and mouth, *Come over!* We talk between orders.

“I thought you couldn’t stand Viviana Vega,” I tease Arthur. “‘Pop trash,’ wasn’t it?”

He sinks his hands in his pockets and looks away. “Well, Ms. Barlow said if I wrote a music review for extra credit she wouldn’t give me a detention for wearing my headphones in class again. Plus, free ticket.”

Amanda pokes him in the shoulder. “Whatever. We all know you’re Viviana’s biggest fan.”

“And you’re on a first-name basis?” Arthur pokes back.

Just then, a black limousine pulls up in front of the arena. Amanda points. “Think it’s her?” she asks breathlessly.

“No way,” I answer. “She wouldn’t just walk in through the front door.” Would she?

We watch as the driver gets out, walks around to the back of the limo, and opens the passenger door. Out steps Julia Sandoval, wearing a shimmering gold tank top and enormous sunglasses perched on her head.

“In case she has to hide from the paparazzi?” Amanda jokes.

“Obviously.”

We watch to see whom she’s with—which lucky seventh grader gets to spend the evening with Julia Sandoval and her

backstage passes? I'm guessing Maddie, but the next person out of the limo is Julia's little brother. And then her mom.

Julia looks in Tía Perla's direction, but I can't tell if she sees us. She pulls her sunglasses over her eyes and walks toward the entrance with her family.

Papi comes over to the window with dinner bags for Amanda and Arthur. "You two be careful in there," he tells them. "Call us if you need anything. Estefania, you make sure they have your phone number."

"*Papi*," I whine.

"Oh, it's fine," Amanda says. "My sister's gonna wait for us, and Arthur has his mom's cell phone in case we need it."

See? I want to say. Instead, I bite my tongue and wave good-bye to my friends. Amanda promises to buy me a program, and they hurry off to join the line. I turn around again and notice that Papi has been watching me. He looks like he has something to say, but before he does, a face pops into the window.

"How fast can you get me a couple of tacos? I don't want to be late for the show."

Papi wipes his hands on the apron tied around his waist and heads back to the grill. "Two tacos," I say. "Coming right up."

chapter

17

I open my eyes the next morning, still so tired you would have thought I had actually gone to the concert. Sunlight pours through the gaps in my mini-blinds, casting shadow stripes on my quilt. It's late, I can tell. Stretching under the covers, I'm surprised my parents haven't shaken me out of bed for Sunday breakfast at Suzy's. Finally, I yawn, twist my hair into a knot, and stumble into the kitchen, where I expect to find Mami and Papi drinking their coffee.

Instead, the kitchen is bright and empty. Two coffee mugs are drying on a dish towel beside the sink, and the only sounds I hear are the ticking of the clock and the hum of our neighbor's lawn mower. Weird. Maybe Mami and Papi are already

working in the garden? Then I spot a note taped to the refrigerator door: DIDN'T WANT TO WAKE YOU, it says in Mami's neat cursive. GONE TO SUZY'S. CALL IF YOU NEED ANYTHING. I can't believe it and even peek through the blinds to see if my parents are actually hiding in the backyard or something. But it's true. I'm home alone.

No way.

Then again, considering that Suzy's is just down the block, they might as well be in the backyard. And it's only breakfast, after all. They won't be gone for more than an hour or so. But still, my parents have really left me home alone. I feel like I can do anything. And then I can't think of anything to do.

I warm a mug of hot chocolate in the microwave and take it to the living room with the newspaper. My parents have locked the doors and even closed all the curtains. It's dark and quiet, and really kind of strange without them. After skimming through the comics and gulping down my hot chocolate, I reach for the cordless phone, resting on the coffee table, and pull it from its cradle. Mami left a note there, too: IN CASE ANYONE CALLS, DO NOT TELL THEM YOU'RE HOME ALONE.

"I *know*, Mami," I say to no one but the ticking clock. Rolling my eyes, I dial Amanda's house. Now that it's finally over, I really want to hear about the concert.

Amanda's mom answers.

"Oh, hi, sweetheart," she says. "Amanda told me she saw you last night. I was so sorry you two couldn't go together.

But she and Arthur had a good time. They got home pretty late, though, and she's still in bed. Is it urgent, or can I have her call you later?"

I tell Mrs. Garcia that it's not urgent—I'll just see Amanda at school tomorrow. She hangs up, and I wonder what to do next. It's no use calling Arthur—he has Korean school every Sunday after church and won't be home for hours.

I rinse out my mug and go back to my room, guessing I'll just take a shower and then get a head start on my reading for the week. The front door opens as I'm brushing my teeth.

"Estefania?" Mami calls before the door has even closed behind her and Papi.

"In the bathroom!" I shout back, my mouth full of minty foam. "Just a sec!"

I find them waiting for me in the kitchen.

"Everything okay?" Mami asks.

"Of course," I answer breezily, like it's no big deal that they left me home alone for the first time in my entire life. "What could go wrong?"

Papi and Mami look at each other. This time, both of them roll their eyes at *me*. Then Papi holds up a take-out box from Suzy's. "We missed you at breakfast. You haven't eaten, have you?"

I haven't. And to tell the truth, I was starting to regret missing out on Suzy's amazing chorizo and eggs.

"Your favorite," Papi says, setting the box on the kitchen

table. Mami brings me a plate and a napkin while Papi goes to their bedroom to work on shopping lists for the week ahead. Mami sits down next to me as I shovel chorizo into my mouth.

“How did you get him to agree to that?”

“Agree?” Mami answers. “It was his idea. I was worried sick. I wanted to call you from the restaurant.”

“Maaaaami, *seriously*,” I whine. “You were, like, a block away. I was *fine*.”

“I know.” She sighs, squeezing my shoulders. “Now finish your breakfast, and then how about you press your school blouses like you did last week? And Papi’s pantalones, too, now that we know you can use an iron.”

If it means my parents are going to start treating me like a thirteen-year-old, I’ll iron every shirt in the house, not to mention the pants. Socks and underwear, too.

chapter

18

Mami is called in to cover another assistant manager shift on Monday morning, so Papi offers to drop me off at school. Since it's not our usual routine, and because we have to pick up Tía Perla on the way, I barely make it to school on time. Even though it's late, I had hoped to find Amanda and Arthur outside class, ready to spill all the concert details. But when I get to the door, I hear their voices already inside. I guess they couldn't wait to tell everyone else about Viviana Vega. I'm a little jealous I didn't get to hear first, but I guess I understand.

Stepping into the classroom, I see a swarm around Arthur's desk. Right next to him at the center of it is Amanda,

her hands fluttering in front of her face. I try to piece together what she's saying and what she's so excited about.

"...I mean, we were there *right* after. We must have just missed her. I'm *so* mad."

Arthur sees me. "There she is!" Everyone turns around and stares. Everyone but Julia, whose eyes are fixed on the cell phone in her lap.

"What?" I look down at my shirt to see if maybe I spilled something in the rush out the door this morning. Looks clean. I pat the top of my head. Nothing sticking up. "Seriously. What?" I look to Arthur and then Amanda.

"What was it like?" Maddie demands all of a sudden. "Did you touch her?"

"Touch who?"

"Was she nice? Did you get an autograph?" Matthew asks. "Please tell me you got an autograph."

I look from face to eager face and can't figure out what any of them are talking about. Are they teasing me? Because my parents didn't let me go to the concert? But that can't be it. Arthur and Amanda are my friends.

I turn to Amanda again, my eyes begging her for a clue.

She stares back at me and blinks slowly. "You seriously don't know? Arthur, show her."

Arthur snatches a piece of newspaper from Maya, then holds it up for me to see. There, in black ink, is a picture of a taco truck that looks suspiciously like Tía Perla.

What now? I take the newspaper from Arthur, and everyone watches me read.

It *is* Tía Perla—and someone's outstretched arm passing a bag to a customer whose face you can barely make out under a dark hooded sweatshirt.

"I don't get it—wait."

I take a closer look at the picture and finally notice *my* outstretched arm. I remember the customer: wheat-free, dairy-free, egg-free, nut-free, and meat-free. I served her the night of the concert. It still doesn't make sense, though. Who would have taken this picture? *Why* would anyone have taken this picture? And how would it have ended up in the newspaper?

"But what . . . even . . . is this?"

Amanda, impatient now, takes my wrist and shakes it. "Come *on*, Stef. Look! Read!"

Okay, okay.

I look at the caption: POP STAR VIVIANA VEGA TAKES A BREAK FROM REHEARSALS TO SAMPLE THE LOCAL FARE BEFORE HER SOLD-OUT ARENA CONCERT SATURDAY NIGHT.

No. Way. I turn the newspaper clipping over, suddenly suspicious. "Is this even real?" Mami and I read the paper every day. We wouldn't have missed this. And then I remember, we didn't have time to look at the newspaper this morning.

Amanda starts laughing. "You didn't get to go to the concert, but you were the only one who got your picture taken with her. Crazy, right?"

Julia finally looks up from her phone. "It's a miracle she didn't have to cancel the concert because of food poisoning." But I don't even care. I can't take my eyes off that picture.

"So did you get her autograph, or what?"

"Did she say anything?"

"What did she eat?"

"Is she as tall as she looks?"

"Was anybody with her?"

I can't keep up. "No, I... I just, I didn't..."

"Oh my god." Julia smirks, her eyes flashing as she suddenly realizes something. "You didn't even know it was her. Viviana Vega came to eat at your crazy old taco truck, and you didn't even know it was her."

"Whatever. Of course I knew," I lie lamely. "I'm just, you know, surprised someone took a picture. Viviana wanted it to be a private dinner." Did I really just say that?

Finally, the bell rings, and Ms. Barlow gets up from her desk. "All right, that's enough. Everyone settle down and take your seats. If we have any extra time at the end of the period, Stef can tell us *all* about her celebrity sighting. For now, please open your textbooks to page one hundred fifty-nine."

As I pull my language-arts book out of my backpack, I turn around and whisper to Arthur, "Can I keep the newspaper to show my dad?" He nods yes.



By lunchtime, I'm not the girl whose dad drives a taco truck. I'm the girl who has met Viviana Vega. If you believe all the rumors, I'm the girl who has eaten dinner with Viviana Vega, who is practically best friends with her. It feels a little weird at first, but I get used to it. Quickly.

Our table is so crowded I have barely enough elbow room to open my milk carton.

"I mean, she's really down-to-earth for being such a major celebrity." (After all, she *did* eat off a taco truck, right?) "Viviana is just, you know, pretty normal."

I look across the table at Amanda and Arthur, double-checking that they're not about to gag. They still seem excited for me. Then for the first time all day, I notice the Viviana Vega button pinned to Arthur's polo shirt.

"I thought you couldn't stand her."

"Never underestimate the power of live music."

"Anyway," I say, looking around the table and nodding at Arthur. "He actually introduced us."

Arthur looks confused. I remind him of Papi's Official Arthur Choi Menu. "Specialty of the house?"

"Oh, yeah." He grins.

"If it wasn't for you, we might not have had anything to feed her."

Arthur straightens up on the lunch bench. "That's right," he says. "Viviana Vega's favorite dish is the Arthur Choi special."

chapter

19

After school, I find Tía Perla at the far end of the parking lot, her front end peeking shyly out from under the shadow of a big ash tree. But since I'm still feeling so full of bubbles and butterflies to have (sort of) met Viviana Vega, it doesn't even bother me to see her there. When Papi honks the horn and waves, I wave right back, holding up the newspaper clipping.

"You have to see this!" I say, climbing into the truck. Papi takes the paper and studies the picture. Surprise crosses his face, and then confusion, as he recognizes Tía Perla but can't quite figure out why he's seeing her in the newspaper. I know the feeling and help him out.

"It was her!" I say, nearly jumping out of my seat belt. "Viviana Vega. At *our* truck! Crazy, right?"

"Ah, sí." Papi smiles. "Specialty of the house." He hands the paper back to me and starts the engine. "So you got to see her after all."

I shoot him a look that says *too soon*, but it dissolves quickly back into a smile. I tell him we should make a poster-size copy of the article and hang it up near the menu. This *has* to be good for business. Papi nods and says, "Mmm," but I can tell he isn't really paying attention. I'm a little frustrated that he doesn't seem to understand what a big deal this is when I realize we aren't heading for any of our usual dinner-time stops. I'd been talking so much and so fast I hadn't noticed.

"Wait, where are we going?" I ask. "Did you forget something at the commissary?"

"We're not taking Tía Perla out tonight," Papi tells me. "There's more important work to do."

If we're giving up a whole night's business, I think, this must be pretty important.

A few minutes later, we pull into the commissary and the lot is fuller than I have ever seen it. There are more kinds of food trucks than I could have ever imagined seeing in one place: Wok 'n' Roll, Lotsa Pasta, Dim Sum and Then Some, Heart and Soul Food. But mostly there are taco trucks, many

of them with vivid murals on their sides that make Tía Perla look even older and plainer than usual.

El Toro is a bright red truck with a giant black bull painted right in the middle, its head raised nobly as it gazes off into the distance.

A garland of red, orange, and pink hibiscus flowers creeps all the way around Burritos La Jamaica.

On the back of Mariscos el Nayarit is a swordfish leaping out of turquoise water, its knife-edged tusk pointing at a glowing sun.

The trucks are just like canvases, I realize, suddenly seeing them in a new way.

As Papi eases Tía Perla into a parking space, I unzip my backpack and start pulling out my math book, figuring I'll start my homework while he takes care of whatever important business he has inside. Instead, he tells me I better come along. He's not sure how long this will take.

I follow Papi to the warehouse where we store dry goods like beans and flour, and supplies like forks and napkins. Dozens of drivers are in there already, only none seem to be doing any work. They're sitting on upturned buckets and standing in groups of three or four. All of them look very serious, with hands shoved into pockets or balled into fists.

Papi stands near the back, folds his arms against his chest, and leans on a shelf. I find a bucket and drag it over to sit down

next to him. Finally, Vera, from Burritos Paradiso, walks to the front of the room.

“Can everyone hear me?” she asks. I can tell she’s nearly shouting, but from back here, her voice sounds small and flimsy. Someone calls out, “Louder!”

“I’ll try to speak up.” She nods. “Can you hear me? Can we come to order?”

Someone clangs a spoon against a big glass jar of pickles. *Ping, ping, ping.* The low rumble of voices peters out. “Thank you,” Vera tells the man with the spoon. Then she turns again to face the group. “As you know, we’re gathered here tonight to come up with a plan to fight these new regulations. I admit, Myrna and I didn’t believe anything would ever come of it, but here we are. We have to take a stand.”

There are murmurs of agreement, and the rumble threatens to build into a roar again. Vera holds up an arm like she’s directing traffic. The rumble dies down, but my ears perk up. Regulations? Again? Papi had told the drivers everything would be all right. I believed him, and I haven’t really worried much about it until now. I look up at Papi as he listens. He hardly blinks.

I pull on his sleeve. “You want me to translate?” I whisper. He shakes his head and pats mine. “No, m’ija.”

The city council, Vera explains, has scheduled a public hearing to discuss rules that will govern all mobile food

vendors. “That’s us,” she says. “We need to come prepared to make a strong case for ourselves.”

She reads the list of proposals I remember from Papi’s letter. One by one, the drivers discuss them, deciding whether it’s a rule they can live with or one they should protest. They trade arguments. They share stories. They decide they’ll go to the hearing as a group. They’ll bring their families and friends. They’ll make an impression.

“Now, I know a lot of you are shy—you think your English isn’t good enough,” Vera says as the meeting wraps up. “But remember, if you want to be heard, you have to speak up.”

We leave the warehouse, double-check that Tía Perla is locked up for the night, and walk back to our pickup. I wonder if Papi is going to speak at the big meeting—I can’t really imagine it. I want to ask him if he thinks we really might go out of business. But he’s gnawing on his fingernails, which gives me an even worse pins-and-needles feeling than when he asks me to translate. So I don’t say anything.

When we get home, Papi asks what I’d like for dinner, but I tell him I’m too tired to eat and say good night. I kick off my shoes, flop on my bed, and stare at the ceiling, thinking a little about the meeting at the commissary. The situation seems much more serious than it did at first, and Papi’s stiff arms, tight lips, and ragged fingernails aren’t doing anything to convince me that everything’s all right.

Then again, it's hard to worry too much about food trucks when I remember the newspaper clipping in my backpack. I get up to tape it to the wall, and for just a second, I let myself wonder whether it would be so bad to lose Tía Perla. Mami still has a good job, and maybe a promotion coming. Plus, Papi has switched careers before, hasn't he?

chapter

20

In the art studio the next afternoon, Mr. Salazar doesn't leave us in suspense for long.

"I spoke to the principal about your fund-raising dance," he begins. We're perched at the edges of our stools. "*And...* she says it's all right."

"*Yes!*" Jake slaps his hands against the art table, then winces. "Ow." Amanda is sitting between Arthur and me and happily socks us both in the shoulders. Julia and Maddie had been squeezing each other's hands, waiting for Mr. Salazar's verdict. Now they are off their stools, still holding hands and hopping on the linoleum. "*Eeeeeee!*"

"*If,*" Mr. Salazar continues, raising his voice over ours. "If

you're really ready to take this on. Organizing a dance is a lot of work. And raising money on top of that? It's a tall order, is all I'm saying."

He suggests we elect a planning committee to help make sure we have all the little details covered. "Since this was Miss Sandoval's idea, she can be captain. Do we have a cocaptain?"

Mr. Salazar looks around as arms pop up around the room. "You're all leaders. But remember, this should be someone who has some spare time." Amanda puts her arm down. "Someone with creative ideas. Someone who knows how to throw a good party." Julia smiles at Maddie. "But, more important, someone who knows how to tell people why they should care."

Christopher shoots his hand up, but before Mr. Salazar even gets to him, he calls out, "Stef. Pick Stef Soto. Maybe she can get Viviana Vega to come."

"Yeah, right," Amanda, Arthur, and I say in unison. But voice after voice agrees with Christopher. "Yeah, pick Stef."

"What?" I ask, baffled and slightly terrified.

"*What?*" Julia sneers.

I can't believe it. And judging by the look on her face, neither can Julia.

Mr. Salazar hooks his thumbs in his belt loops and seems to think about this. "Well, Estefania? What do you say?"

I don't know. Working with Julia? Being in charge? And

what if Mami and Papi won't let me go to the dance? How would I explain *that*?

Then again, art *is* my favorite class. And this is a really great chance to be known for something besides Tía Perla. I look at Arthur and Amanda, who are both nodding enthusiastically. Amanda elbows me in the ribs. "Ow!"

"Okay," I tell Amanda, rubbing my side. I look back at Mr. Salazar. "Okay," I say. "I'll do it."

"Fine." Julia huffs. "You can be my vice captain."

"Cocaptain," I correct her.

Before Mr. Salazar dismisses us, he passes out permission slips, asking our parents to let us stay an hour after school twice a week to plan the dance. I fold mine in half and tuck it into my backpack. Before I show it to my parents, I better figure out how I'm going to persuade them to sign.

I grit my teeth all the way to the gas station and present the permission slip to Papi as soon as I get there. His lips move softly as he reads the letter, and I start to panic. They can't say no again. Before he can say *anything*, I start explaining about the empty art closet and how much I love art. I tell him that Mr. Salazar is counting on us—counting on me—to plan the dance and make it a success.

Papi puts a hand on my shoulder. "M'ija, calma." He chuckles. "Of course Señor Salazar is counting on you. I don't know if I like the idea of you going to a dance..."

I feel my cheeks flush. But Papi checks himself and pulls

a pen from his front pocket. "You'll be at the school?" he confirms.

"In the studio for planning meetings. The dance will be in the gym."

"And there will be chaperones?"

"Some of the teachers." We're supposed to recruit parent volunteers, too, but I don't mention it.

Papi finally signs. I take the permission slip back from him and zip it up in my backpack before he can change his mind.

chapter

21

Two days later, we herd into the art studio after school for our first dance-planning session. Amanda can't miss soccer practice, but she sends me to the meeting with a brown paper grocery bag filled with some of her mom's old craft magazines. "There are some really good ideas for decorations in there," she tells me, promising to work on streamers and garlands at home. "We can make them ourselves. I put sticky notes on the pages."

Once we're settled in the studio, Mr. Salazar reminds us that to raise the money we need, we're going to have to plan carefully and work quickly. He puts Julia, as captain of the

committee, in charge of dividing the rest of us into teams, each responsible for some part of the preparations. It turns out to be the perfect job for her. Her first assignment is for me, her cocaptain, and it sounds like I'm in charge of taking notes and basically following her orders. She ignores me when I start to complain.

"Next, someone needs to be in charge of decorations," she continues.

I plop Amanda's bag of magazines down on the table. "Amanda's in charge of decorations," I say. "She already has some ideas."

Julia challenges me. "Amanda's not even here."

"She can work from home," I insist.

Julia tosses her hair impatiently. "Fine. Whatever. Amanda is in charge of decorations. Write that down."

We bicker our way down a long list of jobs until every post is filled but one.

"Publicity. The most important," Julia says, chin raised. "Obviously, if no one shows up, it doesn't matter how good the refreshments are, or what the decorations look like."

"And if no one shows up, we don't raise any money for art supplies," I add.

"I *know*. I was just about to say that." She pauses, waiting for everyone's attention. "That's why I'm in charge of publicity." She turns to me and smiles, sparkling-sweet. "You can

still make some posters if you want.” Then she murmurs, too quietly for Mr. Salazar to hear, “Just don’t spill any taco sauce on them.”

Maddie puts her hand over her mouth to quiet her giggles. My face burns, and I want to scream. Here I am, finally escaping Tía Perla’s salsa-soaked reputation, and Julia has to keep reminding people of it.

Arthur comes to my rescue—or at least he tries. “Hmm, let’s see, we need someone who can get a bunch of kids to come to a dance. Well, we have someone who got an actual *celebrity* to come to her taco truck. And who was that? Here’s a hint, Julia, not *you*.”

It was nice of Arthur to try to help, but even I have to admit, that’s more than a stretch. Maybe I’d never say so out loud, but I didn’t even recognize Viviana Vega when she was standing right in front of me. “That’s okay, Arthur,” I tell him. “Julia can be in charge of publicity. I’ll make the posters. That’s all I really wanted to do anyway.”

Our planning hour is almost up, and Mr. Salazar, who had retreated to his desk, finally intervenes. “All right.” He claps his hands. “Sounds like you’ve laid some good groundwork. Next time, you better dig into some *actual* work.”

And we do.

Amanda gets excused from soccer practice the next week

so she can join us in the studio. She brings along an armful of leftover gift wrap and instructions for folding the paper into big origami stars. “We’ll string a bunch together and hang them from the ceiling,” she explains before she and the rest of the decorations team take over one of the art tables to start cutting and creasing.

Meanwhile, the refreshments team drafts a letter to the grocery store, asking the manager if he’ll consider donating soda and ice cream for us to sell at the dance. Mami has promised to deliver the letter as soon as it’s ready.

Julia and I float among the groups. When we decide everything is under control, she joins Maddie, who is making a list of nearby schools to invite. I grab a scratch pad and sit down next to Arthur, who is working on his playlist. I know I need to get started on those posters, but I’m not feeling very inspired. Arthur had found an article in one of his magazines filled with images of vintage concert posters and lent it to me this morning. I retrieve the magazine from my backpack and start flipping through the pages, hoping one of them will spark an idea.

When nothing comes to mind, I decide to take Ms. Barlow’s advice and just start. Arthur pulls his headphones down and looks over my shoulder. “It’s good,” he says. Polite, but not enthusiastic. And he’s right.

“Yeah. But it’s not exactly what we need.”

He slides the headphones back on. “Nope.”

Mr. Salazar walks over as I'm tapping my pencil on the paper.

"Stuck?"

"A little."

"Remember," he says, "you're leading this committee because you care about art. So tell me, why does art matter?" He puts a hand over his heart. "To *you*—why does it matter?"

I close my eyes to think about it for a second. "To me? I guess because...well, when I can't think of what to say or how to explain the way I feel...I can...usually...draw it?" Mr. Salazar nods and walks away, and the seed of a new idea begins to grow.

When it's time to go home, I put away my sketches and collect my backpack. Before I leave, I overhear Maddie and Julia talking as they clean up their work area.

"But I just don't get why Arthur is wasting time on a playlist when Stef is going to get Viviana Vega to come. She, like, knows her now or something."

"She doesn't know her," Julia fumes. "She sold her a *Bur.Eat.Oh*." The syllables sound like rubber bands snapping, one after the other.

Quickly, I close the door behind me. Maddie can't be serious, can she? I thought all of that Viviana Vega talk had blown over. My hand is closed around the doorknob. I'm about to turn it, to go back in and correct her. But I change my mind and let go. Maddie would know I'd been eavesdropping, I

reason. And anyway, if people are going to whisper behind my back, having them say I'm friends with a pop star isn't exactly the worst rumor in the world. Plus, if I look at it one way—really squint at it—I *could* say I know Viviana Vega. Sort of. I know her better than anyone else in our school, that's for sure, and definitely better than Julia.

chapter

22

But by the end of the week, what started as a crazy rumor has spread like sniffles during cold season. It hasn't gotten any less crazy, but everyone seems to believe it's true, and I'm worried I can't ignore it much longer. Eighth graders who've never even looked at me in the hallways are waiting for me at my locker to ask if Viviana Vega is really coming to our gym. Sixth graders are tapping me shyly on the shoulder and begging for autographs. I don't know what to say, so mostly, I don't say anything. I just shrug. "Oh, you know," I answer. "We'll see." Not exactly a yes, but not exactly a no.

"So you'll never guess," Amanda begins, slamming her

lunch tray on the table on Friday afternoon, “what Trish asked me at soccer practice yesterday.”

“Geez, easy,” Arthur complains.

“Sorry,” she says. “Anyway, she asked me to ask *you* if she could take a picture with *Viviana Vega* at the big art dance. Crazy, right?”

“Yeah. Crazy.” I peel the tinfoil wrapping from one of Papi’s homemade chicken-and-corn burritos—somehow they taste even better a day old—and try to sound nonchalant. “What did you tell her?”

Before Amanda can answer, two eighth graders plop down on the bench across from me at the table. “Can you get Viviana to dedicate a song to me?” one of them interrupts. “Any song. Just ask her, okay?”

I give my usual shrug and point to my mouth like it’s so full of burrito I can’t possibly say a word. “Humm . . . mmh.”

Amanda and Arthur stop chewing. They stare at me with their mouths hanging open while I kick them under the table, hoping they get the message: *Please, don’t say anything*. Finally, the eighth graders seem satisfied and walk away.

Amanda and Arthur are still staring at me when I swallow.

“What?” I ask, taking a sip from my water bottle.

“*What?* You’re taking dedications now?” Arthur asks sarcastically.

“Well . . . I . . . you know . . . anyway, this is *so* your fault,” I

sputter. "If you hadn't opened your mouth in art class, nobody would be expecting me to bring Viviana Vega to school."

"My fault?" Arthur looks as though I'd just slapped him. His cheeks even turn a little pink. "I was trying to stick up for you, and I *never* said you were going to bring Viviana Vega."

Amanda, quietly for once, says, "They believe that because you let them."

Part of me knows they're right; part of me is trying to gulp down a big lump of embarrassment. But another part of me is stung to hear my best friends call me out, right in the middle of the cafeteria.

"I don't believe this," I say, shaking my head. "You two just can't stand that I'm the one finally getting some attention, can you?"

Neither of them answers. Arthur pulls on his headphones. He leans his head on one arm while lazily pushing carrot sticks around his plate. Amanda stares at her tray for a couple of minutes before stuffing the apple in her pocket and getting up to leave. We don't talk for the rest of the afternoon, and it feels so much worse than driving home in Tía Perla ever did.

chapter

23

After Mami and I help with the shopping at the farmers' market and the prep work at the commissary on Saturday morning, Papi drives home and pulls over at the curb in front of our house to drop us off. Mami hops out and holds the door open for me, but instead of following her, I ask if I can spend the day with Papi and Tía Perla. My parents look a little surprised, but they agree. Mami blows kisses from the porch as we drive away.

"Can we start at the park?" I ask. Amanda will be there, and I have to talk to her, face-to-face, before the awkward silence between us drifts into another school week.

"Por qué no?" Papi agrees.

We get to the park as parents are staking out spots on the sidelines with beach chairs and big umbrellas. Some of the teams have already started warming up. After a while, I see Amanda jump out of her mom's car, a gym bag slung over her shoulder. She runs over to where her team is practicing and flops down on the grass to put on her cleats. Even if she wanted to, she won't have time to talk to me until after her game is over, so I decide to help Papi with Tía Perla.

He slides into a smooth, easy rhythm when he cooks, almost like he's dancing to one of his banda songs. Only there isn't any music playing—just Papi's happy hum as he does something he loves and has worked hard for. As the fields scramble to life with the morning's earliest games, Tía Perla's kitchen starts sizzling with the morning's first orders. I call each one back to Papi. With a quick nod of his head, he drops a lump of butter onto the grill and waits for it to melt into a shimmering, yellow puddle. He adds chicken or beef, then bell peppers and cilantro. As the meat cooks, steam rises, braiding the smells of peppers, onions, and nose-tickling spices, before they escape through Tía Perla's blue-tinted vents. It is the first burrito of the day that sells all the others, Papi always tells me, beckoning new customers with its warm, tempting aroma.

When the meat is nearly cooked, Papi peels one or two tortillas from a stack inside Tía Perla's refrigerator and presses them to the grill with his gloved hand—only a few seconds on each side, just long enough to make the tortillas soft. Then

he piles the meat inside and adds a ladleful of salsa. After crumbling salty cotija cheese over the top, he folds the burrito tightly in one fluid motion, then puts the whole thing back on the grill, lightly toasting the tortilla to give it a little crunch. Finally, he wraps the burrito in paper before handing it off to me to drop into a bag and hand to the customer whose mouth, by this time, is usually watering.

Lunchtime is when Papi's dance is trickiest but also most graceful as he pivots from grill to fridge to sink to cupboard, never missing a beat and never mixing up an order.

Lately, though, the nagging buzz of his cell phone breaks his rhythm. When other drivers call to talk taco truck strategy, Papi pins his phone between his ear and his shoulder while he stirs the meat over the grill. I hear snippets of his conversations as I listen for the long whistle that means Amanda's game is over.

To me, all the phone calls sound the same. They start with Papi shaking his head as he says again and again that it isn't fair, that they have to fight. Before long, the maybes begin: "Maybe if we...maybe if they...maybe if I..." until Papi finally says sadly, "Whatever happens, happens."

That's when I want to take the phone out of his hands and say, "No. No, you can't just let things happen." That's how I got into this Viviana Vega mess, and now I have to *do* something. But first, I need Arthur and Amanda back on my side. The whistle blows. Her game ends. The teams start shaking hands.

I know I can't count on Amanda to come looking for me after what happened at lunch on Friday, so I take a bottle of soda from the fridge and ask Papi if I can run over to say hello. He crouches down and peers out the order window as if trying to size up the distance between us and Amanda.

"I'll have my phone," I remind him, patting my pocket.

That seems to satisfy him. He stands upright again and waves me off.