

chapter

24

I hang back, leaning against a tree, and wait until Amanda is done talking with her teammates before I approach her. “Hey,” I say, holding the cherry soda out in front of me.

“No, thanks,” she says when she sees it. Her face is bright red. I know it’s from the game, but it makes her look really angry, and part of me wants to turn around and walk back to Tía Perla.

But I take a deep breath and pull back the soda. “Okay. I just wanted to say I’m sorry about yesterday. It’s my fault the Viviana Vega rumor got out of hand, and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you and Arthur.”

Amanda narrows her eyes at me, smiles, then holds out her hand for the soda. “Okay.”

I finally exhale, and we sit down on the grass.

"I really need your help," I tell her, pulling tiny leaves off sprigs of clover. "We have to figure out what to do about this."

"Help with what? Just tell everyone she's not coming. They'll be mad. Then they'll get over it."

I've thought of that, but there has to be some other way. A way to get Viviana Vega to come to Saint Scholastica. It sounds impossible, but the idea that a celebrity would come to Tía Perla's order window sounded impossible once, too. When I explain it to Amanda, she groans and throws herself back on the grass. I'm bracing myself for another argument when she says, "Fine."

"Fine?"

"Fine," she repeats, sitting up. "We'll think of something. But you better tell Arthur you're sorry. We need him, too."

Amanda sees her mom waving at her from the field where her younger brother's game just ended. She gets up and dusts the grass off her shorts, saying, "I still think you should just tell the truth and get it over with."

I roll my eyes.

"They'll get stuck up there," she calls over her shoulder.

I feel a million times better when I get back to Tía Perla. In the time it's taken me to smooth things over with Amanda, another truck has pulled up, Taquizas La Paloma. When Papi isn't on the phone with other drivers, he's meeting them in person to worry or plot or complain. But I don't have time to

wonder which they're doing now. I go into the cab and rifle through the glove box for a pen and something to write on. I find an old envelope—that should work—and take it over to the card table that Papi has set up for our customers. Then I sit clicking my pen—open, close, open, close—trying to think up a plan.

Before I know it, twenty minutes have passed. And instead of even one good idea, all I have are a dozen little doodles crammed into a corner of the envelope. I crumple it up and start rubbing my temples.

I hear Papi call, "Adios!" as the other truck driver pulls away. Then, instead of getting back inside the truck, he sits down next to me at the card table. "I need your help with something."

The drivers are all preparing their speeches for the big city council meeting, Papi explains. He wants to write one, too. "It needs to be very professional," he says. "No mistakes." I can see he doesn't trust his English enough to write the speech on his own. I know he's asking me to write it for him—and I know how embarrassing that must be.

But still. I have my own problems right now, and I don't really feel like letting Tía Perla stand in my way again. I look away.

"It's just that I'm pretty busy right now," I tell him. "With...school stuff. And the dance and everything..." My voice trails off. Papi doesn't say anything. He just pats my

hand, stands up, and walks back to the truck. A little well of guilt bubbles up in my throat, but just like missing the concert, maybe this is for the best. It's time to get back to brainstorming. I turn over the envelope to make a fresh start.

The rest of the afternoon is so busy at the park that Papi says we can call it quits and head back to the commissary early. With the city council meeting just two days away, the place crackles with nervous anticipation like drops of water on a sizzling pan. Someone has written *SAVE OUR TRUCKS!* across the meeting notice. Drivers huddle over highlighted printouts of the proposed regulations, fine-tuning their arguments.

Papi shakes their hands as he leaves the commissary. They wish one another good luck and agree to meet outside city hall on Monday night so they can walk in as a group.

"Remember to put on a clean shirt," one of the drivers jokes, nudging Papi in the ribs. "You're going to be on TV."

I wait until we're in the pickup to ask Papi what he meant.

"It's not like real TV," Papi explains. "They tape the meetings and show them on the public-access channel so people who can't be there in person can still follow along. I don't think anyone really watches it, though."

I'm relieved. I know how nervous Papi gets when he has to speak English in front of strangers. Just the thought of him having to speak English on *television* was making me nervous, too. And now I understand why he wanted my help.

So on Sunday night, when he asks to rehearse his speech,

I switch off the TV, put down the laundry, and really try to listen. Reading off index cards, he talks about hard work and supporting a family and raising a daughter. He looks up, unsure, at Mami and me. She nods encouragingly, and he continues. He talks about opportunity and the American dream, and for the first time in a long time, I remember that sweet, strawberry-soda feeling when Tía Perla was a dream all three of us shared.

chapter

25

No one is waiting for me outside the classroom when I get to school on Monday morning. I'm not surprised, but the knots in my stomach tighten anyway. Amanda is at her desk, finishing last night's homework. She looks up when she sees me, and I bite my lip. She rolls her eyes and nods toward Arthur. *Just do it*, she mouths.

Amanda had let me off pretty easily at the park—all it took was an apology and a soda. But she never stays mad very long. Amanda boils over and cools right back down. Arthur's different. His anger is more like a slow, steady simmer, especially when someone has hurt his feelings. And I've known him long enough to know I did.

He's in his seat, headphones on under a thick hooded sweatshirt that he's wearing even though it's not even close to cold outside. I stand in front of his desk for a few seconds, waiting for him to look up. When he doesn't, I say, "Arthur?"

Nothing.

"*Arthur*," I try again, louder. "Arthur, I'm trying to apologize."

I know he can hear me, but he barely blinks.

"Hey!" I bark, pulling his hood down around his neck. His hair underneath is a crazy mess of just-out-of-bed spikes.

"Hey, *yourself*!" he shoots back, finally taking off his headphones. "You're supposed to be apologizing, remember?"

Right. "Sorry."

"Well?"

"Well, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I was a jerk. Do you forgive me?"

He shrugs, and the headphones go back on. "I'll think about it." But I've known him long enough to know he already has.

It's a good thing, too, because by now it seems like Julia is the only one—besides Arthur and Amanda, of course—who isn't expecting Viviana Vega to show up at our school.

"You know she isn't coming." Julia is seething on the way into the art studio for our dance-planning session after school. "Why do you keep pretending she is?"

"Well, she won't if we don't even *try*," I answer. But I know

I have to think of something fast, and I'm counting on my friends for help.

Julia blinks. "Whatever." She pulls a binder labeled DANCE out of her backpack and finds our master checklist. Almost every box is ticked. Amanda and her team have folded hundreds of paper stars and strung them together in long, shiny garlands. The grocery store has promised the refreshments team not just ice cream and soda but plates and napkins as well. Arthur has turned his playlist over to Mr. Salazar for approval, and Maddie has sent invitations to all the middle schools nearby.

And, finally, I have something to contribute, too, something more than half-truths and exaggerations.

I wait for Julia to get to "posters" on our checklist. Just as I expected, she puts her hands on her hips and taps her foot impatiently. "Well, Stef? How much longer are we going to have to wait?"

"Oh, about two more seconds," I say, opening Mr. Salazar's supply closet and pulling out the poster I stashed there earlier. I unroll it then and hold it up for everyone to see.

"Whoa," Jake whispers.

"Nice," says Arthur. Even Julia and Maddie look impressed.

Inspired by the Viviana Vega poster Arthur had given me, mine shows dozens of arms, painted in gray and black and white, all reaching upward. But instead of reaching toward Viviana—they're holding up paintbrushes and pencils, pastels

and palettes. I wrote FEEL THE HEARTBEAT across the top, the "art" in "heart" drawn in bold red strokes.

"Very well done," Mr. Salazar says as my poster is passed around the room. He promises to make copies and have them ready for us to tape all over school tomorrow.

chapter

26

I'm perplexed to see the pickup in the parking lot instead of Tía Perla that afternoon.

"What's going on?" I ask Papi as I toss my backpack into the truck bed. "Are we picking up Tía Perla from here?"

"No, m'ija. Remember? Tonight is the city council meeting. We're not taking Tía Perla out."

That's right. I nod and look out the window. It's a warm afternoon. The days have started getting longer but not yet hot. If Papi had been working, it would be the perfect kind of evening to take Tía Perla to a park. Neighbors would be walking their dogs. Moms and dads would be tossing Frisbees to sons and daughters. Soccer teams would be dribbling their

balls around orange cones. They would all see Tía Perla and realize they were craving tacos.

I had even come up with a name for this kind of evening: Taco Weather. It was a code phrase between Papi and me. “Looks like Taco Weather,” one of us would say, and both of us knew it would be a busy, beautiful night. I don’t mention it today, though. Both of us have more serious things on our minds.

“Mami took the night off,” Papi tells me, “and you can stay home with her if you want. I know you have a lot of work to do. But I had hoped . . . well, I thought we might all go to the meeting together.”

I imagine myself sitting in an uncomfortable chair in a crowded room while a bunch of food truck drivers talk to a bunch of men and women in suits about a bunch of rules that don’t have anything to do with me.

“What for?”

“Well, m’ija, I know what I want to say. But it’s really important that I say it right. No mistakes. The other drivers are counting on me—we’re all counting on one another—and I think the city council will understand much better what I’m trying to say if *you* say it. Will you come with me and read the speech?”

He has to be kidding. Didn’t he say this meeting was going to be on television? I mean, I know what it’s like to have

something important to say and feel like *nobody* can understand you, but this is too much. I can't do it. I look at my shoes.

"Can we just go home?" I mumble. "I'm sorry. I just want to go home. I have school stuff, and I need to call Amanda, and I don't think I would be any good up there."

"Órale," he says, patting my knee. "Don't be sorry. You and your mami can watch us from home."

Mami meets us at the door and hustles us into the kitchen, where dinner is already prepared "Siéntense and eat up," she says. "We need to get out of here quickly if we want to find three seats together."

I cringe, and Papi intervenes.

"Maybe it would be better if you and Estefania stay home after all," he says. "She has a lot of studying to do."

Mami looks at me, then back at Papi, and seems uncertain. "Well, you need to eat anyway," she says. "Sit down."

Papi serves himself two enchiladas dripping with red sauce. But once they're on his plate, he only picks at them. He pulls his note cards out of his pocket, and I watch his lips move softly as he reads his speech to himself.

Meanwhile, Mami paces the kitchen, carrying a glass of water from the counter to the table, and then back to the counter again. She says over and over—to Papi? To me? To herself? I'm not sure—"It's going to be fine. Just wait. It's

going to be fine.” She’s not eating, either, and I don’t have much of an appetite myself.

“Can I be excused?” Without waiting for an answer, I grab the cordless phone off its cradle and take it to my bedroom. As I dial Amanda’s house, I hear Mami kiss Papi’s forehead and wish him luck. The front door closes behind him, and he drives off for the meeting.

Amanda picks up on the third ring. We talk about the essays we have to turn in to Ms. Barlow and the mystery smell in Mrs. Serros’s room before I get down to business. “I still don’t know what to do about Viviana Vega. Have you thought of anything?”

“You mean, besides the truth?” she asks.

“Ha. Ha.”

“Well, what about an impersonator, then?”

“Know any?”

“Can’t you pull it off?”

I hear footsteps in the hallway and then a knock at my bedroom door.

“Estefania?” Mami says through the crack. “The meeting has started.”

I tell Amanda I have to go, then join Mami on the living room sofa.

chapter

27

On the screen, I see three men and two women sitting in leather swivel chairs behind a massive table. Each is wearing a suit jacket, and each has been poured a tall glass of water. Facing the table is a wooden podium, and behind that are rows and rows of folding chairs. Every seat is filled. I can't see any of the faces in the audience, only the backs of their heads. Knowing that Papi is in one of those chairs—that sometime tonight he'll get up and speak at that podium—sets a million butterflies aflutter in my stomach. Mami takes my hand.

The woman at the center of the table, wearing an ivory blazer and peering down through reading glasses, lightly taps

her gavel. "Let's move on to Agenda Item 4: Proposed Regulations for Mobile Food Vendors."

The man sitting next to her clears his throat. "Mayor Barnhart, I am presenting these proposals at the request of some concerned citizens who are worried about health and safety risks associated with the growing number of food trucks in our community. I'd like to open this up to public debate."

Mayor Barnhart looks out into the audience. "It looks like we might have some public comment?" A line forms at the podium, long and wriggly.

A woman with short brown hair and a long gauzy scarf goes first. She bends the microphone so that it's closer to her mouth, takes a quick look behind her, and speaks.

Her family owns a diner in town, she says. It has been in her family for decades. But now, all the food trucks parked nearby are stealing her customers. It's not fair, she complains. Trucks don't have to pay for bathrooms or buildings, carpets or air-conditioning. "Please pass these regulations to level the playing field again." The men and women at the table take notes. Some nod their heads. I look at Mami, and she's biting her lip. We scoot closer together on the couch.

Next at the podium is a man in a blue-striped shirt with rolled-up sleeves. He says he lives near a park where taco trucks come every weekend. "Some of these things are so old and unsightly you just have to wonder about cleanliness, you

know? And what about air pollution? What about the noise? What if a truck were to hit one of the kids?"

A few people in the audience clap. The man in the striped shirt goes back to his seat, and a man in a green sweater takes his place at the podium. He tells the city council he owns a bakery and coffee shop. His wife, he says, got sick after eating at a taco truck not too long ago. "If that happened at my shop, the health inspectors would be all over me. These trucks need to abide by the same rules as the rest of us!" He pounds the podium with his fist. It makes a dull thud—the same sound as my heart falling when I think about where this meeting is headed.

I have my complaints about Tía Perla, but I can't bear listening to these strangers anymore. It feels like they're picking on a friend, and suddenly I can't believe I'm not there to stick up for her.

"Mami, we have to go," I say, jumping off the couch.

"M'ija, I know it's hard to watch right now, but let's see what happens. Your papi hasn't even had his turn yet."

I'm already in my bedroom, pulling my shoes back on. "No, Mami. I mean, let's go!" I call to her. "We should be there. With Papi."

I'm back in the living room seconds later. Mami stares at me, momentarily shocked. Then she looks at the television and at her keys on the coffee table. "Órale."

chapter

28

Mami drops me off in front of the city hall steps. I scramble up, two at a time, while she finds a place to park. On the frantic ride over, I had come up with a plan: Find Papi and read his speech, just like he asked. But when I open the doors, I realize it's impossible. I have to tap on shoulders—"Excuse me"—and squeeze between elbows—"Sorry, can I get by?"—just to shove my way inside. I search the crowd for familiar faces. I see a few, but I don't see Papi.

Then, all of a sudden, I hear him. "Good evening. My name is Samuel Soto."

Somehow, his voice through the microphone sounds

thinner and smaller than it does in our kitchen. "I thank you for your time tonight."

He stops. Clears his throat.

"Five years ago, I bought my food truck. It isn't much, but it is my dream, my family's American dream."

I *have* to get to the podium. I step on toes; I jostle handbags; I almost fall into someone's lap as I scramble to the front of the room.

Papi continues. "My wife and I, we came to this country prepared to work hard because we believed the promise: that if we worked hard, we could build a new life, support a family."

By now, I'm close enough to see him. He shuffles his note cards, looks up at the city council, then back down at his hands. "And it's true." He nods. "We have sweat, and we have saved. With hard work, we have built a life we can be proud of. But if you pass these new rules, all that work will go to waste. If we have to move our trucks every hour, we'll spend more money on gas than we earn selling burritos. And when it comes to public restrooms, well, doesn't it make more sense for me to park where I can find customers rather than where I can find a toilet?"

A couple of the council members chuckle. Papi looks up and smiles. He seems steadier now, the version of himself that confidently commands Tía Perla's kitchen.

"My friends and I pay taxes," he goes on. "Some of us have even hired employees. What happens to those jobs if we go out of business?"

His voice drops again. "Now, as for me and my family, our little truck will never make us rich. But I am happy just to raise my daughter and give her an education. Give her better chances than I had so maybe she won't have to work so very hard."

He shrugs and tucks the note cards in his shirt pocket. "That's all. We don't want special treatment. Just a fair chance."

Finally, I'm standing right behind him. He hears me and turns around. "Qué pasó?" he whispers. I wave at him to keep going.

He turns back to the city council and hurriedly finishes. "Once again, thank you for your time."

The mayor lifts her gavel. "Hearing no further comment, I call for a vote. All those in favor—"

"Wait!"

Is that really my voice? Still echoing in my ears, it sounds like someone else's. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I can't let this vote happen. Not yet.

The mayor still has her gavel raised. "Yes?"

I look over my shoulder, where rows and rows of people are quietly and curiously staring at me. I gulp.

"Young lady, is there something I can do for you? We really do need to move on."

I swallow. "Yes, please. If it's not too late, there's something I'd like to say."

I hear sighs behind me. One of the men at the table looks at his watch. Mayor Barnhart sets down her gavel. "I suppose there's enough time for one more comment," she says. "Go ahead. But please go quickly."

I turn to Papi, who looks down at me, both eyebrows raised like two dark question marks. I nod to him, and he whispers, "Órale," then bends the microphone low enough for me to speak into it. Finally, he steps away from the podium.

"Please state your name for the record," Mayor Barnhart says.

"My name is Stef Soto. Estefania Soto." Now what?

I look up at the city council—watching me.

Back at the audience—watching me.

Over at Papi—watching me, too.

"If you have something to add," the mayor says impatiently, "please get on with it."

I remember what Ms. Barlow told me. Just start somewhere. So I take a deep breath and start.

"Tía Perla isn't really my aunt. That's just what we call our taco truck," I begin. There is laughter behind me. My face feels hot—red fireworks exploding across my cheeks. But then I remember Mr. Salazar pressing me to explain what matters to *me*, and I keep going.

"I'm not sure I even like her, but I know she matters. To

me. She's *our* truck. We all worked really hard for her; we still work hard for her. And she works hard for us. My papi always obeys the rules. Sometimes I think he likes rules a little *too* much."

That gets another laugh.

"It's like he said, he doesn't want special treatment, just to be treated fairly. So I hope you'll reconsider. Because even though Tía Perla isn't really my aunt, she *is* sort of like family."

Half the room applauds.

Papi puts his hand on my shoulder and leads me back to his seat. As we walk past, drivers reach out to squeeze my hand, whispering "Good job, m'ija" and "Well done." I smile and take Papi's seat. He leans down and says, "Thank you," then stands up next to me.

The mayor taps her gavel. "Now that public comments are *really* finished, I think it's finally time for a vote. In the interest of fairness, let's take these proposals one by one. First, the proposal requiring food trucks to move locations every sixty minutes—all those in favor, please say aye." No one says a thing. "Any opposed, say nay." All five of them say nay.

It didn't pass. A small cheer rises among the drivers. One down. I look up at Papi hopefully. He smiles and takes my hand.

They move on to the next proposal. Must food trucks be required to park within one hundred feet of a public restroom?

No again.

We all cheer—a little louder this time.

“And finally,” says the mayor, “the proposal requiring mobile vending permits to be renewed annually, instead of every five years, and to be granted based, in part, on vehicle appearance. All those in favor?”

One of the councilmen leans into the microphone. “Well,” he says, “the first two proposals did seem unfair and unnecessary. But I think we can all agree we don’t want a bunch of mobile eyesores roaming our city. I’m voting in favor of the measure.”

“Aye,” says the councilman sitting next to him, nodding his head.

The others follow—“Aye” and “Aye”—and then the mayor speaks again, “I see no reason why mobile food vendors *shouldn’t* keep their trucks clean and well maintained. It’s unanimous.” She strikes the table with her gavel.

I look at the drivers in the audience, some whispering to one another, others shrugging their shoulders. Two out of three isn’t bad. They seem to be agreeing. I tug at Papi’s shirt-sleeve, wanting to congratulate him. He looks down at me and smiles but keeps his arms folded across his chest.

After Mayor Barnhart hammers down her gavel one last time to close the meeting, the audience really erupts, cheering and shaking hands. I jump out of my seat, too, swept up in the excitement. As Papi and I walk out together, we spot Mami waiting at the back of the room, clapping and smiling at us.

She tousles my hair and, kissing my forehead, says, "M'ija, I am so proud. You did it."

The other drivers are planning to meet up at the commissary to celebrate. I tell Mami to go on ahead, that I want to ride with Papi.

"You can ride with me, Estefania," he says. "But I don't think we'll go to the commissary. Let's just go home. It's been a long night." His voice is tired and quiet again, and I can't understand it. Haven't we just won? Aren't we happy? Isn't this exactly what we wanted? I study his face for clues but don't find any.

"Okay," I say. "Let's go home, then."

chapter

29

We had been out so late the night before that Mami and Papi let me sleep in the next morning. Mami drops me off at school with a note excusing my tardiness, and after checking in at the office, I walk down the long, empty hallway to Ms. Barlow's classroom, pausing at the door. There's no way anyone would have seen me on public access last night, right?

But if anyone saw the meeting, they don't mention it—no one looks up from their reading as I slide quietly into my seat.

"Stef, would you come up and see me for just a sec?" It's Ms. Barlow. She'll want to know why I didn't get to class on time.

"I'm really sorry," I start to say. "It's just, we were out really late, and—"

She puts a hand up to stop me. "I know why you were out late. I always watch the city council meetings on TV."

Oh no. She's not going to make a big deal of this, is she?

"Don't worry. I'm not going to make a big deal of this. I just wanted to tell you that you should be proud. You're quite persuasive when you speak from your gut."

That gives me an idea.



I have to wait until lunchtime to tell Arthur and Amanda.

When she hears it, Amanda wrinkles her nose. "*That's* your big idea?"

I know it's not much. But for some reason, I think it might work.

I decide to write a letter to Viviana Vega. I'll show her how much art means to us. I'll tell her how much we need her help. "You know, from the gut," I say as I finish explaining.

Viviana's an artist, too. I think she'll get it.

"I guess it could work," Amanda says. She looks doubtful. "But where are you going to send it? She didn't write her address on that fifty-dollar bill, did she?"

Good point. I bang my head against the lunch table.

"Relax, drama queen," Arthur says. "You can send it to her record label."

"Her record label?"

"The company that puts out her music," he says. "You write the letter; I'll find the address."

Arthur comes through, and the next morning, he passes me a scrap of paper. His handwriting is scratchy and scribbly, but I can make out the address.

"You did it!" I say, a little too loudly. Ms. Barlow looks at us suspiciously over the top of her yogurt cup.

This is perfect. I could hug Arthur and almost do, but just as I'm about to throw my arms around his neck, he slips his headphones—and his hood—over his ears again. I go back to my desk to reread my letter in the few minutes before school starts.

Dear Ms. Vega,

My name is Stef Soto. You probably don't remember me, but I sold you a burrito not too long ago. Wheat-free, dairy-free, egg-free, nut-free, meat-free. I hope you liked it.

I'm writing to you because the art program at my school, Saint Scholastica, needs help. We're almost completely out of art supplies. My art class is holding a dance to raise

money to buy some, but we could raise a lot more if you were there.

I'm not always very good at explaining how I feel or what I think. But art helps me find my voice. As a singer, I'm sure you'll understand.

I stop and think before adding one more line:

If you come, I'll make sure my papi has a dozen of those special burritos for you.

Sincerely,

Stef Soto



That afternoon, on the way to meet up with Papi at the gas station, I drop the letter into a blue mailbox. "Please, please, please, please, *please* let this work," I whisper as the letter falls. After that, the only thing left to do is wait.

Every day, after Papi and I get home from the commissary, I check the mail for a letter from Viviana Vega. Every day, I find nothing but fast-food coupons and furniture ads.

chapter

30

Tía Perla hasn't picked me up from school since before the big city council meeting, so it's a surprise—and not necessarily an unpleasant one—to hear the *chirp chirp chirp* of her horn after school.

"See you guys." I wave to Arthur and Amanda. I start walking over to Papi and then stop, right in the middle of the parking lot. Parents honk and swerve around me, but for a moment, I can't move. Taped inside Tía Perla's passenger-side window is a sign: FOR SALE.

I don't know what to say as I open the door, so I just throw down my backpack and buckle my seat belt, trying to figure out what Papi could possibly be thinking.

"I mean, is this a joke?" I burst out after we're a mile or so away. "After all those phone calls? The speeches? The city council? After we *won*? What was the point? Does Mami even know?"

Papi pulls over, squeezes the steering wheel with both hands, and turns to me. He spoke to Mami last night, he tells me, after I went to bed. She understands.

"You've seen all those brand-new food trucks at the commissary, m'ija," he says.

I think about the newer trucks I've seen in the lot: Tip Top Tapas, Bánh Mì Oh My, Chai Chai Again. Gleaming chrome and sparkling paint.

"You know I love Tía Perla, but even I have to admit, she's looking pretty run-down, no? It's hard enough finding customers, and I don't think we can compete much longer." He shakes his head. "No. I'll go back to painting, and maybe someday we'll save enough for another truck—maybe a real restaurant this time."

It still doesn't make sense. "Then why did we work so hard—why did we get up and speak in front of all those people if we were just going to quit?" For months, I've been wishing Tía Perla would just roll out of my life, but now that it's happening, I want to slam on the brakes.

"We did it," Papi says simply, "because our compadres needed us." He glances in the rearview mirror then and steers

us back onto the road. “Now. How about we take the night off? Suzy’s?”

Papi talks nonstop through dinner—about the dance, about his plans for the garden, about Mami’s promotion. About everything but the taco truck. I try to listen. I try to mirror his smiles. I try to enjoy the food at least, but it all tastes bland.

Back at home, I sit on the couch with the stack of today’s mail and switch on the lamp, not really expecting to find anything.

Bill. Bill. Magazine. Credit card application. I sigh and put the stack on the coffee table, where Mami and Papi can sift through it later. Then I notice an envelope on the floor.

It’s addressed to me. I must have dropped it.

I jump to my feet. My heart thumps in my ears, and my palms begin to sweat as I hold the envelope in both hands, suddenly unsure if I should open it. This is it: the moment that decides whether I’m Stef Soto, Taco Queen, or Stef Soto, seventh-grade hero.

I tear the envelope open. The first thing I pull out is a black-and-white photo of Viviana Vega. In the corner of the picture is a note scrawled in silver ink: “Thanks for listening, Stef!” Underneath is a swoosh of letters I can’t really read—I guess it’s her signature.

I don’t know what to make of it. There’s nothing about my letter, nothing about the dance. I check the envelope again.

This looks more promising. I pull out a piece of paper, folded in half. Quickly, I unfold it, and my eyes race over the typed page.

Dear Miss Soto,

Thanks for taking the time to write to Viviana Vega! She loves to hear from fans like you! Stay in touch with Viviana by joining the Viviana Vega fan club. For a one-time membership fee, you'll receive regular updates from Viviana, whether she's on the road or in the studio! You'll always be the first to know!

So many exclamation points and so little help.

I've been holding my breath, and after reading the note, it rushes out of me like air from a popped balloon. She isn't coming. And worse than that, she hadn't even read my letter, probably hadn't even seen it. I sink back into the couch and hold my still-pounding head in my hands. Now what?

chapter

31

The next morning, Ms. Barlow writes our journal exercise on the whiteboard: YOU WAKE UP AND REALIZE YOU'RE INVISIBLE. WHAT DO YOU DO?

That's easy: Celebrate.

"Just tell everyone the truth," Amanda says when I show her and Arthur the letter. Arthur asks for the autographed photo to keep as part of his pop music memorabilia collection. Fine with me.

"Amanda's right." Arthur nods. "I mean, it's not really that big of a deal. I'm sure no one actually thought she was coming. They're just glad we're having a dance."

After school in the art studio, Mr. Salazar asks for final

reports from all the team captains. The refreshments team has twelve dozen ice cream cups stored in the cafeteria freezer, plus six cases of bottled water and another six of soda.

"Bravo," Mr. Salazar says. He claps a few times slowly, and the whole class joins him in the applause.

The publicity team has hung my posters in all the bathrooms and hallways. Some of the teachers even taped them up in their classrooms. And tomorrow, during morning announcements, Maddie will remind all the middle schoolers to come to the dance. Another round of applause.

Amanda stands up next, reporting that her team will begin decorating the cafeteria after lunch tomorrow.

Mr. Salazar thanks her. "Congratulations. It's sounding as if this project is going to be a resounding success."

It also sounds like Mr. Salazar might skip right over me. Until Christopher interrupts him. "Wait, what about Viviana Vega?"

Suddenly, the whole class is looking at me—Mr. Salazar confused, but the rest of them eager.

"Everything's going great," I mumble into my lap.

Amanda kicks me under the table. Arthur opens his eyes wide, as though he's trying to make me tell the truth by mind control.

Fine. Just get it over with. "She's not coming."

Silence.

Not knowing what else to do, Arthur and Amanda start

clapping—but they aren't loud enough to overpower the disappointed groans that roll through the studio. It's Julia, of all people, who quiets everyone down. "Guys, seriously. *Nooooo*-body thought Stef was really going to get Viviana Vega to come to the dance."

I don't know if I'm offended or relieved.

"*So*," she continues. "I talked to my parents, and they're going to pay for a DJ! Like, a real one. It's going to be *amazing*." She sparkles, as usual.

Then, even without Mr. Salazar's help, there's an explosion of applause.

"What about Arthur's playlist?" I protest. He's slumped on his stool, his hood pulled halfway down over his face.

But no one listens to me. Julia is the center of attention again, and I'm the girl most likely to smell like taco sauce. When Mr. Salazar says it's time to go, I pick up my things without looking back—without even saying good-bye to Arthur and Amanda. I speed-walk through the parking lot.

chapter

32

I call Amanda from my cell phone right after I've finished my homework. This counts as urgent.

"So how bad is it?" I demand.

"Oh, *hiiii*," she gushes with sarcastic sweetness. "I'm just *fiiine*. Thank you so much for *aaaasking*."

Point taken. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. But please, just tell me. What were they saying after I left?"

"I don't know." She yawns. "Not a lot. I guess some people are kind of annoyed with you. But everyone thinks the DJ thing is cool. Except Arthur, obviously."

I'm not convinced.

Mami and Papi won't let me stay home from school on

Friday, but they can't make me go to the dance. Not even Arthur and Amanda change my mind. They try all day, but there's no way I'm going.

"Come on," Arthur nags one last time as he's stepping into his mom's car. "If I can go, you can go. I bet everyone's already starting to forget the whole Viviana Vega thing."

Well, I'm not about to remind them.

I find Tía Perla waiting for me in her old spot at the far end of the parking lot—maybe for the last time, I think. Papi is leaning out his rolled-down window, talking to a woman in a knee-length skirt and pointy black shoes. She looks sort of familiar, but not until I get closer do I recognize her as Mrs. Sandoval.

"...I was able to find a sitter for her brother, but I know she'd hate to miss the dance, so if it's really not too much trouble..."

No way. Miss Independent needs a ride?

Papi shakes his head. "It's no trouble. I'll take the girls to the dance and bring them home afterward. You can pick Julia up in the morning."

Mrs. Sandoval thanks him and finally notices me. "Stef, we've missed you!" she says, stepping back as if she's admiring a painting. She checks her watch. "Ooh. I better get back to work. You girls have a great time at the dance. I'm so proud of all the work you put in."

After she's out of earshot, I remind Papi that I'm not going to the dance.

“You don’t have to go,” he says, “but it looks like we’re taking Julia.”

Neither of us knows quite what to do next. Do I go back and get her? Do we honk? Luckily, Mrs. Sandoval has thought of that. I pick her out of the crowd that’s still milling in front of our school building. She straightens Julia’s cardigan and looks like she’s explaining something to her. All of a sudden, Julia jerks away and scowls. Mrs. Sandoval throws up her arms and starts walking back toward Tía Perla. A few seconds later, Julia throws back her head and follows.

When they get to the truck, Mrs. Sandoval gives Papi a you-know-how-they-are smile. Then she kisses Julia on the forehead and practically shoves her inside. “Have *fun*. Be *polite*.” Julia slams the door. She senses me trying to catch her eye and looks away, studying her fingernails like she just realized they’re diamond-encrusted.

None of us says a word on the ride home. Once, at a red light, Papi starts tapping nervously on the steering wheel until I nudge him to quit. We can’t be sure what might set her off.

Back at our house, Papi unlocks the front door, and Julia stalks off for my bedroom like it hasn’t been forever since the last time she visited. Papi and I shrug at each other, then I follow Julia down the hallway. I find her sprawled on my bed. She puts her hands over her face and stops me before I can say anything. “Don’t even.”

I do anyway. “Why don’t you just take the bus?”

She sits up. “Right? I’ve been riding the bus all year, and it’s like they *still* don’t trust me. I have to *text* when I get on, *text* when I get off, and if I’m even *two* minutes late, it’s, like, call the FBI or something.”

“So, *we’re* taking you to the dance?”

“I guess.”

“And you’re not worried about smelling like tacos?”

Julia opens her mouth but changes her mind and flops back down on my bed. “I don’t know why I say things like that. Maddie thought I was...cool, or whatever. And...I don’t know. Sorry. Anyway, *you’re* the one who ditched me for Amanda!”

Now I’m the one who opens my mouth, about to lob back an argument, until I realize it’s kind of true. I never thought of it that way before, but the more time I spent with Amanda, the less I spent with Julia—even before Julia started taking the bus to school. It wasn’t on purpose. Amanda and I just had more in common, I guess. Had more fun together.

“Sorry, too.” I slide to the floor, my back against the wall, and sit there until Julia breaks the awkward silence by hopping off my bed and tearing through my wardrobe.

“Make yourself at home,” I say, getting up to stop her, though I quickly see there’s no point trying.

“Well, it’s not like my genius mother thought to pack me any extra clothes,” she answers from inside my closet, her voice

muffled by my sweaters and dresses. "And I'm not going in my *uniform* obviously. What are you gonna wear?"

I tell her I'm not going to the dance. We can give her a ride, but I'm not going.

"Don't be dumb," she says. "Here." A black button-up sweater flies at my face. As soon as I manage to swat it away, a plum-colored skirt hits me.

"Hey!"

"Just put it on."

I sigh and start changing. It's easier than fighting with her. A few minutes later, Julia emerges from behind my closet door in a flowery pink sundress and jean jacket, sleeves rolled up to her elbows. The outfit looks like she's been planning it for weeks, but at the same time, effortless. So annoying. "At least you don't have completely terrible taste," she says.

"Are you always this charming when you steal people's clothes?"

She shrugs and smiles, sparkling-sweet as ever. "Now," she orders. "Sit."

I let Julia bully me into the chair at my desk, but not even she is bossy enough to force my curls to behave, I think. Nonetheless, she twists and pulls and yanks and spritzes and, somehow, it works. Mami would be thrilled.

chapter

33

We ride to school in Tía Perla, me squished between Papi and Julia on the bench seat. When we get there, Papi tells Julia he'll be back in a couple of hours and to call if she needs anything. "See you," I say.

Julia whips her head back around. "Come *on*. We're already late. I'm not walking in there by myself." She grabs my wrist and tugs.

"No, I told you. I'm not going." I tug my arm back and plant myself squarely in the middle of the seat.

"Stef, *seriously*, just come with me?" She's really asking me to go with her, and not just trying to boss me around. Deciding I might as well check on Arthur and see how Amanda's

decorations turned out, I slide out the door and tell Papi I'll be right back.

I expect to hear music as we get closer to the gym. Instead, what we hear are two boys—I don't recognize them from Saint Scholastica—on their way back to the parking lot.

"Just have your mom come get us now. No Viviana *and* no dance?"

Julia and I look at each other and start walking faster.

Outside the gym, students are shuffling around looking bored and disappointed. The teachers who came to chaperone are huddled up, shaking their heads and shrugging their shoulders. A few parents linger nearby, glancing at their watches. Mr. Salazar is pacing the breezeway, a phone held up to one ear and a hand pressed against the other.

I spot Arthur, and he walks right over, pulling his headphones down around his neck. "I thought you weren't coming."

"I'm not. What's going on?"

"Power went out in the gym. Mr. Salazar is trying to get it fixed, but the ice cream already melted and the sodas are all warm. No lights, no speakers, no music."

That means no dance. The teachers have started refunding everyone's admission.

And that means no art supplies, I think.

"What *happened*?" Julia asks.

"The DJ," Arthur says. "Tripped a circuit breaker when he was setting up."

Julia screams into her hands. “No, no, no, no, *no!*” She pulls out her cell phone and frantically dials. When her mom doesn’t pick up, she screams again and storms off. I don’t blame her. This dance is a disaster, and it’s our fault. Part of me wants to follow Julia, to crawl under my bed and hide forever. But part of me knows we can’t just leave this mess behind us. So I close my eyes and think. Hard. From the gut.

And then I have it.

I tell Arthur to find Amanda and meet me back in the parking lot. Then I chase after Julia and grab her by the elbow. She whips around. “Let’s just *go*.”

“No,” I tell her. “Tía Perla!”

“Tía *what?*” But then, as she starts to understand, the lights in her smile begin to flicker back on.

“I’ll go talk to my dad—you tell everyone the dance is moving.”

Papi is humming to himself with one arm draped out the window when I get to the truck. I throw open the door, and he starts to turn the key. “Ready to go? Shall we take Tía Perla out for a couple of hours until it’s time to pick up Julia?”

“No, wait.” Panting, I try to explain the dance debacle as quickly as I can. “Can we fire up Tía Perla, like, right here?”

He starts nodding, slowly at first and then eagerly. “Órale!” he growls. This time it means “YES!” Then he slaps his palm on the steering wheel so hard the horn blares—as if Tía Perla herself is whooping in excitement. “Órale!”

chapter

34

Arthur and Amanda come rushing to the parking lot as Papi hooks up Tía Perla's generator and I lift open her canopy. Amanda finds a take-out bag in the kitchen, writes DONATIONS on one side in black marker, and sets it on the card table. Arthur pulls an armful of sodas from the ice chest and starts passing them around to the students and parents and teachers who followed Julia out here but still aren't sure what's going on. I scramble back into the cab, crank down the windows, and turn up Papi's radio. He has it tuned to banda again. No, thanks. I twist the dial and, like magic, find Viviana Vega.

I sink down into the bench seat to catch my breath and enjoy the moment.

Arthur interrupts. "Hey, turn it back!" he hollers from outside.

I poke my head out the window.

"What?"

Arthur, Amanda, and Julia yell back at me in unison: "Turn it back!"

Oh well, I think. Órale!

The joyful, driving rhythm of Papi's music begins to break up the clumps of middle schoolers standing around Tía Perla. A flourish of horns set Julia and Amanda swaying, shoulder to shoulder, *oompah-pah, oompah-pah*. Jangling guitar chords relax the worried lines on Mr. Salazar's forehead until he's clinking soda bottles with the other teachers. Students tap their feet as they wait in line for the nachos, quesadillas, tortas, and—for Arthur—the wheat-free, dairy-free, egg-free, nut-free, meat-free specialty-of-the-house super burrito that Papi and I slide through the window as fast as we can.

I'm dusting cilantro over the top of two street tacos when Papi stops me. "I can handle this, m'ija. You should be out there." I look doubtfully at the line outside the truck.

"Really," he urges. "Go." Then he hands me a tortilla, fresh off the grill and smeared with butter. I take a big bite—it's as warm and familiar as home—then leave the tortilla on the counter while I look for Arthur and Amanda in the crowd.

They're selling Amanda's origami stars, fifty cents apiece. Students are swinging them over their heads like lassos, the

metallic wrapping paper winking under the parking lights. I take both their hands and pull them closer to Tía Perla, where the music is loudest. I twirl Arthur under one of my arms and Amanda under the other. Then they close the circle, and we spin until we fall over laughing.

It seems like only minutes before the first parents start arriving for pickup. Tía Perla's kitchen is nearly empty, but the donation bag is full—so full that a few crumpled-up bills have fallen to the ground. Julia and I pick them up and stuff them inside the bag before presenting it to Mr. Salazar.

He tries to give some of the money back to Papi. But Papi just folds his arms over his chest, shakes his head, and smiles.

“Do you think it's enough?” I ask.

Mr. Salazar looks like he can't quite believe it. “I'd say so.” He nods. “More than enough.”

When everything is cleaned up, Papi hands Julia and me a strawberry soda each. “Saved these for you.” We climb back into the cab, crank the radio up as loud as it will go, and sing all the way back home. I don't even care who sees us.

chapter

35

Julia and I are still up chattering in my bedroom when Mami comes home from her shift at the grocery store.

She taps on my door before nudging it open. “Girls? It’s very late. I heard you had an exciting night, but if you can’t get to sleep, at least keep your voices down. Papi has to be up early tomorrow. Someone is coming over to check out the truck.”

So soon? I deflate.

Lying on the floor with our feet propped on my bed, Julia and I reminisce about afternoons on my front porch and about Tía Perla.

“Why does he have to sell her anyway?” Julia yawns. “I mean, she’s not *that* bad.”

She *isn't* that bad. Not bad at all. And maybe he doesn't have to sell her.

"Get up." I elbow Julia as I spring to my feet.

"What for?" she moans. "It's so late. You heard your mom."

I'm already tearing through my stash of art supplies. I'm going to come through for Tía Perla like she came through for me.

"Just get up. And put your shoes back on. And don't make a sound."

It's colder in the driveway than I thought it would be, but with our extra-bright porch light, it's at least bright enough to see. Shivering, I squirt globs of red and white paint onto a paper plate. I hand it to Julia with a paintbrush, showing her how to touch up the flaking roses on Tía Perla's side. While she works, I add swirling blue clouds and curling green vines—the same as in the drawing I made the day of the Viviana Vega concert. Only now I don't want Tía Perla to fly out of our lives after all. Instead, I imagine her soaring into a newer, brighter future, with all of us inside.

I carry chairs out from the kitchen, and Julia and I stand on them to reach the high spots. When we're done, we step back on the grass to examine our work.

"Looks good," Julia says finally. "Only, I never understood the name. I mean, do you even have an Aunt Pearl?"

She's right. This truck isn't just crazy, old Tía Perla—she's so much more.

"I'm not quite finished here," I tell Julia. "But you can go back inside." As she tiptoes up the front steps, I squirt two more puddles of paint onto a fresh paper plate.

chapter

36

Julia is snoring on my bedroom floor when the alarm clock starts bleating. I want to pull the covers back over my head and snore along with her, but then I remember Papi's appointment. I get out of bed, step over Julia, and race to the kitchen.

Mami and Papi are at the table, sipping their coffee.

"Estefania," Mami says, "I wasn't expecting you up for hours. When did you two finally get to bed?"

I wave off her questions. "Has that man come? About the truck?"

"He'll be here soon," Papi says. "I was about to go out and wipe down the counters."

Not too late, then. "Good." I look from one of my parents

to the other. "I need you to come outside with me. Both of you. Now. Please."

"Estefania?" Papi asks.

"M'ija," Mami says, looking down at her bathrobe. "I'm not even dressed."

"Please, just come."

I dart ahead, open the front door, then spread my arms across it to hold them back. "Okay. Don't be mad. Just think about it." Then I step aside and sweep my arms toward the driveway, introducing them to:

THE TACO QUEEN.

She looks even better than she did in the moonlight. Not perfect—still dented, but not so dull. Tired, maybe, but full of life and promise.

A laugh catches in Mami's throat as soon as she sees it, and she wipes a tear off her cheek. Papi comes closer. "M'ija... how... I don't..." he starts and stops.

"I'm not ready to give her up," I say, making up a new speech, there on the lawn. This time, instead of the mayor holding a gavel, I'm facing Papi, who's holding his breath. "I know how nice those other trucks look, but if I could do this overnight with Julia, just think what we could all do. Together. And anyway, it's like I said: Tía Perla isn't really my aunt. But she is like family."

Papi runs his finger over the freshly painted letters, black outlined in gold. He doesn't say anything until we all hear a

car slow to a stop in front of our house. As the man opens his door, Papi startles and walks out to the end of the driveway, stopping between the man and Tía Perla.

“Is this the—” the man starts to say.

“No,” Papi interrupts. “It was a mistake. I’m very sorry, but she’s not for sale after all.”

The man turns to Mami, who smiles and shakes her head. Then he gets back into his car and drives away.

When he disappears, I run to Papi and jump onto his back. He catches me under my knees and laughs his biggest, thundering laugh.

“Órale!” I shout, looking up at the sky and then at the miles and miles of road just waiting for us. “Órale!”