

**THE
LIARS
OF
MARIPOSA
ISLAND**

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ELENA FINNEY

MARIPOSA ISLAND, TEXAS

1986

CHAPTER ONE

MY BROTHER JOAQUIN KNOWS THE CALLAHANS ARE back on the island just by the look on my face. And there's no doubt he's pissed about it.

Squatting on our screened-in porch in front of our door, working to repair the loose doorknob Mami has been after him about, he glances up at me and he knows. He just does.

Good, noble Joaquin. Always trying to do the right thing for Mami and never winning. His efforts end in explosive arguments or him cursing her later behind her back, working himself up into such a frenzy he needs to listen to music on his Walkman at top volume or guzzle a Budweiser to calm down. Such a waste of energy if you ask me. Better to ignore her. Hide from her. Agree with her even if you don't. It isn't that hard to do, really. Not if you do it often enough.

I don't even have to say anything to him and he figures out

the Callahans are back. After all, school ended last week. It's been just a few days since Joaquin walked across the auditorium stage at LBJ High School in a rented burgundy cap and gown, and later Mami, Joaquin, and I enjoyed a celebratory dinner at El Mirador, compliments of Joaquin's boss, Carlos. The Callahans always show up a week after school lets out. It's been that way since the summer after I finished seventh grade.

"Hey," Joaquin says, lifting the bottom of his white T-shirt to wipe the sweat off his face. He squints up at me.

"Hey," I answer back. "I have a babysitting job tonight."

Joaquin stands up, arches his back. He flips the screwdriver he's holding in his hand over once. Twice. Both times he catches it without even looking. He keeps his gaze on me.

"It's so hot, Elena," he says. "Why the hell do the Callahans come to Mariposa Island every summer? Why don't they go to, like, the coast of Maine?"

I shrug. "Who can understand the ways of the rich?"

"Fine," he says. "But I have a shift at the restaurant tonight. So I hope you won't be home too late. Someone has to be here to pour Mami into bed."

I roll my eyes. First of all, it's almost always me who pours Mami into bed. He knows this. And secondly, any chance he gets to go after Mami, he does. One time in middle school, he brought home pamphlets about alcoholism from the school nurse and started marking Mami's bottle of Bacardi with a black magic marker. That lasted about two weeks. Honestly, he can be so dramatic sometimes.

“Mr. and Mrs. Callahan are just going out to dinner,” I say as Joaquin resumes his squat and peers at the front doorknob like he and it are about to engage in hand-to-hand combat. “I have to get the kids into bed, and I’ll probably be done by ten or so. Maybe ten thirty.”

“How old are those little brats now, anyway?” Joaquin asks, jiggling the doorknob, his brow furrowed.

“Jennifer is eight and Matthew is four,” I answer. “At least Matthew’s out of diapers. And they’re not brats. They’re sweet kids. I mean, a little spoiled, yeah. But they like me. They never give me any trouble.”

“A regular Mary Poppins you are,” Joaquin says dryly.

“Are you going to let me in or not?” I ask, one hand on my hip.

Joaquin jiggles the doorknob one more time, and rocking back on his heels, he opens the front door and wordlessly lets me enter. I’m pretty sure the accompanying slam is meant for me.

I have an hour until Mami gets home from work, so I hunt through the pantry until I find an almost-empty bag of potato chips. I’ll finish them and Joaquin will have another reason to be pissed at me, but at least he gets a free meal every shift at work. And El Mirador is better than Mami’s dinners. With her it’s always *ropa vieja* or mac and cheese or overcooked burgers for the five millionth time.

Taking the kitchen phone off the hook, I stretch the cord as far as it will go and slide onto the floor behind my bedroom door.

Michelle answers on the second ring.

“Hey, it’s me,” I say.

“Hey,” she responds. “So can you make it out tonight? To the party?”

I crunch down on a chip and lick salt off my fingers. “Yeah, I should be able to make it.” The Callahans are often home sooner than they say.

“What about your brother?”

“He has to work.”

“Shit.”

“God, Michelle, don’t be gross.”

“How am I being gross?” she asks. “I literally just said *shit* to express my disappointment that your brother isn’t going to make it to the party.”

I cram a handful of greasy potato chips in my mouth and talk through my crunching, little explosions of chips flying from my lips. “It’s gross because . . . you think my brother . . . is cute.”

“You’re the one who’s gross, eating and talking at the same time,” Michelle answers. “And your brother *is* cute.”

I swallow and shout into the phone. No words, just a loud, sustained yell.

“Jesus!” Michelle cries, and I burst out laughing. “Fine, I won’t bring up your brother again.”

I slide down my bedroom door farther until my chin is resting on my chest. Madonna stares down on me from the poster on the wall, her eyes killing me with confidence. I

wonder how long before Mami makes me take that poster down. I need to make sure I keep my bedroom door closed more often.

“My brother never does anything fun anyway,” I say. “He just suffers.”

“I’m not even going to respond because I’m afraid you’re going to shout again,” Michelle answers.

“Let’s move on to other boys I’m not related to,” I say. “Namely, Jimmy Paradise.”

It’s ridiculous this could actually be someone’s legal name, of course, and that this person could be as hot and cool and amazing as his name suggests, but Jimmy Paradise is a real person, and he’s had that very real name since he moved to Mariposa Island this past school year, in the middle of tenth grade. In the five months he’s been here he’s had one suspension and two girlfriends, and every time he walked into my Spanish II class I wanted to die. I let him cheat off me on every verb conjugation quiz. Señora McCloud doesn’t know I’m almost fluent, but Jimmy figured it out. After every A he made, he flashed his paper at me and winked.

“I’m sure Jimmy Paradise will be there,” Michelle answers. “Honestly, I don’t know what you see in him. Too many muscles for my taste.”

“What?” I shriek, savoring my last chip. “You have *no* taste. That’s your problem.”

“Oh, please. Whatever.”

She may sound annoyed, but I know she’s not. Michelle

and I have been best friends since second grade. Or maybe third grade, I'm not sure. I just know I can't remember a time when we weren't slipping notes to each other during class or trading scented erasers or going through our freshman year-book putting dots next to the names of all the kids in our class who we were sure had done it.

We talk and talk, and before I know it, an hour has slipped by and I hear the front door open and then shut. I feel my chest tighten.

"My mom's home," I say. "I gotta get off."

"Elena, you're going to break the phone with that stretching! I've told you one million times!"

Michelle laughs. It's not her mother, after all. All she says is "Jesus, I can hear her from here."

"I'll bet," I say. "See you tonight."

"Okay. I just wish you could spend the night after."

"You know I can't."

"Elena! The phone! Hang up!"

"Trust me, I know you can't," Michelle says, and I don't even say goodbye, I just stand up and open my bedroom door.

• • •

Everything about Mami has a weight to it. Her words. Her movements. Even her thoughts. Really, even the things she doesn't say or do have a weight.

When I was little and In Trouble, I would go into her bedroom at night to hug her and find her tucked into one side of

the bed as if someone else was going to take the other side. Lying there on her stomach reading a celebrity magazine she'd brought home from work, her dark hair jumbled up and pinned to the top of her head like a storm cloud, she would turn to me as I entered, quiet as a cat, to say good night. To say, *I'm sorry*.

"Good night," she would say, stiffening as I placed my arms awkwardly around her. Sliding away from me as if I were toxic. "Sleep well."

The hug that was not a hug had a weight. The words that were not words had a weight.

But I could shrug off the weight if I ignored it. Move on and play nice. Something Joaquin has never learned.

"Elena, I've told you a million times not to stretch the phone cord," Mami says as I emerge from my bedroom. She sets two large paper bags from Belden's on the kitchen counter and begins unpacking them. "I mean, literally one million hundred times." She runs a hand through her shoulder-length dark curls that are now only dark because of a box of hair dye she splurges on at the drugstore every once in a while and hides in the cabinet under the bathroom sink. I pretend not to know this.

"I'm sorry, I just forgot," I say, placing the phone back in the cradle where it belongs.

"Who were you talking to?" she asks even though she knows. Still, I play along.

"Michelle," I answer.

My mother's nostrils flare, and her mouth turns down at

each end. She places bananas and apples in the fruit bowl and slides it into its place over the permanent mystery stain on the pink Formica, a stain that's been there since before we rented the place. Mami's frown is the first invitation to debate her, followed by a second in the form of a loud exhale. I do not engage, just dig my hands into one of the paper bags.

"Here," I say, "let me help."

"You know how I feel about her," my mother starts in, since I haven't taken the bait.

"Yes, Mami."

Michelle's mother is on her third husband. Michelle's older sister used to work at the Pink Pussycat before getting pregnant out of wedlock. Michelle's father, who is not even her father, can't keep a steady job.

Basura.

Mami doesn't say anything else and neither do I, and we finish putting the groceries away in silence until Joaquin walks in, his wrestling match with the faulty doorknob apparently over. The weight in the kitchen immediately feels even heavier.

"Did you fix it?" Mami asks, straining to shut the last of the boxed mac and cheese in one of the top cabinets. Her blue patterned top hikes up over her khaki slacks, and after she puts the food away, she tugs down the top and smooths it out carefully.

"Yeah," Joaquin answers. "I mean, yes."

"Good. Elena, leave that meat to thaw in the counter. I want to use it for dinner."

“*On* the counter, Mami,” Joaquin corrects her. “Leave it *on* the counter.”

“God, Joaquin, let it go already,” I say, setting the ground beef out. “You’re always going after her on those little phrases that she’s never going to get right anyway.”

“I love it when my children talk about me like I’m not here,” says Mami. “So respectful.” For a second I hold my breath, but then she turns away from her bag of groceries and gives us a half grin, so I know it’s okay. “*Debería hacer que ustedes hablen español, y luego verán quien suena cómico.*”

I push out a laugh, but Joaquin says, “Maybe if we’d practiced more as kids, our Spanish would be better.” He looks down at the screwdriver in his hand when he says this.

“Like you wanted to practice Spanish?” my mother says, her voice crackling just the slightest bit. “You complained enough about your name.” I have to feel for Joaquin on that. How many teachers on the first day called roll for a Joe-a-kwin? At least my name can be Americanized into Uh-lay-nuh. The way some of the teachers at the high school say it, I sound like a wealthy Southern debutante instead of the daughter of a Cuban refugee turned doctor’s office manager and single mother. I kind of like it.

Joaquin doesn’t answer Mami’s remark about his name, just wanders over to the kitchen drawer where he keeps his tools and dumps in the screwdriver and a few loose screws.

“Elena’s got a babysitting job tonight in case she forgot to tell you,” he says suddenly, shutting the drawer and heading

down the hallway, walking past without looking at me. It's a look that is not a look. "I'm going to take a shower before work." A few beats later I hear his bedroom door shut more loudly than normal. In a couple of moments his stereo will turn on. That weird-ass moody Jesus and Mary Chain tape again. All that guitar feedback and distortion. Gag.

My mother folds the paper bags from Belden's and places them in the space behind the garbage can. She glances at her wristwatch before taking out a glass tumbler, opening the refrigerator, and pouring herself a drink. The *plink plunk* of ice, the *hiss pop* of a can of off-brand cola, the *glug glug* of the big jug of Bacardi. I could write lyrics to this music, I know it so well. While she makes her cocktail, I stand barefooted in our kitchen and wonder how much Matthew and Jennifer have grown since last summer.

"So as far as the babysitting, is Mr. Callahan here or is it just the mother and children?" Mami asks, sipping her drink. As she swallows her cocktail her shoulders drop just a millimeter or two, a distance only Joaquin and I would be able to measure.

"Mr. Callahan is down for the weekend, but on Monday he goes back to Houston for work, same as the other summers."

"And she doesn't get bothered?" Mami asks, arching one eyebrow. "Her husband always away like that?"

"Well, someone needs to earn the money to get a house on Point Isabel," I argue. "It has the prettiest views of the ocean."

My mother flares her nostrils again. "The ocean," she remarks. "You mean the Gulf of Mexico. There's a difference."

The waters off Mariposa Island will never rival those my mother grew up next to in Havana, something she reminds us of every chance she gets.

“Right, the Gulf of Mexico,” I answer. “Anyway, they’re going out to dinner and then to see a movie. So I’ll probably be home by ten thirty. Maybe eleven.” I look down and scratch an imaginary bug bite on my leg. When I look up, Mami is pursing her lips the same way she pursed them three years ago when I found the flyer Mrs. Callahan had posted for a mother’s helper on the community bulletin board at Belden’s. *Mother’s Helper Needed for the Summer! Two sweet kiddos, ages 1 and 5, like story time, trips to the beach, and playing dress-up!* It’s the same tightly wound face Mami makes every summer when the Callahans come back and she finally gives me permission to leave the house like a regular person.

“What are they paying you?” she asks, taking another sip. A gulp, really. The glass is half empty.

“Three dollars an hour,” I say. “Plus sometimes tips. It’s more than any other girl I know gets.”

My mother opens the fridge and pulls out the jug of Bacardi. She calls it freshening up her drink, the same way she freshens up her makeup after work even though she never goes anywhere.

“Do they rent out their house during the off-season?” Mami asks, topping off her glass and screwing the cap back on the jug. I’ve answered this question before, but she’s either forgotten the answer or just likes hearing it again.

“No. They have someone who comes in once a month or something to check on the place and keep it clean. Or maybe it’s twice a month.” Mr. Callahan must bring in a ton of money. Most families who own homes on Point Isabel at least rent out their houses when they’re not using them.

“They must be very wealthy,” says Mami, in a voice equal parts admiration and envy.

“I guess,” I answer.

Mami takes another sip from her drink and looks out the front window that sits over the kitchen sink. The window that stares at another saggy clapboard house staring back at us. She scowls at some imaginary spot on the windowpane and is soon attacking it with a paper towel and a bottle of glass cleaner, her drink temporarily forgotten on the counter.

“So . . . I can babysit, yes?” I ask. I hold my breath. Her hand swipes furiously back and forth at the spot on the glass.

“Yes, fine,” she says, not turning to look at me. “But you know what?” Her voice is thick with certainty. “I bet that man cheats on his wife. I bet when he goes back to Houston during the week it’s one big party for him. Remember, Elena, that most men are not to be trusted.”

I exhale. “I bet you’re right about Mr. Callahan,” I answer, ignoring the part about not trusting men, and I head back to my bedroom and shut the door.

CHAPTER TWO

MICHELLE AND I ARE HEADING TOWARD THE PARTY ON the beach, a six-pack of Budweiser swinging from Michelle's hand. The gritty sand under our feet is still warm because night has only just fallen, and the stars are starting to peek out and say hello like shy toddlers. I think about my babysitting charges, Matthew and Jennifer. How at the beginning of the summer they're always a little bashful, and Mrs. Callahan has to coax them out from behind her legs with the promise of Oreos.

"Oh, you remember Elena, don't you?" she always says on my first job of the season, her singsong, honey-sweet voice always so understanding. Always so patient. Then again, maybe mothers are just more patient when they have lots of money and time to themselves. I swear Mrs. Callahan gets younger and more in shape each year. She says she has a tennis pro in Houston named Antonio who keeps her honest.

“First party of the summer,” Michelle says, and she shimmies a bit with anticipation. “Three months of no school. And a six-pack of beer. Yes, please.”

I smile, but as my eyes take in the large crowd down by the surf, my heart pounds. I don’t get out much during the school year. Michelle spends every weekend all year long at some kegger since her mother doesn’t lose her shit just because she wants to have fun sometimes.

“Do you see Jimmy Paradise yet?” she asks.

“God, shut up.”

“Elena, we’re still, like, a million miles away. He’d never hear me.”

“Just shut up anyway,” I say, and then I spot him. He’s got on shorts and a Polo and is off to the side with a bunch of other guys kicking a soccer ball around. As Michelle and I get closer, I can hear they’re all swearing at each other, and in the middle of it Jimmy stops to finish his beer, crumple the can, and toss it to some guy in the circle.

“Catch, asshole,” he says, and then he laughs. The other guy laughs and tosses the beer can back.

“No, *you* catch, you dick.”

None of the boys look at Michelle and me. I try to appear disinterested with the whole scene. Just then we hear a familiar voice.

“Hey, come sit by us.”

It’s our friend Tara with a few other girls we know. They’re sitting on a ratty quilt, smoking cigarettes. Tara pats the blanket, and Michelle and I drop down to the sand and kick off our flip-flops and open some beers.

“Is that really you, Elena, out in the land of the living?” Tara says before taking a deep, slow drag on her Marlboro.

“Can I bum one?” I ask, dodging the question. Tara tosses me her pack and her lighter, and then Michelle asks for one. Soon we’re sitting back on the quilt, watching the boys kick around the soccer ball and gossiping about the various couples who break off and head down to the surf’s edge, melting into each other like it’s their last night together on earth. It’s a big party—maybe sixty or seventy teenagers from LBJ High—and every time I turn around, some more are walking up to the perimeter, six-packs in hand. Sometimes whole coolers. There’s a boom box playing, turned up to top volume.

“I hope we don’t get shut down,” Michelle says. “That would suck.”

“Totally,” says Tara.

“Yeah,” I add, trying to track Jimmy Paradise as he breaks out from a group of guys and walks up to the surf, his back to me. A beat later some tiny blond girl darts toward him, jumping up to wrap her arms around his shoulders for an impromptu piggyback ride. She jumps sure in the knowledge that she weighs next to nothing. She jumps sure in the knowledge that Jimmy Paradise would want nothing more than to have her appear out of nowhere with her arms around his chest, her legs around his waist, her face buried into his neck. She yelps in excitement as he grabs her legs and spins around, but she’s cute about it, like a newborn puppy or something.

I can’t tell in the moonlight, but I can guarantee she has shell-pink nail polish put on by a professional, perfect,

gleaming white teeth, and sweet green eyes the color of jade. Oh, and her name is Ashleigh or Siobhan or Vanessa, and when she gets home in the evenings her mom is always up waiting for her and the two of them curl up on the living room couch and the mom grins at how much Ashleigh Siobhan Vanessa reminds her of her own girlhood, full of beauty and popularity and everything good.

Sigh.

Michelle catches me watching all of this and what happens after, too, which is that Jimmy Paradise and the girl slide down the coastline and into the inky blackness of night, becoming one of those melty couples. I finish my cigarette and dump it into the empty Budweiser can in the middle of the quilt that everyone's using for ashes and butts. Michelle leans against me and puts her head on my shoulder for a second before she presses a quick kiss on my cheek. She smells like Love's Baby Soft and cigarette smoke and she's my very best friend, so she doesn't need to say a single word.

"Anyone want another beer?" asks Tara, digging into the cooler.

"Yeah," I say, "and I want to go put my feet in the water for a sec, too."

"Want company?" asks Michelle.

"In a little bit."

I take the slick wet can from Tara and walk down to the gulf, sinking my feet into the water and letting the small waves rush back and forth until I'm ankle-deep in sand. When Joaquin

and I were little and Mami would take us to the beach, I remember I would stand by the edge of the water and wonder how long I would have to stay there before the sand would cover my knees and then my waist and then my face. I take a swallow of Budweiser and wish I liked the taste more. Mami's Bacardi and off-brand cola would be better, probably. Not that I would know. But at least cola is sweeter.

"Hey, Elena."

I startle and almost drop my beer. It's Miguel Fuentes, a classmate of mine since forever. He jumps back a bit.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, it's okay," I say and take a swallow. "I didn't see you come up."

"I wasn't sure it was you," Miguel says. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his shorts. "You hardly ever come out." We glance at each other and then switch our focus back to the dark, rippling gulf. I wrinkle my nose at the fishy stink that Mami says she never had to endure on the beaches in Cuba.

"My mom's better about me having a social life in the summer," I say. I check my wristwatch. Nine thirty. I have an hour at least before I have to be home, and I quietly give thanks that Mr. and Mrs. Callahan got back early, just as I'd hoped they would, leaving me more time to hang out.

"I guess she thinks you can relax a little more since school's out, right?" Miguel asks.

"Yeah," I answer.

He takes his hands out of his pockets and cracks his

knuckles, then shoves them back in his pockets again. I wish he had a cigarette or a beer or something so he would have something to do with his hands.

Miguel Fuentes likes me. He has since the eighth grade. I mean, he's never said it, but I'm pretty sure it's true. My experience with guys is more limited than I want to admit, but I'm pretty sure there are only a few ways for a teenage boy to show you he likes you. Like waiting by your locker to say hi or offering to let you copy his notes when you've been home sick or telling you he likes your hair even though it's brown and boring and nothing special. All of which are things Miguel has done. Why would a guy be nice to you if he wasn't also hoping that maybe one day he could get in your pants?

"You ready for junior year?" he asks me, his eyes still trained on the water.

That's the other thing that makes me think he likes me. He always asks the most obvious, rehearsed questions.

"I guess," I answer, taking another swallow of beer. "What about you?"

Miguel's eyebrows pop up, like maybe he wasn't expecting me to ask the question back.

"Screw junior year," he says at last, and I have to laugh.

"What? Did that amuse you?" He's pleased with himself, obviously.

"A little," I tell him, and Miguel grins and it's quiet between us, but it's okay. We stare out at the water, the shrieks of our classmates filling the sticky summer night behind us. Miguel

scratches at a mosquito bite on his arm, his fingernails cutting across his skin. He is *puro indio*, Mami would say, rolling her eyes when Joaquin would then tell her how racist she sounds. Miguel is the kind of brown that people on Mariposa Island think of when they think of Hispanics. Dark skin, dark eyes, Spanish last name. The funny thing is his grandparents were born in Texas, so his family's been in the United States a lot longer than mine. And I know for a fact he can't speak Spanish for shit. Who would ever guess fair-skinned Elena Finney knows more of our mother tongue?

"So," Miguel starts, his eyes still focused on the water. He swallows. I look away because I know what he's going to say. I just know it. "If you're allowed some freedom this summer, maybe you could let me take you out?"

Sometimes he comes to school with stains on his shirts. His bushy black eyebrows grow too close together into the space above his nose. Once in geometry class I swear he farted during a test.

I cannot get excited about Miguel Fuentes.

"Um . . ." but I've already crushed him by waiting too long to answer. I can tell by the way he looks away from me and down the shoreline that he's hoping a beached whale might turn up to end this conversation.

"Forget it," he says. "You're probably busy."

I wince a bit. Maybe Miguel isn't Jimmy Paradise, but he's still a nice person.

"No, I mean, it's just . . ." I can't look at him anymore, so I

stare at the sea in front of me, like the right words might float in on a raft to save us both.

“Hey, you hogging my friend here?”

Okay, so maybe it’s not a raft, but Michelle will do.

“Hey,” I say, sliding my arm around her shoulders. “There you are.”

Miguel exhales. I think he’s relieved Michelle has shown up, too. I picture both of us hours later—him in his bedroom and me in mine—only he’ll think of me and cringe and I’ll think about Jimmy Paradise and cringe and we’ll both be depressed because neither one of us got what we wanted.

Mami is right about one thing. *La vida no es justa*. Mami always says those words in Spanish, not English. Like maybe that makes them extra true.

“How’s tricks, Miguel?” Michelle asks. Miguel rubs the back of his neck and sighs.

“The usual,” he says. “Another Mariposa summer. Tourists overtaking everything, and nobody can find a freaking parking spot by the beach. But at least there’s more money in tips.” Miguel works at El Mirador with Joaquin, but as a busboy, not a waiter. Even I can admit my brother can turn up the charm for a job serving customers directly. Miguel just doesn’t have what it takes in that area.

“I need to go hunt down a beer,” he says, giving up at last. “See y’all.”

“Take care, Miguel,” I say, feeling like a real jerk.

Michelle and I link arms, and she tugs me down the

shoreline. The waves lap at my feet. “I could tell he was asking you out,” she says.

“I really don’t want to talk about it.” I find my eyes searching the night for Jimmy Paradise and that girl, my ears listening for his deep, sure-of-itself voice. Then I glance down at my feet and kick at the sand hard, watching the tiny grains spin up and collapse back down. It feels good to kick it, so I do it again and again.

“You need another beer,” Michelle suggests, stopping me by tugging me back up the beach toward Tara’s quilt. And for my last hour of freedom this is how I spend the first real night of my summer, drinking cheap beer and smoking even cheaper cigarettes, surrounded by the gossip of girls and the heat of the Texas night as it holds us in its tight and all-too-familiar grip.

CHAPTER THREE

PLEASE LET HER BE ASLEEP.

She isn't. Of course.

She's up, watching the tail end of the local ten o'clock news in the den off the kitchen, curled up on the couch on her side, with her head propped up on a throw pillow and an empty tumbler resting by her breasts. The news anchor on the television blabs on about the annual Miss Crawfish Boil pageant.

"Look at those girls," Mami says, stabbing her finger at the air in the general vicinity of the television. "Walking around in their underwear. *Fea. ¡Sucia!*"

"Definitely," I say as I watch girls that look a lot like Jimmy Paradise's latest fling flouncing around on the boardwalk in string bikinis, not underwear. Not that I correct Mami. Instead, I reach for the glass she's been drinking from that's too close to the edge of the couch for my comfort. "Here, let me get that."

“Wait,” she says, her hand suddenly on mine, her grasp stronger than I would have imagined it would be by this hour of the night. She sniffs and I freeze. “You stink of cigarettes, Elena.” She lets go of my hand and hauls herself up to a sitting position, inhaling again. “Yes, that’s cigarettes.” Her bleary eyes sharpen. She grimaces.

“It’s Mr. Callahan, Mami,” I say, walking the glass a few feet to the kitchen sink and taking enormous pains to rinse it out over and over, trying to extend the distance between us so she can’t smell me up close again. “He smoked in the car when he was bringing me home. He’s just . . . stressed from his work, I think.”

I put the glass in the dish rack and turn toward my mother, leaning my back against the sink.

Mami’s eyebrows tug together. “Why is he stressed with work? Or do you think it’s something else?” She tips her head to the side.

“I really don’t know. He just seemed stressed. He said he had a lot on his plate, and he was so grateful that I was able to help out Mrs. Callahan this summer since he was going to be gone so much.” He really had said that, even if he hadn’t smoked a cigarette. He’s like Mrs. Callahan, sort of a health nut. He plays racquetball, too. And in college at Northwestern he played soccer. Mrs. Callahan always finds a way to mention that to me, like that’s more impressive than him being a big-time oil-and-gas guy or whatever it is he does. I think it’s so cute that his soccer-stud background means more to her than his fat paycheck. I know she must really love him.

“I’m telling you,” Mami says, thrusting a finger toward me, “he’s stressed because he’s keeping up one family in Point Isabel and another back in Houston.” Her words are slurry. Lazy. She’s had a few for sure. “I hope they know you come from a fine family, where that kind of behavior is frowned upon.”

“I’m sure they know,” I say, filling a clean glass with water and heading toward Mami’s bedroom off the den. She has the biggest bedroom in our dollhouse-sized house. Joaquin’s bedroom and my bedroom are really one room with a fake wall the landlord put up to charge more money. Once inside Mami’s room, I turn down her sheets, plump up her pillows. I put the water on her nightstand, right by her collection of old romance novels. She keeps them with the covers facedown so we won’t see the bodice-ripping pictures, like we’re still little kids.

I glance around for her nightgown but can’t find it. Finally, I recover it hidden all the way at the foot of the bed in one wadded-up lump. With a quick flick of my wrists, I air it out and lay it on the bed for her, pearl buttons and lace front-side up. When Mami was a little girl in Cuba, her maid, Juanita, used to put clean sheets on her bed every night and brush her hair and help her bathe and change clothes, even when she was a teenager. Honestly, Mami was a little spoiled when she was younger, so sometimes it’s easy for me to see why she is the way she is. I don’t know why Joaquin can’t understand it. Especially considering that it’s me who helps Mami get into bed most nights anyway.

I walk back into the den. Mami is curled up on the couch, lightly snoring. I turn the television off and think briefly about leaving her there, but the one time I made the mistake of doing that, she woke up in the middle of the night panicking and not sure where she was. She jumped up in such a rush that she knocked her favorite lamp off the end table. She loved that lamp, too. It was pale pink with white piping and it cost a whole five dollars at Goodwill. Afterward, I had to give up a lot of my Callahan babysitting money to pay her back for it.

“Mami?” I say, shaking her shoulders gently. She grunts. Her thick foundation looks cheap this close up, buried into the fine lines around her eyes. “Mami, you should get to bed.”

Her eyes pop open. She sits up as if she’s been poked by something hot. “Okay!” she says. “Okay, I’m going.” She stumbles off to the bathroom, and I can hear water splashing around and the sounds of her muttering.

Finally, she heads into her bedroom. “Good night, *preciosa*,” she calls out from inside her room. Before I can answer, she’s shut her door. I hear loud footfalls and finally the squeaking sigh of her mattress as she collapses onto the bed and falls asleep.

• • •

When Joaquin gets home, I’m fresh out of the shower and towel-drying my wet head, trying to stop the replay in my mind of my awkward conversation with Miguel Fuentes. I pull my nightgown over my arms and peek out of the bathroom

to see my brother hanging his keys on the hook by the front door. He glances around the living room and kitchen area for a moment, like maybe he expected it to transform itself into something nicer while he served people cheese quesadillas at El Mirador all night.

“Hey,” I say, my voice a whisper as I step out to meet him. I hold a finger to my lips.

“She asleep?”

I nod.

“Good mood or bad?”

I shrug. “The usual, I guess.” Joaquin shrugs back, then rolls his eyes a little bit. I swear, if he keeps waiting for a good mood like the one he wants, he’s going to be waiting for the rest of his life.

I curl up on the edge of the couch. I had sort of planned to watch the late movie on television, but Joaquin would probably make fun of me for it. I miss the days when we liked the same things—the same Saturday morning cartoons, the same cheap candy bars from the Stop-N-Go down the street. I pull my arms and legs inside my nightgown and hug my knees up to my chin. Joaquin gets a beer from the refrigerator.

“Remember the time you were a kid and you sat like that?” he asks, motioning to me before sitting down on the recliner with the cat scratch marks back from that one year that Mami let us have a cat. “Only you fell off the couch and you couldn’t catch yourself, and you chipped your front tooth on the coffee table? God, was Mami pissed about that dentist bill.”

I give him a dirty look and drag my arms out through the sleeves. “Happy now?”

Joaquin takes a sip of beer. “Hey, you’re old enough to do whatever you want.”

“What planet are *you* living on?”

Joaquin ignores me and pulls a cassette tape out of his jeans pocket, flipping it over a few times.

“Anything good?”

“Someone at work gave it to me,” he answers before he slides it back into his pants pocket. “It looks like it could be good.”

“I hope it doesn’t have any of that music-to-get-depressed-to on it.” I motion like I’m gagging.

“Well, I hope it doesn’t have Madonna on it,” he tells me, then fake-chokes himself until he pretends to pass out, slumping deeper into the recliner. When he sits up, I laugh but I’m not sure what to say next.

There have been times when I’ve felt like I would die for my big brother and do anything for him, and sometimes it feels like we’re just playing out the parts somebody wrote for the stupid brother-sister sitcom that we’re on, and we barely have anything real to say to each other at all. Lately it’s been more the second one.

Outside, we hear the roar of an engine followed by another, like rockets taking off.

“Drag racers,” I say. They might even be some of my classmates post-party. I picture Jimmy Paradise and Pretty Blond

Girl sliding wildly down Esperanza Boulevard, Pretty Blond Girl's hair whipping in the wind like party streamers.

"Yeah," Joaquin says, swallowing the last of his beer. "Hope they don't wake Sleeping Beauty." He nods over his shoulder toward Mami's bedroom.

"I'm sure she's out," I say, stretching. I'm not in the mood to dissect her, and I hope he's not, either. He almost always is though.

"So how was your babysitting job?" he asks, surprising me by changing the subject.

"Fine," I say, standing up and turning away from my brother to tidy up the already-tidy kitchen. Just in case Mami missed something. She won't like waking up to anything misplaced. I grab Joaquin's empty beer can to throw it away.

"The Callahans paying you the same as last year?" Joaquin asks my back. "Or are they giving you a raise?"

"Same," I say, moistening a sponge and wiping down the counters and the refrigerator handle.

"You don't deserve a raise after all these years together? I thought they were supposed to be loaded."

I shrug and put the sponge away, turning my attention to straightening the magnets on the refrigerator. One in the shape of the Cuban flag. One in the shape of the Texas flag. One in the shape of a banana that has *I'm Ah-PEEL-ing!* printed on it. Joaquin gave it to Mami as a Christmas present one year when we were small.

"Seems to me like you'd want to make more money,"

Joaquin says. God, why is he harping on this? Three dollars an hour is pretty good even if the Callahans could definitely afford more.

“Maybe,” I say. “But I’m lucky to have the job at all.”

“You mean you’re lucky Mami lets you have it.”

I finally turn to face Joaquin. He’s not looking at me. Instead, he’s taken out the cassette his coworker gave him and is turning it over and over in his hands.

“If you’re worried that my babysitting job is going to cut into me being here to help Mami, stop, okay?” I say. “I proved you wrong on that tonight.”

Joaquin takes a deep breath. “It’s not that, Elena.” He so rarely calls me by my name. It sort of makes my throat ache with sadness when he does.

“Then what is it?” I demand.

Joaquin stares out our front windows, silent. I notice Mami forgot to shut the curtains, so I walk over and pull the blue fabric tight, making sure the edge of the good curtain is lying over the edge of the curtain with the uncleanable stain.

“Forget the babysitting and listen to me for a second,” he says to my back. When did we start having so many conversations where we can’t look at each other?

“Yeah?” I ask, squeezing the curtains briefly in my hands until the veins pop out of my knuckles.

“I’m not going to live here forever, you know,” he says. “I’m thinking about moving out at the end of the summer. Of leaving the island.”

“Okay,” I say, still not turning around.

“I mean, I’m done with high school. I’ve been saving up my money. And there’s really nothing for me here.” He pauses between each sentence, like he’s practiced this little speech. Knowing Joaquin, he probably has.

Silence sits between us, but I finally manage to shoot him a look over my shoulder. I can feel my mouth turning into a frown.

“There’s nothing for you here? Gee, thanks.”

“Elena,” he starts again, only this time when he says my name it makes me feel like a little kid, like a dumb baby. “Elena, you know what I mean.”

Facing him completely, I ask, “Where are you going to go? Why can’t you stay and take classes at MICC?” Please don’t cry, I tell myself.

“I don’t want to spend money on community college classes when I’m not even sure what I want to do with my life,” he says. “I’m thinking I want to travel for a little while. Maybe head out to California.”

“Oh, where *he’s* supposed to be?” I fire. I realize my hands are on my hips, but I don’t remember putting them there.

“It’s not about that,” Joaquin says, lowering his voice. “It’s not about him.”

“Yeah, right it’s not,” I shoot back with a roll of my eyes. Hasn’t it always been about him a little bit? At least for Joaquin? The mystery of our father has always been more important to him than to me. Why anyone would want to meet

an asshole who abandoned his family is something I can't understand.

"Don't be so loud!" he urges, standing up from the recliner. He glances at Mami's door again.

"She's not going to wake up," I tell him. "Stop worrying about it. If you can't handle waking her up, I don't know how you're going to handle telling her you're going to move out and leave us." It's a low blow and I know it. I don't care.

"Enough," says Joaquin, holding up his hands. "Let's just . . . look, it may not even happen. I may not be able to save enough money to leave anyway."

I pout for a moment, chewing on my bottom lip.

"You probably will," I say at last, my voice resigned. "Save enough, I mean."

"Maybe, maybe not. I shouldn't have even said anything. I don't want to worry you. I mean, I just graduated last week. It's a long summer."

"It's okay," I say, anxious to relieve him of guilt even while hoping he feels guilty as hell.

"I'm going to take a shower and go to bed, okay?" he asks. "I'm working a double tomorrow." He pauses and stares at me. "Are we okay?"

"Yeah," I say with a nod even though we both know we aren't.

"Hey," my brother starts, making a move toward me. We're not a hugging family. Mami doesn't hug us much, so I guess we never learned. Now Joaquin sort of puts his arm around

me, leans in, and squeezes me. He smells of Tex-Mex. His squeeze is surprisingly strong. “Look, it’s going to be okay. And you know what? If I leave, one day you can leave, too.”

That’s easy for Joaquin to say. He’s the oldest. He’s the boy. He can leave and know I’m still here on Mariposa Island with Mami. If I leave, she’s left with no one.

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, just to finish this conversation.

“Hope you have a good sleep,” he says, heading for the bathroom.

“You, too,” I answer.

I stand there until I hear the rush of the shower start, then I tiptoe down the hall to peek in on Mami. It reminds me of how I peeked in on the Callahan kids tonight to make sure they were safe in their beds. The door squeaks just a bit as I open it a crack and peer in. Mami’s a motionless lump. I wait until I glimpse her body rise and fall once, twice, and then I quietly shut the door and head back to my own room.

**CARIDAD
DE LA GUARDIA**

MIRAMAR, HAVANA

CUBA

1957

She was fourteen years old and her life was perfect. It was easy to count all the ways.

First, she was blessed with dark hair, full lips, a lovely figure, and sweet blue eyes the color of the water off Varadero Beach, where as a little girl she had walked hand in hand with her grandmother, who had doted on her as any *abuela* would, especially an *abuela* with only one grandchild to spoil and coddle and love.

She lived in a lovely home in one of the nicest neighborhoods in Havana, whose name, Miramar, meant *look at the sea*, because when you lived in Miramar that's what you could do, anytime you wished. Look at the sea stretching out in front of you like one enormous bolt of blue velvet. Look at it and imagine all the good things in your life falling into place like a row of perfectly placed dominos.

At her all-girls academy run by the Ursulinas, Caridad was a favorite of the strict Catholic nuns, who would offer up rare smiles at her masterful recitations and perfectly executed papers. Her pencil bag was always neatly organized, full of pencils sharpened to a fine point and smooth rubber erasers her father would bring home from his office. Caridad loved the clean, queer smell of them. Her school uniform, ironed each morning by her maid, Juanita, was a soft pink that contrasted so nicely with her dark, wavy locks. Her shoes were never scuffed.

After school she and her best friend, Graciela, would head over to Caridad's house in Miramar and sit in the *salita* and drink pink lemonade that matched their school uniforms, and they would gossip about Ricardo, the boy down the street, whose dark eyes and swoony good looks reminded them of the singer Pedrito Rico. Ricardo's parents and Caridad's parents were good friends, and Caridad was sure that her mother and father were anxious to pair them off one day. How lucky for her to be matched with someone so handsome! During those sunny afternoons in the *salita*, Caridad and Graciela would dream of their upcoming *quince*s at the club and what they would wear and how they would dance and what songs the band would play, certain that when the night was over, they would be transformed into women at last.

And after Graciela went home and Caridad had finished her homework, she would go into the kitchen where Juanita

would be preparing dinner, filling the house with the rich, delicious smell of pork chops or *papas rellenas*, potatoes stuffed with ground beef and olives and onions. When Juanita chopped the onions, first she cried and then she laughed at her tears, and Caridad would laugh, too, and then she would beg Juanita to make rice pudding or *dulce de leche* with *galletas* for dessert, and Juanita always would. Caridad would linger in the kitchen after the meal was ready, watching Juanita clean up. Juanita always finished with a careful wipe-down of the kitchen windows, never leaving behind the slightest streak.

And then her mother would come home from her shopping or her before-dinner drinks with her friends at the club, and her father would come home from his office, and Caridad would admire them both—how beautiful both of them were. How they could have been Hollywood stars in one of the American magazines she loved to flip through, even if she couldn't understand the words. Striking and poised, both of them had that lovely combination of dark hair and blue eyes. During dinner they would remind Caridad of all the ways she was special and pretty and clever and charming, and when they slipped into the *salita* for after-dinner cigarettes and cocktails, Caridad went to take her bath.

And in her bedroom in that lovely house near the sea, Juanita would pull back the comforter, revealing clean white sheets that were put on fresh each day, and after her bath—even though she was getting too old for it, really—Caridad

would wrap herself in a fluffy pink towel and balance herself on the stool in front of her vanity and wait patiently for Juanita to work out the tangles in her long, dark hair before she perfumed it with a splash of *agua de violetas* cologne as she had every night for as long as the teenage girl could remember.

And as she fell asleep it was as if she could hear the ocean roaring and singing outside. She couldn't, of course, but if she opened her bedroom window, she could smell it, and she would be filled with good memories of walking along the water at night with her *abuelita*. She would remember how her *abuela* would tell her that when the moon came out was when the sharks would come to shore to feed, and as they walked, Caridad would grip her grandmother's hand, filled with the delicious feeling of being scared and safe at the same time.

And after the memories of her *abuelita* had faded and she had drifted off into a sweet, restful sleep, she would wake up and do it all again the next day.

Yes, when Caridad de la Guardia was fourteen years old, her life had been perfect. At least this was how she remembered it.