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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

they're back. After all, school ended last week. It's been a 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 yearbook 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 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 drug store 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. This time I do not engage. I 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 quién suena cómico.*”

I push out a laugh, but Joaquin says, “Maybe if we’d practiced more as kids.” 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.