

CHAPTER ONE

MAY 2018



Girls who were born in Guatemala can never be president of the United States. This is all I can think about every time I see Mr. Brody in one of his yellow button-downs. He crosses in front of me in the hall and turns into his classroom. As I watch him enter, I catch a glimpse of the huge U.S. map that covers his windows. I guess the oversized map he treasures so much is vastly more important than the sunlight we might receive on that side of the building.

He never actually said the words, but it's the message I came away with. Freshman year, he asked for volunteers to run for president in a model election. I volunteered, only to be told that he wanted to make the elections realistic, with only natural-born citizens. I wanted to point out that it couldn't possibly be realistic because none of us were thirty-five. Of course I didn't say that, because I still wanted an A in the class. I did get the A, but I never quite forgave Mr. Brody.

I shake the bitter thought away as I head outdoors to the bus. It's not that I actually want to be president, but I don't like being told I can't do something just because of where I'm from. I was only a few months old when my parents left Guatemala,

but sometimes those few months feel like an anchor weighing down my entire life. Getting my citizenship two years ago, getting my college acceptance letters this spring—none of it erases the fact that I wasn't born here.

Charlie Wheeler comes up right behind me as I step outside and head toward the buses. "Hey, Millie. How's it going?"

"Hey, Charlie." That's all I say. Charlie Wheeler doesn't actually want to know how it's going. He's just one of those people who is surface-level friendly toward everyone. Convenient for the son of an aspiring U.S. senator, I'm sure.

"So I know it's still a few weeks away, but I'm having a pool party the day after graduation," he says. "Just thought I'd let you know in case you'd like to come."

Leave it to Charlie to not see the irony of his invitation. During the summer, I have to stay home to babysit because *my* mother is babysitting *his* sister. My mom has been the Wheelers' housekeeper since Charlie's little sister, Caroline, was born seven years ago. Mami does more than just clean their house and cook their meals—she's practically raised Caroline Wheeler. "I can't, Charlie, but thanks." I turn to face him as I say this, out of politeness, but quickly redirect my gaze toward the buses.

Charlie steps into the bus line with me. "Well, let me know if you change your mind. You'd be welcome to bring Chloe or Jen or whoever, really." He gives me one last hopeful smile before turning toward the path that leads to student parking.

Imagine being rich enough to host an unlimited number of people for a graduation party at your house. And then paying my mom to clean up afterward.

I board the bus and take my usual seat next to my friend Chloe. Our school is right in the middle of Corpus Christi,

Texas—two miles away from both the richest part of town and the poorest part of town. Currently, it's headed to the latter.

Chloe's concentrating on her latest sketch. She carries a small sketch pad everywhere and ninety percent of the pages are filled with drawings of horses. It's her dream to own a horse, probably not something that will happen soon. Her family is only slightly better off than mine.

"Hey," I say, sliding in next to her. "Let me see."

She angles the notebook toward me. "I'm not finished yet . . ." she says tentatively.

"It's great, Chlo. You're amazing. I could never draw anything like that."

"You have to say that because you're my best friend." She pulls the notebook back in front of her and starts shading in the horse's mane.

"I say that because I have eyes and can see how good you are."

She smiles because she knows it's true. "You going to the dance this Saturday?"

"No. My mom has to work late."

"You never get to do anything." Chloe shakes her head.

"I'm used to it, I guess," I say even though I'm not.

"How late does she work? Can you go after she's done?"

"No," I say. "The Wheelers are having a dinner party, so she's going to be there until way after midnight, serving and cleaning up." They've always been big entertainers, especially Dr. Wheeler, Charlie and Caroline's mom. And now that Mr. Wheeler is running for Senate, they spend a lot of time courting big donors.

"Well, I don't think I want to go anyway." Chloe pulls out her phone, checks it, and then shoves it back into the pocket of

her jeans. “Maybe Jen and I can come over and help you with the kids. We can watch a movie after they go to bed.”

“You don’t have to do that. You should go. I bet Ivan will be there.”

“Yeah, I know Ivan will be there, but that doesn’t mean anything really. He just wants to hang out with his stupid friends.”

I know all about his stupid friends, especially Jay Hernandez, who was my boyfriend until ten months ago. “You really should go, though,” I say to Chloe. Just because I don’t have a life outside of being an unpaid nanny doesn’t mean she shouldn’t either. For the most part, I try not to throw myself pity parties, but when I do, Mami is usually there to remind me that missing dances were not her teenage worries. She tells me about how she spent her youth avoiding assault and theft every time she rode the autobus. Or she’ll bring up her nineteen-year-old uncle, who was dragged out of his bed and arrested for sympathizing with insurrectionists who opposed Guatemala’s dictator during its thirty-six-year civil war.

“We’re almost done with stupid high school boys anyway,” I remind Chloe, since I can tell she’s still thinking about Ivan. “I can’t wait until we meet some college guys, you know.”

“I know, girl. And I can’t wait for our road trip. I just put away another fifty bucks that I got for my birthday.” Chloe and I are saving for a trip out west this summer. Chloe will visit her older sister in Arizona and then drop me off in California to start my fall semester at Stanford.

So far, I’ve told my mother nothing about this.

Mami doesn’t know that I was offered—and accepted—a full ride to Stanford. She thinks I’m going to the Texas A&M satellite school right here in Corpus Christi, since they’ve also offered me a full-ride scholarship. And I was tempted to stay

here. I really was. But I turned them down, without telling Mami. I’m waiting for the right time to break it to her that I’ll be going almost two thousand miles away.

Chloe looks at me as if she can tell what I’m thinking. “Your mom is going to flip when you tell her about California. How’s she going to keep your virginity intact from so far away?”

I laugh. “Stop it.” Although she’s barely more than an in-name-only Catholic, Mami lives by a lot of Catholic values—no stealing, no taking the name of the Lord in vain, no sex before marriage.

“Girl, I’m going to miss you,” Chloe adds. “Never mind your mom, what am *I* going to do without you?”

“Oh, I’m going to miss you too. Everyone at Stanford is going to suck compared to you.”

The bus pulls up to our stop. As Chloe and I get off, I pull my long hair into a ponytail. All the women in my family have straight black hair that only slightly curls with the Texas humidity.

We walk together until Chloe gets to her house. I have two more blocks on my own. Two blocks of perfectly alone, quietly mine time. It’s the only time I get completely to myself—to breathe, to think, without someone wanting something from me or wanting to tell me something. I take in the hot, humid air, pretending, for just two blocks, that it isn’t stifling. For those two blocks it’s fresh spring air—cool and calming.

And then I get home.

Sele has done the best a thirteen-year-old can do to hold things together for the past half hour, since she and the younger two got home from their schools. It’s my siblings’ free time to watch TV or play before the homework battle begins with nine-year-old Javi and six-year-old Ceci.

I dump my heavy backpack on the floor by the door, not to be picked up until seven-thirty, which is when I usually start my own homework. For now, it's time to play mami.

"Okay, guys. Let's turn off the TV. Time for homework."

"But this show's almost over!" Javi says, jumping up from the couch.

"Five more minutes, and that's it," I say. After I take a quick trip to the bathroom and the five minutes have expired, I try again.

Javi groans.

"Wait!" pleads Ceci, grabbing the remote from Sele, who's about to turn it off.

Sele rolls her eyes and lets Ceci have the remote. She's been dealing with them since school let out, and she's tired of it. She settles in at the table with her math book.

I focus on prying Javi away from the TV. He hates homework almost as much as I hate making him do it. "Come on, Javi. Spelling test is tomorrow. It won't take long."

"But Millie. I haven't had much free time."

"More free time than me. I still have to help you and make dinner. Now, let's go!"

Javi stomps his foot and sets off to find his backpack. He's named after our dad, Javier Vargas. Papi worked for an oil refinery out in the Gulf until he died of a heart attack almost three years ago. Now, Mami works a lot more. She used to work part-time at the Wheelers, but after Papi died, they gave her a raise, more hours, and the chance to clean Mr. Wheeler's law office as well. Sele and I have picked up the slack at home. It's just what you do; there's no choice. When a tragedy happens, you pick up the pieces and move on. That's what I learned from Mami, who's cried only once in my eighteen years—the day my papi died.

Ceci comes into the kitchen too now. With Javi resigned to do homework, she has no one on her side, and she surrenders. She starts with her preferred assignment—reading—delaying the math worksheet and spelling words until later, when I'll have to threaten to call Mami if she doesn't do them.

She grabs her Beverly Cleary book from her backpack and a flashlight from the counter and crawls into a cupboard by the stove. That is where she reads, where she has space to herself in this tiny house.

As a first-grader, Ceci is already reading at a fourth-grade reading level. I think back to my first-grade experience. It was nothing like that. I was speaking English, but barely learning to read, sounding things out. I didn't start reading Beverly Cleary until I was in fifth grade, after four years of pull-out sessions with the school reading interventionist, Mrs. Lacey. Mrs. Lacey had a sound board that showed all forty-four sounds that make up the English language. I remember asking her how there could be forty-four sounds when there were only twenty-six letters in the alphabet.

I've come a long way since then. The summer after sophomore year, I spent countless hours going through SAT prep books from the library and taking online practice tests. But I still found time to start teaching Ceci to read. She wasn't even in kindergarten yet, but I didn't want her to suffer through embarrassing reading pullouts once she did start school. And now, we have the result of those efforts sitting in the cupboard diving into a two-hundred-page book.

An hour later, I've successfully plowed through homework with Javi and Ceci, and they've been rewarded with thirty more minutes of TV while I get dinner ready. Mami has called to remind us that she's working late because the Wheelers are

at a campaign function. This Senate run is keeping both Mr. Wheeler and Dr. Wheeler busier than ever, which means more responsibilities for Mami, and by default more responsibilities for me.

After dinner, once Javi and Ceci have cleared the table, I remind them to take showers and get ready for school tomorrow.

As I start the dishes, I try to think of a way to tell Mami that I'll be leaving. At first, I didn't tell her about Stanford's offer because I assumed that I couldn't take it, that I couldn't leave her and the kids to manage by themselves. But then the deadline came, and I had to decide, and I found myself accepting. Afterward, the guilt overcame me, and I just could not bring myself to tell her.

Time is running out, though, and I'll have to break the news to her—to everyone—soon.

CHAPTER TWO



This Sunday is dollar day at the Texas State Aquarium. It's the only time we can afford to go. Half the city has come to the same conclusion, I realize as we stand in a slow-moving line two blocks long. We even came early, but not early enough it seems. Slugs move faster than this mass of ice-chest-toting, stroller-pushing parents.

Mami had to work. She's watching Caroline Wheeler while Mr. and Dr. Wheeler are at a political appearance in Austin and Charlie is out of town with some friends. I try not to be mad that she has to spend her whole Sunday carting Caroline around to her art lessons, dance lessons, soccer games, whatever activities that overscheduled child is enduring. I know it's overtime, extra money for us. Sele is going to need braces soon, and I'll be going to college next year.

Chloe drove us here, in exchange for me paying for her ticket and bringing lunch. She's the youngest of three, so she doesn't have younger siblings and enjoys hanging out with us. We're in line behind a young mom who's trying to hold on to her wiggly toddler while the baby in her stroller wrestles in his seat and yelps every time he realizes he's being restrained.