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### The Summer of Mom

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The Summer of Mom  
By Sonia Valdiviezo  
Advisor: Pamela L. Laskin  
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Submitted as partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at the City College of the City University of New York

## Chapter 1

The year was 1979, I was nine and a half, and it was going to be the best summer ever. When my mother complained that she had been feeling ill, my father said that what she needed was a family vacation. So he made plans to drive us all to California on Memorial Day.

“It’s time we see my brother’s new house,” Dad said. Uncle Sonny lived in a place near Los Angeles called Balboa Island. His house was on the beach so Dad said it would be loads of fun for us to stay there. We lived in El Paso, Texas, where there isn’t any beach for hundreds of miles and this would be the best vacation ever.

“Can I go to Disneyland, too?” I asked. My parents had taken me there when I was four. There was a picture of me with Mickey Mouse in our photo album, but I didn’t remember having been there.

“If you stay out of trouble,” Dad said. “You can stay at your uncle’s ‘til the end of June.” We made a deal. If I did well in school and did my chores at home and didn’t get in trouble, then Mom and I would stay for a long vacation until Dad returned to pick us up.

“When your father picks us up, we can all go to Disneyland.” Mom had promised.

Summer was almost here. I couldn’t wait. I had done all my chores and all my homework. Not once had I gotten in trouble. It was now the last week of school.

I grabbed a banana from the kitchen counter and poked my head into Dad’s office. I smelled the coffee he was drinking.

“Dad, you know what today is?” I peeled the banana.

“It’s Tuesday.” He was sitting at his desk opening and closing the drawers. The sunlight was coming in through all the windows. Dad’s office didn’t have any curtains like the rest of the rooms in our house.

“No, I mean there’s only three more days for school to be out and I haven’t gotten into

trouble.” I took the last bite of the banana and threw the peel into the wastebasket on the corner by the door.

“That’s good.” He said from behind his stack of papers. Dad was always reading papers and writing notes on them. Sometimes he would yell on the telephone and wave the papers in the air while speaking. “Aren’t you going to be late for school?”

“Mom’s not up, yet.” I spoke softly and sat on the sofa across the desk. Maybe Dad wouldn’t hear me and then I wouldn’t have to go to school.

“Well, go wake her.” He waved his hand at me.

I didn’t want to wake Mom. Whenever I did, she would get up grumpy and tell me to call our neighbor Mrs. Roman to walk me to school. I didn’t want Mrs. Roman to walk me to school because she always took the long way and then would only walk me up to Harper Street and that’s where the Beltran brothers, Joey and Paul, lived right on the corner. I hated going past their house because whenever they saw me coming they’d let their dog, Killer, out of the house and it would run to the fence and start jumping and barking at me. I had a secret plan to one day take our dog, Lobo, with me and sic him on the Beltran brothers.

“Vivian, stop daydreaming,” Dad ordered. “Go wake your mother. Now.”

I knocked at the bedroom door and waited. I knocked again but Mom didn’t answer. I could hear her snoring. I turned the doorknob and opened the door just far enough to peek into the room. “Mom,” I said. “Mom, it’s seven thirty.” Mom didn’t move. She kept snoring. “Mom?” I said a little louder. Still nothing. The sun was peering through the drapes and I could tell the window was open because the breeze puffed up the curtain and then flattened out. I noticed the curtain would puff out when Mom snored and would flatten out when she breathed in. It was funny. I giggled every time the curtain puffed up.

“Vivian!” I heard Dad behind me. “What are you doing? I told you to wake your mother.” He walked over and pulled the drapes open. I nudged Mom.

“What’s going on?” She sat up rubbing her eyes. “Why didn’t anyone wake me?” She threw the sheets aside. “You’re still here?” She said to me. “Why aren’t you at school, yet?”

“She’s waiting for you to get up,” said Dad. “Get any sleep last night?” He asked Mom.

“Not much,” she said stretching and yawning. “Hand me the phone, Vivian. I’ll call Mrs. Roman.”

“I’m going to the shop,” Dad said. “It’s a busy day. Won’t be back ‘til after four,” he grabbed the car keys from the nightstand and left the room.

“Can’t you drop her off?” Mom called out to Dad.

“You ready to go, Viv?” Dad said from the living room.

“Hurry,” Mom said. “Grab my purse.” Mom’s purse was sitting on the chair next to the bed. It was a big bulky heavy bag. I picked it up and handed it to Mom. She rummaged through it quickly. “Here, take this for your lunch.”

“One dollar? Lunch costs one fifty.”

“One fifty! Boy, every time I turn around it goes up.”

“Should I ask, Dad?”

“No, don’t bother him. Here’s another dollar.”

“Can I keep the change?”

“No. I want it back, young lady.”

“Aw, Mom.”

“Now go, your dad’s leaving.”

As I ran to grab my books from the kitchen table I heard the car engine turn on out on the

driveway. Dad honked and I ran out the door into the odor of gasoline. I knew Dad was taking the shortcut because he drove down Maple Street and turned onto Pershing Avenue and continued down the hill under the railroad bridge. Our house was on the foothills of the Franklin Mountains, just between Crocket Elementary and Coldwell Elementary and all the kids on my block went to Crocket. I went to Coldwell because Mom said that the principal at Crocket didn't speak any Spanish, and she preferred that I went to a school where the principal could speak Spanish because she always felt more comfortable speaking Spanish. Mom grew up in a city in Mexico and didn't come to the United States until she was a grown up so that when she spoke English she spoke with an accent. Dad grew up in Santa Ana, California. He said that I was a lucky kid because I was what he called a first generation American on my mother's side, just like him. Only he was first generation on the side of his father who emigrated from Argentina.

"Where's your lunch? Did you forget it?" Asked Dad.

"Nope, Mom gave me money." I turned the knob on the car radio.

"She did, did she?" He kept his eyes on the road.

"Yup. Two dollars." I showed him the bills.

"Put them away some place where you won't lose them." He shook his head.

I folded them together into a tiny square and put them into my shoe.

"What in heaven's name are you doing, Viv? Put them in your pocket."

"I don't have any." I was wearing shorts because it was springtime and it was hot and dry. Shorts never had pockets.

"Tell your mom to get you some clothes with pockets in them."

"Yes, sir." I said and hummed to the music on the radio.

"And why are you wearing a yellow sock and a green one?"

“That’s all there was in my sock drawer.” As Dad turned onto Boone Street I could see many kids playing on the schoolyard and some were walking along the sidewalk. Christopher Handsel held up the sign for Dad to stop. He was a school crossing guard and had a special hall pass that gave him permission to be late to homeroom class. He stuck his tongue out at me as we went past him.

“Okay, honey. Have a good day at school,” Dad pulled up at the curbside. “Give me a kiss.”

“Bye Daddy,” I kissed him on his bristly cheek. “See you later,” I got out of the car.

“That’s a funny looking car,” said Christopher. “What kind of car is that? My Dad drives a Buick.”

“So,” I said. “My dad’s car was made in Japan.”

“Japan? You know, the Japanese are our enemies.”

“No they’re not.”

“They are, too.”

“Naw, uh.” I stopped to think of something to say to stupid Christopher that would cut him down, but it was too late. He was now busy holding up the stop sign again. I went to meet Celi Jodorowsky. We had been friends since kindergarten. She was a year older because she started kindergarten when she was six instead of five like me.

“Hi, Celi.”

“Hey, you wanna play hopscotch with Maria and me? We’re just about to start a new game. Grab a rock.” Celi was a pretty girl with long dark hair and freckles, but she was called a tomboy because she mostly wore blue jeans and sneakers. She didn’t like wearing dresses because she couldn’t wrestle with her brothers when she wore a dress. Celi was taller than me,

but not as tall as Maria Galvan. Maria was almost twelve, but she was still in the fourth grade because she had come from Cuba when she was ten and didn't speak any English, so that's why the principal put her three whole grades behind.

I tossed my rock and it landed on the number 9. That meant I went first. I tossed my rock again and it landed on the number one square. I skipped through all the squares up to number 10. I hopped on my right foot to each square until I bumped into Joey standing on square number three. "Go away," said Celi. "We're playing."

"Make me," said Joey. He was a big bully that was in my homeroom class. Paul was his skinny brother. Everyone called them Laurel and Hardy.

"Go away, Hardy." Maria said to Joey. "Or I'll make you." Joey turned around and yanked at Maria's ponytail. She kicked him on the shin and got away. She ran around him calling him a big fat slob while Paul chased her.

"I'll get you skinny bones!" Celi shouted at Paul, but he grabbed her by the arm. I picked up my rock and threw it at Paul but I missed. Then I tried to kick him but Joey tackled me to the ground. Maria clobbered Joey on the head with her social studies book and he fell over.

"Oh, my head," he cried. Paul released Celi and ran over to Joey. As Paul bent over to help his brother up, Maria kicked him in the butt and he toppled onto Joey. "Get off of me," Joey yelled at Paul. "Go get 'em!" Celi, Maria, and I grabbed our books and ran towards the building just as the school bell rang. "I'll get you. You'll see." Joey shouted at us.

"Yeah, just you wait and see!" Added Paul.

I ran to homeroom class. My teacher, Mrs. Keitch, wasn't sitting at her desk yet. The room was bright because the sunlight came through the windows that reached all the way up to



the ceiling. The second bell rang and the national anthem played through the overhead speakers. At the front of the room Joey's desk was empty. I looked around, but he wasn't anywhere. While I pledged allegiance, I scanned my eyes from side to side. *What if Joey came in and hit me?* Then I'd be in trouble for fighting. Mrs. Keitch would send me to the principal's office and then they'd call Mom. Then Dad would really hit the roof. He'd say I was causing Mom unnecessary worries. Dad didn't like for Mom to worry. He always told her not to, but she did anyway.

When the announcements came on I sat at my desk and opened my notebook to write. Mrs. Keitch had us write down the announcements everyday. There were now only a few blank sheets left in my spiral bound notebook with a drawing of Snoopy and Woodstock on the cover. Outside there was noise from the construction of a new highway along Trowbridge Lane. With the noise from jackhammers rattling and tractors digging, I couldn't hear what was being announced. I thought it would be best to write a goodbye letter to Mom and Dad, just in case Joey killed me in the hallway or at lunchtime.

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*If I don't see you again, I want my Holly Hobby tea set to go to Grandma Lita, but give Teddy to St. Joseph's Church for the orphan children. I will miss you. Love, Vivian*

"Put that away," Mrs. Keitch went past my desk to the front of the classroom. "Good morning, class." She greeted us the same way everyday.

"Good morning, Mrs. Keitch," we answered in unison. Joey walked in. He was catching his breath and his big fat cheeks were red and sweaty. His hair was wet and his blue shirt stuck to his round belly. He looked gross.

"Joey, why are you late?" Mrs. Keitch asked him.

“I fell down,” he answered. Everyone laughed. Joey puffed up his chest.

“We’re waiting, Joey. Sit down,” Mrs. Keitch put on her glasses. Joey squeezed into the desk chair and turned to me with squinty eyes and shaking his fist at me. “Take out a sheet of paper. You should all remember what today is.” Mrs. Keitch opened her book.

I couldn’t remember. I looked over to Cloe Siegel. She was the smartest kid in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. She took out a sheet of paper from her neat Trapper notebook. I copied her and took out a sheet of paper, too. “The first word is ‘manageable,’” said Mrs. Keitch as she strolled between the rows of desks. It was our Tuesday morning spelling test. I wrote down ‘manageable’ then tried to think of a sentence to put it in. I looked at the bulletin board. It was nearly empty. The purple paper that covered the corkboard was faded and I could make out the outline where there had been letters spelling ‘Happy Easter.’ The yellow border was nearly all gone but the paper eggs and bunnies were still there. Our book reports were no longer pinned along the edge of the chalkboard and the bookcases that formed the reading circle were almost empty of books. I hoped that Mrs. Keitch would choose me to help her take down the rest of the classroom decorations. She never chose me. She only chose the kids that finished their work first. Usually that was Cloe and Annette. They were both smart, but Annette Rincon was the prettiest girl. She had long straight hair, big green eyes and honey colored skin. My hair was wavy and usually tangled and my eyes were brown. That’s probably why we weren’t friends.

I wrote *My hair is not manageable.*

After the spelling test, Mrs. Keitch took up our papers. “Thursday is our end-of-the-year picnic and some of you still haven’t turned in your permission slips,” she said. “If you don’t have your permission slip by tomorrow, you will be staying with Mr. Gills 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class.” A wave of grumbling went around the classroom. Nobody wanted to stay back with the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.

Everyone knew that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was for babies.

“Vivian, why haven’t you turned in your permission slip? Is your mother joining us?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Take her this note for me.”

“Ooooh,” the class mumbled. Everyone knew that having a note sent home usually meant trouble. Just like in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade when Mrs. Gardner sent a note home to tell Mom and Dad that she had found me hiding under the desk taking a nap. It had been the day after Uncle Vic was babysitting my cousins and me. He took us to Western Playland while our parents went to visit Nana, our great-grandmother, in a hospital across the border in Juarez City.

“Don’t tell anyone I brought you here,” Uncle Vic said. “Let’s keep this a secret.” We all agreed. He was our favorite uncle. He bought us cotton candy and gave us quarters to ride any ride we wished. I got on the spinning airplanes, the train, and the bumper cars. The next day I was sleepy so I hid under my desk to take a nap.

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“Three more days ‘til school is out,” said Celi on our way to the cafeteria. I looked behind me to see if Joey was following us. “Why do you keep looking back?” She asked.

“I’m scared,” I whispered. “What if fat Hardy comes and gets us.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get my brother to beat him up.” Celi’s brother Michael was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. All the big kids liked him because he played football and could throw the ball very far.

“What are you doing this summer? We’re going camping at the Grand Canyon.”

“Wow, how neat.” I said as Celi and I got in line in the noisy cafeteria.

“Wanna come? We’re going for the Fourth of July. Dad says it’s the best time to go there?” Celi smiled.

“I can’t,” I said. “We’re going to California to visit my uncle.”

“When are you going?”

“On Memorial Day. And if I don’t get into trouble, I’ll get to go to Disneyland.” I hopped forward out of line and grabbed a tray.

“I know!” Her eyes opened wide. “You can come with us after you go to California.” She picked up a tray. The cafeteria lady scooped up a heap of Spaghetti and dropped it on our plates, then tossed some round gooey meatballs on top. Steam was rising from the pasta and it smelled like pepper.

“I don’t think my dad will let me.” I placed a carton of chocolate milk on my tray.

“Do what I do,” Celi suggested. “I always ask my mom first, and then she talks to Dad, and then I usually get to go.”

“Really? My mom doesn’t do that. She always tells me to ask Dad.”

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We ate our lunch as fast as we could. The faster we ate the more time we would have to play out in the schoolyard. I’d forgotten all about Joey, until we got outside. He was easy to spot because on hot days like this one he was all sweaty and his t-shirt was wet and stuck to his belly. “There he is.” I pointed him out to Celi.

“Don’t worry. It’s too hot he can’t catch his breath to chase us.” She said, but it wasn’t true. Joey was coming right at us with Paul running behind him.

“I’m gonna get you,” Joey announced as he stormed in our direction. Paul rushed into us hitting my arm and knocking me aside. Then he grabbed Celi’s ponytail.

“Let go of me, you skinny bones!” Celi yelled.

“Quick, Joey. Punch her,” Paul said.

“A fight, a fight!” I heard people yell as I wrestled from under the huge weight of Joey’s blubber. I kicked and screamed, but he was too heavy to push off. I felt a hand grab my shoulder and lift me up. My hair was in my face, but I squirmed and kicked and someone yelled.

“Stop that! Right now!” Mr. Griego’s voice boomed.

“Oh, no.” I was in BIG trouble. Mom and Dad were sure to punish me now. I wouldn’t get to go on summer vacation. I would grow old without ever seeing Uncle Sonny’s house.

“But Mr. Griego,” Celi pleaded. “It was Joey. He started it.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“All right.” Mr. Griego said and he let go of my arm. “Everyone follow me to my office.”

## Chapter 2

Mr. Griego separated us all. He made the boys wait inside the assistant principal’s office and the girls wait with the Office Lady. He forbade us to talk to one another but Celi and I used sign language.

“Quiet.” Said Mrs. Holguin. She was a nice Office Lady. I mean, *secretary*. Mom told me never to call her Office Lady. She said it was bad manners.

“But we’re not talking,” argued Celi.

“I can see your hands signing.” Mrs. Holguin said.

I hid my hands in embarrassment—because Mrs. Holguin was aware that we knew how to speak a little bit of sign-language. If Mrs. Holguin told Mom that I had been using sign-language to chat while waiting to see the principal, I would definitely never set a foot on Uncle

Sonny's beach.

"It's not supposed to be a privilege to be missing class." Mrs. Holguin shook her head at us. She told Celi and me to sit with our backs to each other so that we wouldn't get to talk or sign with our hands. Waiting was boring. There was nothing to do. I needed to go to the bathroom. Mrs. Holguin was typing at her desk. I enjoyed the sound of the typewriter. I tried to read what she was typing on the sheet, but it was too high for me to see what she wrote. I raised my hand.

"What is it?" She asked.

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

"It's *'may I go to the bathroom'*." She stopped typing and scratched at the sheet with a funny white eraser that looked like a pencil.

"*May* I go to the bathroom?" I asked again.

"No. You'll have to wait until after Mr. Griego dismisses you." She began typing again. Her fingers moved fast and the click, click, click, sounded the same as when I jump on my lemon twist on the wooden deck at home.

I pretended I was already on summer vacation. I was having so much fun imagining what it would be like to swim in the ocean when Mr. Griego called me into his office. The room was filled with the odor of cigarette smoke. I held my breath for a moment, but then I had to breathe. Nobody in my house ever smoked, except sometimes Uncle Joe had a pipe and that didn't smell yucky. Mr. Griego told me to sit on one of the big chairs that faced his desk.

"Now, young lady," he said. "What happened out there?" He looked right into my eyes.

"Joey attacked us first." I turned to the window. I could hear the roaring of the construction, but the window was too high for me to see outside.

“Yes, I know. But according to him you had already fought this morning.” His face didn’t look friendly. Hair was missing at the top of his head and he had lots of gray hair on the sides above his ears. I wondered if he was hot wearing a suit and tie.

“No, sir.” I said. “He came after us this morning, too.” I sat up straight in my chair.

“Tell me what happened.” He leaned into his arms on the desk.

I told Mr. Griego all about the hopscotch with Maria and Celi.

“I see,” Mr. Griego took out a sheet of paper and grabbed his fancy pen from his desk drawer.

Oh, no, I thought. Not another note. I already had one note from Mrs. Keitch. Now, my dad would never let me out all summer. I would have to spend the whole summer doing chores and listening to my father tell me how badly I had behaved and that it was my own fault I wasn’t going to Uncle Sonny’s beach house. I wouldn’t get to go to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon. I would have the worst summer of all.

“Please don’t write a note, Mr. Griego. I promise I won’t fight anymore.” I stood to look at the sheet on his desk.

“Sit, sit,” he waved his hand with the pen at me. “Don’t you think your parents should hear of your behavior at school?”

“But it’s not fair.” I leaned forward pursing my lips. “It was Joey’s fault. He always picks on me. He picks on everybody.” I whined.

“Didn’t you hit him back?” He asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

The telephone on Mr. Griego’s desk rang and he answered it. While he spoke into the phone he became upset. I worried that he would call Mom and Dad to tell them that I would

have to stay in detention that afternoon, and the longer he spoke on the phone the angrier he looked. Mr. Griego began raising his voice. “Mrs. Holguin,” he shouted with his hand over the receiver.

“Yes, Mr. Griego?” Mrs. Holguin stood at the door.

“Get me central office. I’ve got a bus emergency here.” He told her and then spoke again into the telephone.

I thought about how to tell Mom and Dad that it was Joey’s fault. That he made me fight because he was such a big fat bully. I wondered if his phone call would make Mr. Griego forget to write a note to my parents. Mom said that sometimes grown-ups forget things when an emergency comes up.

“Hmm, hmmm, hmmm.” Mr. Griego kept saying into the telephone. Each time he said another ‘hmm’ his face turned redder. His hand moved quickly as he wrote with his fancy pen. It sounded like when Lobo knocks his bowl over and it rolls down the porch steps.

“Ok, young lady.” Mr. Griego said as he hung up the telephone. “Where were we?” He felt around the desk searching for something. “Oh, yes. Should there be consequences for fighting at school?” He looked at me.

“I guess,” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Should people fight?”

“No,” I nodded.

“Should kids be allowed to fight?”

“No,” I nodded again.

“But you were fighting, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” I nodded. I noticed a half-eaten apple on Mr. Griego’s desk. Mom would never



let me bite into an apple without eating it all. She said food should not be wasted.

“There is no way around it. If I punish Joey, I have to punish you, too.”

“Then don’t punish him,” I whispered.

“What was that? Speak up.” He stood from his chair and grabbed a paper cup to pour water from the cooler stationed at the corner of the room.

“Don’t punish Joey,” I said looking at the floor. “If you don’t punish Joey, then you don’t have to punish anyone.”

Mr. Griego laughed. I looked behind me, but there was nobody there. I didn’t know what he was laughing at.

“Excuse me,” he said smiling and took a sip of water. “Wait right there.” He went out the door.

I waited in my seat. It was a big leather chair like the one Uncle Vic had in the basement of Grandma Lita’s house. Mr. Griego’s desk was covered with papers. The telephone had a bottom row of clear plastic buttons and a red one at the end. Some of the buttons were lit and others were blinking. Behind his desk was a bookcase stacked with big books and a giant plant at the corner next to the door. He came back into his office holding a thick black book.

“You see this?” He lifted the book for me to see. “This is the rule book. Now, you agree that I have to follow the rules. Right?” He flipped through the pages.

“Yes, sir.”

“It says here that students who are caught fighting for the first time should receive a warning.” He put his finger on the opened book. “So you know what I’m going to do?”

“I dunno,” I shrugged my shoulders.

“I’m going to give you a verbal warning.” He shut the book closed. “If you are caught

fighting again, I will place you in detention and call your parents. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.” I smiled. He signaled to me to follow him to the door.

“No more fighting, young lady. Now, go back to class.” He nudged me towards Mrs. Holguin’s desk.

Mrs. Holguin stopped typing and rolled the sheet out of the typewriter and folded it to fit into an envelope and set it aside. While Mrs. Holguin wrote me a pass back to class, I turned to look at Celi who was sitting behind me. I didn’t say anything. I used sign-language with my hands behind my back. Celi and I had learned sign-language from the deaf kids at our school. When I was in the first grade, my teacher, Mrs. Flores, introduced our class to the deaf kids in the special education class. The kids were just like us except they spoke with their hands. That day I went home and showed Mom and Dad how to say thank you in sign-language. Mom was excited and the more I learned the more she would brag to my aunt Mandi that I was tri-lingual. Aunt Mandi was Mom’s twin sister. She and Uncle Joe didn’t have any girls. They had two boys, my cousins Javi and Leo.

“Didn’t I tell you not to do that?” Mrs. Holguin nodded her head in disapproval. “Here’s your pass. Go directly back to class.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I went out into the hallway counting the floor tiles all the way back to class. When I got back to fourth period class, the lights were out and everyone was sitting on the floor listening to a filmstrip. It was about outdoor safety. The voice from the recorder was telling us to remember what to do in case we were lost from our group during a field trip. I handed my hall pass to Mr. Phelps, our science teacher, and he pointed to a spot where he wanted me to sit. I sat down. Next to me was Cloe. She had a round face that was creamy white with tan freckles and very dark black hair and wore eyeglasses. In the second grade she taught

me how to make a fire. We were playing out in her backyard one day when she had a craving for roasted marshmallows. “We can make our own,” she said and I followed her into the kitchen. She reached up to the kitchen drawer and grabbed a box of matches. Then we went out into the garage and took some little black squares out of the bag of charcoal that her dad used for the barbecue grill. We placed them inside a pail in the middle of the backyard and lit a match, but nothing happened. Then Cloe went back into the garage and came back with a bottle of liquid that smelled of gasoline. She poured some of the fluid into the bucket and we lit another match. This time, flames went up into the sky and almost touched my face. We screamed and ran around trying to put the fire out. I grabbed one of the flowerpots that Cloe’s mom, Mrs. Siegel, had under the tree and I threw handfuls of dirt into the pail. The fire finally went out. Mrs. Siegel came running outside waving the dishrag at the smoke. We made a great commotion, but her mother shouted at us. “Keep still, you two.” She demanded.

We cleaned up the mess and went back inside. Cloe’s dad said it was good that I threw dirt at the fire, but I think Cloe got into big trouble after I went home because she never invited me to play at her house after that.

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When the filmstrip was over, Mr. Phelps turned the lights back on and we all went back to our desks. Mr. Phelps said that we were set for our class picnic on Thursday. “Don’t forget to remind your parents to pack you an emergency name tag.” He reminded us as the bell rang. It was time for P.E. and everyone pushed and shoved to get out the door. The hallways were filled with kids getting into their lockers. I had a top locker so I had to stand on my tippy toes because I was still too short to reach the top shelf of my locker, where I kept my baseball cap. Mom made me wear a cap and all sorts of sunscreen on my face because she said that the sun in El

Paso was much too strong and could cause me skin damage like it had to my Nana. That's why I always wore a hat in the sun just like Grandma Lita always wore a hat when she went outdoors. She was my favorite grandma because she lived around the corner from our house and my dad said it was ok for me to walk to Grandma Lita's all by myself. I could go there anytime. Grandma Lita had a beautiful garden in her backyard and while she was out in the garden she wore a gigantic straw hat and denim overalls like farmers do. I loved helping her pick tomatoes and herbs from her garden.

I grabbed my purple cap from my locker and ran to the gym. Coach Tenario was shouting at some boys to leave the basketballs alone and line up for warm-ups. I liked doing warm-up exercises but not the push-ups. I hate push-ups they're awful. If I had to do more than five, I couldn't. I always got stuck with my face on the ground.

"Ten, nine, eight," Coach Tenario was counting as all the fourth graders did jumping jacks. Jumping jacks and scissors were fun. It was a hot day my cheeks felt red and my head felt sweaty under my cap. Joey and Paul were already standing against the fence. Whenever students got into a fight at school, they lost their privilege of playing during P.E., but Coach Tenario always made them exercise. Joey said he couldn't because it was too hot. Coach Tenario reminded him that eating a big lunch and not exercising was very bad for his heart.

"That's why he's fat," yelled Christopher. Everyone laughed.

"I'm not fat," shouted Joey. "I'm big and strong!"

"You're like a buffalo," yelled a girl. I think it was Cloe, but I'm not sure.

"That's enough," ordered Coach Tenario. "Get back to doing triangles." His deep voice boomed at us as he walked over to where Paul and Joey were standing. He spoke to them but he was too far away for me to hear what he said. Then I saw Joey pointing at me. *That big fat*

*Hardy*, I thought. *He's a big baby; always tattling on everyone.* Coach Tenario told them to go over and stand under the shade of a tree. There weren't many trees in El Paso, because it is a city at the edge of west Texas where everything is a mountainous desert for hundreds of miles, but our school had planted many trees a long time ago, before I was born, and now those trees were big and tall and shady. Last year, the school had a campaign not to have the trees torn down even if it took many gallons of water to keep them alive. The whole school raised money to save the trees. The eighth graders helped by donating a portion of the funds for their graduation party. Mr. Griego said that it was very noble of them, especially because it was their last year at Coldwell and they wouldn't be enjoying the trees anymore.

Joey and Paul each stood under a different tree. Coach Tenario had them doing jumping jacks and push-ups on the ground. Joey just lay there but he couldn't push himself up. "I can't," he cried. "I just can't."

"That's what you get for hitting girls," Christopher and Kevin shouted at him. "You're a sissy, you can only fight girls." They taunted him. Coach Tenario ordered Christopher and Kevin to do ten more push-ups.

"That's for being loud mouths," he said to them.

"But Coach," pleaded Christopher. "You said we should never hit girls."

"Yeah," said Kevin. "And Joey and Paul were picking on Vivian and Celi at lunch."

"I know, I know," answered Coach Tenario. "They're already punished. Now leave them alone and go play." The boys ran happily towards the football field along with everyone else in the fourth grade. Coldwell Elementary was one of the few schools in our area that had a football field and we shared it with Crocket and Hamilton elementary schools during Saturday morning football games. The fourth graders dispersed into groups across the field and the black

top. Some groups grabbed soccer balls and ran to the farthest end of the field. Others went in the other direction with bats and softballs, and some grabbed basketballs to play on the blacktop. I went with the volleyball group over to the corner where there were two nets. Volleyball was my favorite sport. I was good at it too.

Playing in the hot sun made me very thirsty so I went to get a drink from the water fountain. There were four spigots at the fountain and the knobs were below at the side of the white porcelain. It was stretched like a trough along the brick wall of the school auditorium. Four people could drink at the same time. Occasionally students would splash each other on purpose just to start a water fight. Water fights were the most fun when balloons got involved. With only a few days left for school to be out, a water fight could start at any moment, because every day was warmer than the day before. There was a line of students waiting to get a drink and the boy standing at the front was Joey. He was wearing his t-shirt with the hem folded up over his chest so that his wobbly belly could be seen. His blue jean shorts seemed twice the size of mine. I looked up at his face and that was a big mistake. Joey was looking right at me.

“Who have we here?” He shoved me.

“Leave me alone,” I shouted. “You’re a big bad ugly...” I stopped because he had puffed up his chest against my side and stood with his arms stretched out forming a barricade around me. Behind me I was blocked by the fountain on the wall. There was nowhere for me to run. I didn’t want to fight. If I did, Mr. Griego would put me on detention and call my parents.

“What did you say?” Joey taunted me with his belly against my arm. I was very scared of him. I didn’t want to fight. My knees were like standing on rubber bands, they were wobbly and I knew I would cave to the ground at any moment, but I wanted to make him stop getting me in trouble with Mr. Griego. If I got caught again, Mr. Griego would put me on detention and call

my parents. I would never get to go to California. “Well!” Joey shouted in my face. I felt the water he had just been drinking splatter on my face.

“Gross!!” I shouted back at him. “You spit on me.” I screamed. “Yuck! You’re gross! I’ve been spit on. Disgusting!” I wanted to run to wash my face with soap but the restrooms were on the other side of the building. The other kids were laughing. I didn’t know if they were making fun of me, but I was very mad at Joey for spitting on me. Now I had his cooties on my face. I pushed him as hard as I could to get him out of my way. “You’re disgusting! You big mean ugly bully. I hate you.” I rammed into him again but this time with all my might and he fell to the ground where he landed on his butt. There was more laughter. Someone splashed him with a handful of water then someone else, and then another. Joey was on the ground getting splashed by everyone around him. It was fun like watching the pie-throwing contest at the spring bazaar at St. Joseph’s church or like the pie fights on the television shows I would watch with Grandma Lita.

“Leave me alone,” Joey cried. “Stop wetting me!” His clothes were soaked. The crotch of his denim shorts looked like he had peed on himself. The laughter continued because he couldn’t get himself up from the slippery ground while people kept throwing water at him. I was glad everyone was throwing water at him, but then I looked at him. The redness of his cheeks was all gone. His chubby hands were over his eyes as he tried to block the water from his face. He didn’t seem so big and mean. He looked sad and scared.

“Stop!” I shouted standing with my arms spread between Joey and those throwing water at him.

Suddenly, everyone stopped to look at me.

“Just leave him alone,” I said quietly and lowered my head.

“We were sticking up for you,” Kevin yelled in my ear and stomped away.

“Yeah!” Christopher Handsel added poking me on the shoulder. “You’re a traitor.”

“Come on,” ordered Kevin and everyone followed him away from me. Christopher stuck his tongue out at me as he trailed behind the others. I looked down to where Joey was sitting over the pooled water. He was crying.

“Don’t cry,” I said to him. He stared up at me wiping his tears.

“I’m not crying,” he said. “Water got into my eyes.”

I put out my hand to help him up. He sure was heavy to pull, but we managed.

### Chapter 3

In art class, Ms. Amaro had us clear out our tool boxes and wash out the paintbrushes and scrub the table tops from the whole year’s worth of art projects. She was very strict. “No talking,” she stood tall and thin swaying back and forth on her feet. Her long hands carefully held the pencil or ink brush when she taught us how to draw and paint a shape.

Celi came over to the sink where I was standing rinsing out the baby food jars that we used for mixing paint. “What happened?” She whispered. Without letting Ms. Amaro hear me, I tried telling Celi how Joey pushed me and I pushed him back. “Christopher said that he fought Joey to the ground and beat him up.” Celi whispered.

“That’s not true,” I said.

“Vivian? Celi?” Called Ms. Amaro. “You’re not supposed to be talking now.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Kevin said that you started to cry,” Celi whispered at my shoulder.

“NO, I didn’t!”



“Vivian, come here please.” Ms. Amaro called me to her desk. “You’ve done well all year long. Now what is so important that can’t wait until class is over?”

“Nothing.” I said.

“Go help Sivi organize the paper in the closet. If I hear you talking, I’ll be very upset.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I went over to the closet where Sivi was stacking the construction paper and art paper neatly on the shelves. She was wearing a matching Strawberry Shortcake outfit. The blouse and shorts were white cotton with a red border at the sleeve and pant cuffs. The strip of buttonholes and the collar had the same border of little red strawberries outlined in black. Her thick long brown hair was neatly woven into two French braids with red ribbons at the ends. She wore white canvas tennis shoes and red socks with white lacy ruffles.

“Did you really fight Joey?” Sivi whispered.

Yes, I nodded. “He pushed me first.”

“Did Christopher really beat him up?”

No, I nodded. “Nobody beat him up.”

“But Christopher said that Joey made you cry.”

“That’s not true. That’s not what happened.”

“Then what happened?”

“Girls?” Ms. Amaro’s voice called. “Are you talking in there?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“I’ll tell you later,” I said and Sivi nodded in agreement.

When art class was over, it was the end of the school day. In all, the fourth graders had a total of six different periods with different teachers. Mrs. Keitch was my homeroom and my first period social studies class. I had second period with Mrs. Carson for language arts. For third

period I had math with Mr. Ochoa. Then came lunch and recess. After that was fourth period science with Mr. Phelps. Then P.E. with Coach Tenario. Sixth was art on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and music on Mondays and Wednesdays with Ms. Thompson.

“Well, kids.” Said Ms. Amaro. “It was a pleasure having you for art. Today’s your last day in art class, because Thursday you’ll have your class picnic, but I won’t be there. So enjoy it and I will see you next school year. Take your art portfolios home.” She ordered as the bell rang and we cheered to get out.

Celi, Maria and Sivi rushed to me. “What happened? What happened?” They eagerly approached me. I told them what had happened at the water fountain as we walked out to the front of the school building. The schoolyard was swarming with younger kids. The first through third graders got out at 2:45pm before us bigger kids did at 3:30pm. Parents were outside waiting and chatting under the shady trees. It was a very hot afternoon and some grown ups wore sunglasses. I looked around to see if I spotted Mom or Dad, but they weren’t there yet. We sat on the cobblestone wall.

“That’s it? That’s all that happened?” Said Celi. “They said you were crying.”

“Christopher said that he kicked Joey in the butt.” Sivi said.

No, I nodded. “Nobody beat up Joey. They just threw water at him. That’s all.”

“Then why is Christopher telling everyone that you’re a traitor?” Maria wanted to know.

“Because I stuck up for Joey.”

“What!” They all said at the same time. Their eyes were bulging and their mouths were opened in the shape of a capital ‘O’. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t know how to explain that I had felt sorry for Joey, because I didn’t know how I could feel sorry for a big mean bully like him.

I saw Mrs. Roman walking towards me. *What is she doing here?* I thought. *Where's Mom?* Mrs. Roman was a nice person, but I didn't like walking home with her, because I felt like a baby. Celi lived one block away and she never had to wait for anyone to pick her up. She could come and go alone because she lived so close. Maria was older than all of us and she was allowed to ride her bicycle all by herself. Sivi's mom was always at school because she was the head of the PTA and everyone liked her because she organized the school events and raised funds for the school projects. My mom was a homeroom mother, but lately she was usually feeling sick and too tired to bake cupcakes or join us on field trips.

"Bye, I gotta go." I said to the girls before Mrs. Roman could reach us.

"Hey! Don't forget to ask about the Grand Canyon." Celi said as I ran in the direction of Mrs. Roman.

"I won't!" I shouted back to Celi and kept running as fast as my shoes could take me. I ran right past Mrs. Roman with my art portfolio dangling from my hand.

"Vivian. Vivian!" She called to me, but I kept going until the crossing guard stopped me at the corner. There was a crowd waiting for the cars to pass before the crossing guard would signal the right of way to pedestrians.

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Roman catching her breath as she reached me. "This is too much exercise on a hot day like today," she put her hand on my shoulder.

"Leave me alone," I yanked myself away and ran across the street without looking both ways. A car honked at me as it screeched to a halt. I froze in the middle of the street.

"Watch out, kid." Yelled the driver. "I coulda killed ya!" He waved an arm out of the window. The crossing guard blew his whistle at me, and the crowd clamored at my commotion. A little boy in a stroller laughed at me when his mother scolded me. Other mothers also scolded

me as I went past. They warned their children not to ever do what I had done. I kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk.

“Are you ok,” asked Mrs. Roman as we reached the other side of the street.

“Where’s my mother?” I shouted. “Why didn’t she come?” My throat tightened like when I wake up with a fever.

“I’m sorry Vivian, but she was ill.” She bent over to look at me.

“She’s always sick. She never does anything but stay in bed, anymore.” I stuffed my portfolio into my knapsack.

Mrs. Roman’s mouth twisted tightly. “I know you miss her. She needs to rest to get better. Don’t you want her to get better?”

I didn’t answer. I put my head down and kept walking.

Walking in silence, Mrs. Roman and I took the long way home. The sun was hot on my face and neck. The cars were too shiny and hurt my eyes. Mrs. Roman was wearing an orange plastic visor to keep the sun away from her eyes and floppy sandals to keep her toes cooled. Her dress was made of thin white cotton with big orange and yellow flowers printed all over. She dressed very different than Grandma Lita, even though they were both old. Grandma Lita wore dark clothes and shoes and I never saw her wear sandals, even when we were out gardening, but not Mrs. Roman. Mrs. Roman looked like the ladies in the J.C. Penny catalog that Mom got in the mail. Grandma’s clothes looked heavy and I never saw her legs or her arms because she always wore stockings and long sleeves even in summertime.

Mrs. Roman said hello to people that we passed on the sidewalk along Altura Avenue. It was a busy street with lots of traffic and pedestrians. As cars went by they left behind fumes of rotten eggs. We were approaching Harper Street, where the Beltran brothers lived. As we

reached the top of the hill I could see over the fence into their yard. The drapes of the two storey brick house were drawn. On the porch an old rocking chair was sitting very still. *Whew!* I closed my eyes with relief. I was glad nobody was home, and there was no sign of Killer, the black Doberman Pinscher with a very mean bark. As we descended the hill and went past the house, I held my breath and crossed my fingers. I was a few yards from the corner stoplight when I heard a rumbling at my side. The fence was taller than me and I couldn't see over to the other side. I stopped to listen for the sound that was coming from behind the fence.

“Woof, woof!”

“Yikes!” I jumped with my arms in the air. My Holly Hobby knapsack fell to the ground. Killer ran up and down the yard leaping at the wooden fence. The gate rattled and I was sure the door would shake loose and Killer would attack me.

“Hurry, Vivian!” Called Mrs. Roman as she crossed the street. “Run, run!” She walked back towards me. I could see Killer's white teeth as his head bobbed up and down above the rim of the fence. He rammed at the gate as he barked louder and louder. “Oh no,” cried Mrs. Roman. I followed her eyes to the ground where my knapsack lay only inches from Killer's teeth. “Just leave it.” She shouted. Killer's paws were scratching at the gate.

I panicked. I couldn't leave my Holly Hobby knapsack, Killer would tear it up and ruin it. It was my favorite bag in the whole world. Grandma Lita had bought it for me when I was home sick with a fever in the second grade. Mom made me miss the Christmas party and the presents at school because I had the flu, but Grandma Lita got me the bag to make me feel better. It came with a little Holly Hobby ragdoll on the front pocket. The doll was safely on my bed at home, but I didn't want to lose my knapsack. Killer was in a frenzy. I could see his mouth foaming. I grabbed my bag and ran. I ran so fast I went past Mrs. Roman all the way to the end

of the block.

#### Chapter 4

I bent over to catch my breath and waited for Mrs. Roman. My feet were hot and sweaty. I felt the dryness at my throat. We still had about six blocks to go before we made it to Maple Street, but at least there wouldn't be any more dogs along the way. I dusted the dirt off of my knapsack and searched for bubble gum, but I had given my last piece to Celi at lunch. That made me remember that she wanted me to ask for permission to go to the Grand Canyon. I didn't want to ask, because I didn't want Dad to get mad at me for asking. He didn't like it when I asked for permission to spend the night at anyone's house.

"I don't like sleepovers," he would put his hand on his chin and his elbow on the table. "Children should sleep in their own beds in their own homes."

"Maybe just this once," Mom would say.

"That's why we bought a house. So that our daughter has a home."

"But Dad."

"No buts. The answer is 'no' and that's final."

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When Mrs. Roman caught up to me, she put her hand on my shoulder. The scent of vanilla lotion came from her hand. We continued walking home along Lackland Road. It was a quiet road with little traffic. To the left side there was the back of the high school football stadium. It was built of concrete and was very high. Whenever the high school football team, the Panthers, would play we could see the bright lights shining at our kitchen window. I would sit on the back porch petting our dog, Lobo, while listening to the cheering crowds at the high

school. Last season Uncle Vic took me and my cousins, Javi and Leo, to a game. We sat next to the marching band eating popcorn and sipping on bottles of Coke while Uncle Vic shouted at the players from time to time. It was so much fun, but Dad said he didn't understand how anyone ever had time to be a spectator. "Life's about doing, not watching." He would say, but Uncle Vic just ignored him.

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Mrs. Roman and I walk through the last two unpaved blocks home. Because they hadn't laid asphalt there yet, it was a bumpy dirt road. So on hot days like that one, if a car went by it would kick up the dry dust into our faces and parch my throat. "We made it," Mrs. Roman took her orange visor off and wiped her forehead. "No cars, today."

My house was the second one from the corner and Mrs. Roman lived across the street and three houses over. "Bye!" I waved to her and ran through our front lawn and up the three concrete steps unto our front porch. The door was open and I could see inside through the screen door. "Mom! I'm home." Mom didn't answer. I could hear the washing machine running in the kitchen as I went into the living room. Our house was a three-bedroom house that had a small foyer that opened directly to the living room on the left as you walked into the house. Behind the door was another door to a coat closet, but because El Paso's winters were short and not very cold, we hardly ever needed coats, so Mom mostly used that closet for storing Christmas ornaments and photo albums and board games. Most of the time she only went into that closet for the vacuum. Our house was the only house in the neighborhood that had a huge bay window that overlooked the side of the house and it was the only house with a two car garage. I knew this because my Aunt Mandi's husband, Uncle Joe, would always mention it when they came over. He was a tall man with very dark hair like Dad, but he wasn't as

handsome as Dad. Uncle Joe's face looked old and wrinkled and he had a raspy deep voice, and because he'd been in the army he had tattoos along his forearms. Dad was taller and had big blue eyes that looked the color of a swimming pool. Mom said I had his eyes, except for the color. My eyes are brown like hers but I have thick black eyelashes. "Still," Mom would say. "I'd like to borrow your eyes for a night." She'd smile at me and Dad would wink at her. But it must be the way grown ups talk because I thought it was creepy for my mom to say that she would borrow my eyes. Everyone always said I looked just like Dad but with my mom's skin color. Her skin always appeared like a golden tan, even when she didn't spend time out in the sun. Her hair was light brown and very straight, she kept it long down to past her shoulders and whenever she wore a ponytail, Dad said she looked like a teenager. He was right. People sometimes mistook her for my babysitter when I was out with her shopping for groceries or roller skating, or riding our bicycles through Fort Bliss, the army base next to our neighborhood.

"What are you two girls doing out so late?" An officer in uniform once asked Mom as we were going past the security booth on our way home from the base. "Do you're parents know where you are?" Mom looked at me and we laughed.

"This is my daughter," she told him. His eyes opened wide underneath his white helmet with the letters MP writing on the front of it. "Let me see some identification, please."

When Mom told him that she hadn't carried her purse to go cycling, he insisted that we call home to verify that indeed she was my mom and not my babysitter or my older sister. While we waited for Dad to make the five-minute drive from our house, Mom tried convincing the officer that she was thirty-four and much older than him, but he stared at Mom and squinted his eyes at her as if he were looking for something on her face. When Dad arrived he scolded the young officer. "How old are you?" Dad asked him, but didn't give the officer time to respond.



“This is my wife. You’re concerned about a mother and daughter, when you should be ticketing speeders around here. I just nearly hit some jerk right over there.” Dad pointed behind him. Before the officer could ask, Dad pulled out his wallet and Mom’s too. He showed him their driver’s licenses and the officer apologized. “All right, all right,” Dad waved his hand. “No harm done. Just doing your duty.” The officer’s face turned red but he was grinning and told us to have a nice evening. Mom and I got back on our bikes while Dad drove slowly behind us through Pershing Drive. I was struggling to keep up. Mom slowed down by riding ahead of me and then circling around while I caught up. After two blocks, Dad beeped at us and poked his head out the window. “Ready for some ice-cream?” He shouted out.

“Yippie! Dairy Queen.” I cheered.

“It’s too many calories,” Mom said.

“Oh, come on Angie,” Dad urged Mom as he drove up along side of us. “It’s a beautiful night.”

“Please? Pretty please, Mom?” I said and she gave in. Dad put our bikes in the trunk of the car and off we went to have sundaes at the Dairy Queen near our house.

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I turned on the TV to watch *Little House on the Prairie*. I didn’t want to miss the continuation of yesterday’s episode. The cartoons were still on. I looked up at the brass clock the shape of a star that was hanging over the television console. The big hand was near the ten and the little hand was almost at the four. I had time to get a snack before Laura Ingalls came on. I still hadn’t seen Mom anywhere. I went into the kitchen. The scent of laundry detergent was nice. Lobo was panting at the backdoor screen. “Hi boy,” I said. “Want some treats?” I opened the screen just a little to pet him, but he rushed in almost knocking me over.

Immediately he had his paws on my torso and was licking my face. “Down boy! Down!” He wagged his tale fast and sniffed around the kitchen floor. I set a chair against the counter and climbed on it to reach the cupboard. Mom kept the dog treats hidden at the very top shelf, but if I stood on my tippy toes I could reach them. I was stretched as far as I could and could feel the edge of the plastic bag of treats when Mom walked in.

“Vivian? What are you doing up there? I just cleaned that counter, young lady. Now you’ve got your dirty sneakers up there.”

“Can I give Lobo some of these?” I asked before she noticed he was under the table licking the floor.

“What’s the dog doing in here? Get out!” she shouted at him. “Go, go.” She held the screen door open for him, but Lobo wouldn’t budge. “Here give me some of those,” she said to me and I handed her the box of milk bones. The washing machine was on the spin cycle. It was rattling in the pantry room behind the refrigerator. I got down from the counter and begged Mom to let me have a popsicle. “No, it’s too much sugar before dinner.”

“It’s so hot, Mom.” I whined running my hands down my face. “It’s like an oven out there.”

“Just half,” she grabbed one out of the freezer and broke it into two individual pieces. “Here,” she said and put the other half in her mouth. “How was school?” I was about to tell her about the fight with Joey, but stopped myself because she would tell Dad and he would definitely get mad.

“It was our last day of art class,” I said. “Mrs. Amaro made us clean up the paintbrushes, and Mrs. Keitch wants to know if you’re going to the picnic on Thursday. She sent you a note.”

“Where is it?”

“In my bag.”

“Well, get it.” The washing machine had been shaking and rumbling then came to a full stop and went silent. Mom finished her popsicle and threw the stick in the garbage under the sink then opened the lid to the washer and grabbed the wet clothes and put them in the laundry basket. While licking my popsicle, I went to get my knapsack and went back into the kitchen. “Leave it there,” Mom nodded at the counter. “I’ll read it in a minute. Go do your homework.”

“I don’t have any. We only have two days left for school.”

She nodded, but I could tell she wasn’t really listening. She strained to lift the basket and set it back on the floor. I had finished my popsicle but I kept the wooden stick in my mouth. Mom leaned onto a chair.

“What’s the matter, Mom?”

“It’s just hot,” she sat on a kitchen chair. “Give me that,” she pointed at my bag. I gave it to her and she pulled out my portfolio. “What’s this?”

“That’s my art portfolio.”

She flipped through the pages. When she got to a picture I drew of her and Dad she smiled. “This is very nice, Viv. You did this all by yourself?”

“Mmh. I was going to draw Lobo and me too, but there wasn’t enough space. See here, that’s where I had to erase.”

“Leave this here. I want to show them to your dad.” She got up from the chair and carried the laundry basket through the backdoor.

I went back to the living room where Bugs Bunny was mocking Elmer Fudd on the television screen. I was still watching television and chewing on the end of the popsicle stick when Dad got home. “How’s my girl?” He kicked off his shoes and threw himself down on the

couch putting his head on my lap like I was a pillow. His head felt warm and he weighed a lot, but I didn't say anything because I liked it when Dad and I watched television together. "How was school?"

"O.k." I said. "Can I ride my bike after this show is over?"

"Not now. It's too hot."

"Later?"

"Maybe. Where's your mom?"

"In the back," I said. "Guess what, Dad?" He turned his head to look at me. His face looked funny upside down. "Remember that mean dog at the Beltran's house. He almost got my Holly Hobby bag, but I ran so fast I left Mrs. Roman behind. She had to catch up." I chuckled.

"What? You're mom didn't pick you up from school?" He sat up.

Uh, uh, I nodded.

"Angie!" Dad got up from the couch. "Where is she?" He asked, but didn't wait for me to answer. He went out to the backyard where Mom was hanging the laundry on the clothesline. Dad didn't like it when she hung the clothes to dry. "I didn't buy the dryer just so that it could occupy space."

"I know," Mom would answer. "But the clothes look so much better when I hang them on the line. And it saves electricity." After that, Dad wouldn't argue anymore.

I could hear Mom and Dad outside arguing about the clothes dryer or something while I watched television. During a commercial break I got up and went into the kitchen for a glass of iced tea. The telephone rang and it was Mrs. Wicha, one of the moms from school. Her daughter was in the second grade and I could never remember her name. "Mom! It's Mrs. Wicha on the phone." I yelled out the back door and went back to the couch. Neither Mom nor

Dad came inside to answer the phone. “Mom! Dad! Telephone.” I called but they didn’t respond. I didn’t like being ignored so I yelled very loud. “Telephone!!” Then I went to the receiver. “She’ll be right here, Mrs. Wicha.” I returned to the television show. Dad came inside and I heard him shout at Lobo to stay outside.

“Who is it?” He asked me and picked up the phone. I heard him talking but I wasn’t listening to what he was saying until he hung up and yelled my name. “Vivian!” He turned the TV set off just as I was about to see what happened to Mary and Laura Ingalls.

“Wait, Dad!”

“Did you run across the street and almost get hit?” He said to me in that tone that always made me pay attention because I was scared. “That was Mrs. Wicha. What could you be thinking, Vivian?” His face darkened and his eyes were wide. He was standing over me shaking his head. “How many times have I told you---”

“What happened?” Mom walked in carrying the empty laundry basket.

“That was Dolores Wicha, she called to say that Vivian almost got hit by a car because she ran into the street without looking. Of all the stupid things to do.”

“Why did you do that, Vivian?” Mom asked. Her eyebrows were squeezed tightly together. They were both angry with me now. I was nervous. I had forgotten all about what had happened earlier. *That tattletale Mrs. Wicha, she wasn’t as nice as I had thought.* It was her fault my parents were now both angry at me. “Well answer me?” Mom insisted but I didn’t know what to say.

“Go to your room.” Dad ordered. “Before I do something I’ll regret.”

I did what I was told, because I was afraid Dad would say we weren’t going on vacation anymore. *That wasn’t fair.* Mrs. Wicha tricked me. Next time she calls I’m going to tell her

she's got the wrong number and hang up. I kicked the door to my bedroom shut and put my ear against it to hear what they were saying but, although Dad's voice was booming, it was hard to make out their words. I could tell they were both angry but Dad sounded angrier. Then the telephone rang and I heard Mom say hello. While she spoke into the phone, I could hear the back door slam. I knew Dad was going out to the garage, because that's usually where he went whenever he was mad. I heard Dad banging on the drum kit he kept in there.

I stayed in my room and prayed that we would still go to California. The more I thought about it the more nervous I became. I took out the shoebox where I kept my Gingham paper dolls, but I didn't have any fun dressing them up. I wanted to go outside and ride my bicycle while Dad watered the lawn or worked on the car, but he was mad at me. I took out my tub of Tinker Toys to finish building the windmill that I had started the week before, but it wasn't much fun without Dad commenting on what I was doing, so I put it away under the bed. It seemed like I was there forever and nobody was talking to me. I took out my color pencils and drawing paper. I made doodles and then drew a house on a beach. I had never seen a beach in real life. I had only seen beaches on television and the movies. I really wanted to go to visit Uncle Sonny. I crumpled the sheet of paper and took out another sheet. I wrote a note with the red pencil.

*Dear God, please don't let Mom and Dad cancel our vacation to Uncle Sonny's. I promise not to cross the street without looking anymore.*

I crumpled the note then pushed my pad and pencils aside. I threw myself on the bed and buried my head in the pillows. I must've fallen asleep because Mom woke me up later.

"Viv," Mom tapped my shoulder. "Honey, are you hungry?" She whispered.

"No," I rubbed my eyes and turned my head down.

"What happened?" She sat next to me on the bed. "I spoke to Mrs. Roman, and she said

you were very upset about something.”

I got up. I was getting tired of tattletales. It was all their fault, if Mrs. Roman hadn't come to get me at school I wouldn't have run across the street. I turned to Mom. She was sitting on my Snoopy plush doll. “You're sitting on Snoopy,” I said tugging at his foot. “You're crushing him.” Mom shifted her weight to the side and I grabbed him and pulled it close to my chest. “Poor Snoop, he's all smashed.”

“He'll be ok,” Mom said. “Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“Are we still going to California?”

“Let's not worry about that now. Your dad's very upset with you. Do you know you could've been hurt, maybe even killed. You're not a baby anymore. You need to watch what you're doing. Mrs. Roman is an older lady she can't run after you.”

“Then why do you send her to pick me up?” I crossed my arms and shut my eyes tight. “It's all her fault!” I threw a pillow on the floor.

“Now, you listen here,” Mom grabbed my arms. “She is doing us a favor.”

“But you were fine when I got home. You weren't even sick like she said you were.”

“I was sick earlier, but I felt better in the afternoon. I asked her to pick you up because I wanted to have time to do the laundry and prepare dinner before you and your father got home.”

“That's not fair! All the kids have their moms pick them up.”

“I know, honey. But look at Danny and Melissa, their mom has to work and she can't pick them up.”

“But they're twins, they can walk home together by themselves. They only live four blocks from school. Why can't I go to a school that I can walk to? Why do I have to go to stupid Coldwell? Why can't I go to Crockett like all the kids on our block? I don't have anyone

to walk home with. What about Grandma Lita? Why can't she pick me up at school?"

"Because your grandma is old and has trouble walking too far."

"But Mrs. Roman is old too."

"Yes, but Mrs. Roman is younger than Grandma, and Mrs. Roman likes to exercise by walking."

"Then why can't I go to Crockett?"

"Look sweetie, you only have two more days. Next year you'll be in the fifth grade and your dad and I have been considering letting you ride your bicycle to school on some days."

"But it'll be the same thing. Dad will say that it's too dangerous for me to go alone."

"That's why you have to demonstrate to your father and me that you can be careful and responsible. That's our biggest nightmare, is that you'll get hit by a car." She put her head down. "Promise me you won't ever do that again." She held my face in her hands.

"I won't, I promise." I tilted my head. "But you have to promise not to send Mrs. Roman to pick me up." Mom didn't say anything for a moment. I could tell she was thinking about what Mrs. Wicha and Mrs. Roman had said.

"I'll tell you what," she said. "Let's make a deal. If you promise not to do something like that again, I won't send Mrs. Roman unless it's an emergency."

"Ok. And I get to ride my bike to school next year?" I smiled showing all my teeth.

"One day of the week for starters. Then we'll see."

"Thanks Mom." I liked the idea of riding my bike because only the big kids got to ride their bicycles and lock them up on the bike rack at school where everyone could admire the tires and the seats and the bells and whistles. Mine had a basket on the handlebars and I had a horn that honked like the ones the circus clowns have.



“Come on,” she said. “Go talk to your father.” She tapped me on the leg. I didn’t want to, because I knew Dad was going to tell me I had ruined the family vacation. He would probably be mad forever. Mom tugged me by the arm and nudged me out of the room. “Go. And then wash up for dinner.”

I went to look for Dad in his office while Mom went to the kitchen. I stood at the door leading into Dad’s office. It was a small room across the hall from the living room that jetted out from the rest of the house. It had French windows all around and two doors. One door led to the backyard and the other led to the front yard. Dad was sitting at his desk counting money and placing it in a small metal box that had separate compartments for the different types of dollar bills. I walked up next to him. I could tell he had just shaved because his face smelled like *Faberge’s*. That was the cologne Mom bought for him. Whenever he shaved he splashed it on his face and neck. I watched him counting the money to himself. When he was done he wrote down the amount on a book with lined sheets that he kept inside a locked drawer. He didn’t say anything for a long time.

“Here,” he set a bag of coins on the desktop. I grinned because that meant he wanted me to help him count the quarters by putting them inside little packets of paper that turned them into rolls of ten dollars. “I’m still mad at you. But you can make yourself useful.” He shoved my shoulder with the back of his hand. “You ever do that again, Viv, and I will spank you so hard you won’t be able to sit for a week.” Dad had never spanked me and he had never said he would. Only Mom had a few times, like the time that I had been playing in her VW bug and I released the parking break. The car rolled down the driveway and made a small dent on the garage door. Mom was so angry that she spanked me. When Dad got home he was furious with me. He yelled so loud it made my ears hurt, but he didn’t spank me. Later, I heard him laugh

when he told Aunt Mandi and Uncle Joe what I had done, but Mom shook her head. “You weren’t laughing then. You were ready to kill her.” She said to Dad. So I knew Dad was serious about spanking me if I did something stupid like running in the street again.

“Yes, sir.” I looked at my shoes.

## Chapter 5

While we were having dinner, the doorbell rang. It was the paperboy asking for the check that Dad wrote him every month and placed it in an envelope, but Dad had forgotten to leave it in the mailbox earlier in the day the way he usually did. He told me to go grab the envelope from his desk and take it out to the paperboy. I looked on the top of the desk but I didn’t see the white envelope with orange trim, so I opened a drawer and there it was sitting on top of a folded piece of yellow paper. It was the same kind that Grandma Cal used to write me on my birthday and for holidays. I unfolded it to see what it was. It was hard to read the handwriting, but I did make out Uncle Sonny’s name and something about Disneyland. “Vivian, hurry up!” I heard Dad call me. I put the letter back and pushed the drawer close. I ran out of Dad’s office through the door that led out to the front yard. Dad was holding the screen door open. “Here,” I handed the envelope to the paperboy. “Where’s your bike?”

“It has a flat tire,” the boy said. He was my cousin Leo’s age, but he was much taller than a twelve year old and he was very skinny. I thought he would break like a house made out of toothpicks. I turned to the curb where his mother was waiting in the station wagon with his little sister.

“Have a good evening,” Dad waved at the woman in the car. “Get in, Viv.”

“See ya,” I said to the paperboy and went inside.

“Did you lock the door behind you?” Dad wanted to know if I had locked the door from his office.

“I think so.”

“Well, go make sure.”

I ran back to his desk and pulled out the drawer again. I was trying to read the rest of the letter, when I heard Mom asking if anyone wanted dessert. I closed the drawer and ran back to the dining room where Mom was clearing the table and Dad was taking out the trash. I could hear him play catch with Lobo. I helped load the dishwasher by scraping the leftovers into the garbage where they belonged, while Mom scrubbed the pots and pans over the sink. Then I saw her stop abruptly and bend down away from the sink. Her face was pale and she put the wet sponge to her side and with her other hand supported herself against the counter.

“What’s wrong Mom?”

She grimaced at me. “I think I ate too much,” she looked very uncomfortable.

“Dad! Mom’s not feeling good.” I shouted through the screen-door.

“Shush, Viv,” she said. “It’s nothing. It’s just a little cramp.” She straightened her back, but I could see she was still in pain. “You know how your stomach aches after you have too much chocolate fudge.” I nodded to her. “Don’t say anything about this to your father.”

“Is it because he won’t take us to Uncle Sonny’s?”

“No, it’s not that,” she looked confused. “I don’t want to worry him. You know how he gets worried.” She crouched against the kitchen chair. I nodded, but I knew that it was something grown ups say when they don’t want someone to get mad at something they have done. Like the time when Dad fell off the horse at a friend’s ranch and he told me not to tell Mom because he didn’t want her to get worried. But I didn’t understand why it had to be a

secret. For the rest of the week Dad limped around the house, saying that he had probably lifted a box that was too heavy while at work. “I’ll finish this later,” she said setting down the sponge and left the room.

I was drying my hands when I noticed Dad wiping his feet on the mat just outside the screen door. “Give me that treat on the table,” he said through the screen door. I handed it to him and he tossed it to Lobo. When he came inside he asked me where Mom had gone. “She went to the bathroom.” I didn’t tell him that she had a cramp on her side because she didn’t want me to and I didn’t want him to say we couldn’t have dessert.

He opened the freezer door and pulled out the strawberry parfaits that he had made earlier. Mom would usually cook the meals, but Dad liked making desserts. He always made tasty treats with Jell-O and Cool Whip or fruit and ice-cream and I would get to lick the bowl. Ever since I was a little girl he would let me help him prepare a new recipe. He’d prop me up on the counter and I’d mostly watch him. Once in a while, he would let me stir with the big wooden spoon. When I turned eight he started letting me read the ingredients to him. The first time I saw the abbreviations on a recipe I didn’t know what they were. “It says here to put one tsp of salt.”

“Did you just say tsp?” He laughed.

“That’s what it says,” I pointed at the place where I saw the word *tsp*, but he kept laughing. The longer he laughed the sillier I felt. “Stop it, Dad. Don’t laugh at me.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing because the first time I saw that, I didn’t know what it meant either. My mother had to explain it to me.” Then I laughed too. Later, I heard him say to Mom that there was no doubt I was his daughter because our brains seemed to work the same way. She slugged him on the shoulder and told him he could never

doubt it even if he wanted to, because I was his spitting image. I didn't understand what that meant but I felt good hearing it.

Mom came into the kitchen wearing her pajamas under her bathrobe. "Did you save some for me?" Mom looked as if her stomachache had gone away, but I didn't ask her because she didn't want Dad to know about it.

"Viv, grab the napkins. Let's go watch the sunset." Dad liked sitting outside on the porch-swing. It had been there the day we moved into the house when I was only four. "There's a nice breeze out." Spring days in El Paso were usually very warm, but because the city was in the desert, the air was usually dry and it cooled down at nights. I sat between Dad and Mom on the swing just as the sun was dipping over the mountains. I wouldn't be ten until September, so my legs were too short to reach the ground from the swing and although Mom was a grown up she could only reach if she pointed her toes. Dad was tall and had no problem swinging us without lifting his feet off the ground. He rocked the swing back and forth with just his heels and little effort. The chain that held the swing to the porch ceiling creaked. "I need to put some oil on that," Dad said.

We ate our parfaits while listening to the wind rustle through the shrubs and the live oak tree in our yard. It was a very thick tree with long branches that stretched like long arms. It was out on the left side of the house and it provided shading for Dad's office and a little bit to the porch. I liked to climb the branches and pretend it was a tree-house. Whenever my cousins Javi and Leo came over we would claim it as the tower to a fort because we could see over into the neighbors' backyard even though a tall rock wall surrounded the house. They were the only people in the neighborhood that had a fence around their house. Mom said that it was probably because they were old and retired and didn't want people bothering them. Javi said that it was

because they were rich and were hiding all their money in the attic, and if anyone tried to get it they would lock them in the basement. Although I knew Javi was making it up, I was still scared of getting too close to the neighbor's house.

"I spoke to Sonny, today," Dad announced.

"Yippie!" I jumped off the swing. "When are we leaving for California?"

"Settle down," Dad said. "You've got school until Thursday, and next week is the end of the month."

"Awww," my shoulders sunk. I knew that the end of the month was the busiest time for my dad's business. He owned a moving and storage company and I had learned that the days at the end of the month were the times when Dad was the busiest at work. On Saturday mornings I would beg and plead for Dad to take me with him to work, and if he wasn't expecting to be there long, he'd take me along. "Ok," he'd say and I'd quickly run to the car before he had time to change his mind. "Just try not to get in the way."

I would make sure I never got in the way so that he would take me the next time.

"I was thinking we could leave on Friday," Dad said. "Then I'll stay for a few days and fly back for next weekend."

"That sounds good to me," Mom replied. "I'll pack in the morning."

"Yippie! Yippie!" I jumped around flapping my arms like wings. "We're going to the beach. We're going to the beach." I had been waiting for this since Dad set a date for our trip back on Easter Sunday.

"Yes, but you still have school tomorrow. So go get ready for bed." Mom said.

I was so happy that I didn't mind being told to go to bed. I finished my dessert and went

inside to use the bathroom. The house was dark because the sun had set and the light outside was almost all gone. I switched the lights on as I went through every room. In the bathroom I noticed that there was blood on a tissue in the wastebasket. It scared me because maybe Mom had a bloody nose. Then I noticed a crumpled piece of paper. It looked like a tiny newspaper with tiny letters. I imagined a miniature typewriter being used to type up that paper. Then there would have to be little hands and fingers. I tried to imagine who could have such small hands. I loved typewriters and pianos. Grandma Lita said that it meant I was going to be an artist or a newspaper reporter. I would either be a writer or a pianist, she said.

“She likes cameras too. Does that mean she might end up a photographer?” Dad teased.

“She can grow up to be anything she wants.” Grandma Lita patted me on the head.

“I hope you’re right.” Dad said.

“What about a pilot? Can I be a pilot?”

“We’ll see.” Mom added.

I went back outside where Mom and Dad were still sitting on the swing talking. They were discussing things about our trip to Uncle Sonny’s. Dad noticed me standing at the doorjamb.

“Didn’t your mother tell you to get to bed?” He said. “Go on.”

I went back inside into my bedroom to put on my pajamas and got into bed, but I was too excited to sleep. I got my Nancy Drew book and began to read. I thought I heard the telephone ring, but I didn’t get up to answer it. Mom came in later to say goodnight and turned out the lamp on my nightstand. “Mom?” I said. “Did you have a bloody nose?”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?” She turned the lamp back on.

“I saw a bloody tissue in the bathroom.”

“When?” She was surprised.

“A little while ago.” I said.

“Oh, that.” She paused for a moment. “I just cut myself, that’s all.”

“How?”

“Hmm. I can’t remember now. It’s nothing. Just a little cut that’s all.” She put her hand on my head and kissed my forehead, again. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“But what about the paper with the tiny letters? Did you type that?”

“What are you talking about?” Mom yawned.

“Look,” I pushed the blankets aside. “See, it’s got itty bitty letters.”

“Where’d you get this?” She took the piece of paper from my hand.

“I found it in the bathroom. What is it?” I put my hand on it.

“It’s just instructions,” Mom folded it into a square. “Now, go to bed,” she pulled the covers over me and kissed me on the forehead. “Goodnight.” She turned out the light and went out the door.

I lay in the dark confused. It seemed like Mom was keeping secrets. First, she didn’t want me to tell Dad about her stomachache. Now she didn’t want to tell me about the instructions written in tiny letters that I found in the bathroom. I heard the telephone ringing as I drifted to sleep.

## Chapter 6

In the morning I was really excited that it was almost the last day of school. When I got up Mom had already fixed my lunch and was having breakfast with Dad. I could tell it was



going to be a good day because everything was working out better than it had the day before. Dad left while I was still brushing my teeth but Mom said there was time for her to put my hair up into pigtails so that I wouldn't be so hot. She drove me to school. On the way there she said that Celi had called and Mom had told her I was asleep.

“She did?” I had forgotten to ask about going to the Grand Canyon. I was sure she would be mad at me for forgetting all about it.

“She wanted to know if you remembered to ask permission. That's when I remembered about Mrs. Keitch's note. I put it in your bag.”

*Whew!* I was glad Celi hadn't said anything about the Grand Canyon. “Are you coming to the picnic tomorrow?” I asked as Mom pulled over in front of the school.

“Of course.”

“Great!” I kissed her before I got out of the car. She waved goodbye and I shouted back at her. “I love you, Mom.” I hoped everyone would hear me.

Celi was already playing in the shade over by the ring of four-foot hedges that surrounded the flagpole. We were small enough to fit inside the branches and if we crouched nobody could see us playing in there. It was our own hiding place. Maria didn't like playing in our hiding place because she thought it was embarrassing that she couldn't fit as easily as Celi and I could. I would leave a piece of wrapped bubble gum just to make sure nobody had been there. If the bubble gum was gone, that meant someone had found our secret hiding place. I searched between the branches and found the *Bubble Yum* piece still in the purple wrapper. I gave it to Celi because chewing gum made my jaws hurt, but she didn't mind it so she just popped it in her mouth.

“You didn't ask. Did you?” She blew a bubble.

“No,” I bent down to tie my shoelace. I felt the coolness of the dirt under my feet.

“Why not?” Her bubble popped and she was pulling the chewing gum off of her face.

I didn’t know what to tell Celi. She was my best friend and I didn’t want her to think that I didn’t want to go camping in the Grand Canyon with her. I really wanted to go but I was afraid of asking. “I got in trouble,” I said. “On my way home I ran across the street and a car almost hit me. So Dad was very upset and Mom too, and it wasn’t a good time to ask.”

“That’s ok,” she said. “I asked my mom and she said that she would ask your mom at the class picnic tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Isn’t that great!”

I nodded and smiled crossing my fingers that Dad would say yes. I had never been to the Grand Canyon and it would be so much fun to go with Celi. “It’s the best!” I leapt forward and gave her a hug. “This is going to be the best summer.”

We played until the school bell rang and it was time for homeroom class. When I walked into the classroom, I noticed everyone got quiet and turned to look at me. I went right up to Mrs. Keitch who was sitting on her desk munching on crackers. I handed her my permission slip. “We’re all set,” she said. “That means only Joey will have to stay behind.”

I thought it was strange that nobody was a smart aleck about Joey not coming to the picnic. I went to my desk and sat down. This was the second time Joey’s desk was empty. Still nobody was talking.

“Traitor,” whispered Christopher. “We don’t want a traitor at our picnic.”

“Yeah, you traitor.” Added Kevin.

“I’m not a traitor,” I said. I didn’t understand what I had done wrong.

“You like Joey,” Christopher said. “Joey and Vivian sitting on a tree.”

“Shut up!” I said.

“Quiet!” Mrs. Keitch ordered. “Or nobody will go.”

There was a long *awwww* from the students before the static from the intercom speaker broke in. We could hear the principal putting the needle on the record and we all stood up as the pledge of allegiance began. Joey came in quietly and slipped into his desk. Mrs. Keitch turned to him with a frown. He stood up and placed his right hand over his chest. The rest of the morning, I heard people whispering about the water fight of the day before. When I would get near them they’d either stop talking or turn their nose up at me. I didn’t know what I had done other than help Joey when everyone had ganged up on him.

“He’s a bully,” Sivi reminded me at lunchtime. “Everyone knows that.”

“I know,” I said. “But he was crying.” Celi, Maria and Sivi all laughed.

“He was crying?” Celi said.

Yes, I nodded. “So I felt sorry for him.” They laughed again.

“If they hadn’t helped you, Joey would’ve beaten you up.” Maria said.

I hadn’t thought about it that way. I had just felt sorry for him, but I knew she was probably right. Joey would’ve beaten me up if the others hadn’t doused him with water. “Oh well,” I shrugged.

It was such a hot day that we didn’t go outside after lunch. The four of us played in the auditorium. That’s where the coach and principal would set out the board games and ping pong tables for those of us who didn’t want to play outside on very hot days. I wrote little scripts and Celi, Sivi and Maria picked a role to play. We rehearsed behind the curtains on the stage. Mr. Tenario gave us permission to play back there when I told him what we were doing. “That’s

very creative,” he said and tapped me on the shoulder. “Go ahead. Just don’t get too noisy.”

Celi wanted to pretend she was Brooke Shields. Sivi said she would be Farrah Fawcett. “But she’s a blond,” I said.

“So what,” she answered back. “Farrah Fawcett is from Texas, like us. So I can pretend.”

We all agreed that she could. Maria said she was Celia Cruz. “Who’s that?” I asked.

“She’s the best singer in the whole world. At home, we have every record she every made.” Maria said and began humming a tune. I shrugged and continued writing on the slivers of paper that I tore off my notebook. I handed everyone their part, and told them where to stand.

“You go first, Sivi,” I said. “Then Celi and then Maria.”

“I’m not Celi, I’m Brooke Shields.”

“Ok. Ok.” I said. “Ready. Action!” I used a rolled up sheet of construction paper and pretended it was a camera. I had learned all about making movies from watching *The Muppet Movie* last summer. The director always held a megaphone and yelled *roll ‘em* and *cut*. I liked being the director. I didn’t really care about being a movie star, I was happy telling everyone what to do because it was the only time anyone listened to me and I could yell *cut* whenever they didn’t do something the way I wanted them to.

## Chapter 7

I was sitting in science class reading about the difference between sedimentary and igneous rocks inside the Earth’s crust, when Annette, who sat behind me, tapped my shoulder. “Psst.” Christopher said behind her. “Give it to the traitor.” She passed the folded piece of paper that Christopher gave her. She looked just as confused as I was. I took the piece of paper

and unfolded it.

It read: *Vivian loves Joey*. Then it had a drawing of two stick figures holding hands with a heart drawn around them. I crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it past Annette and it hit Christopher right in the face.

“Vivian!” Yelled Mr. Phelps. “What is this?” He was standing over me with his face twisted into a knot. He scratched his white hair and took off his eyeglasses. “I’m very disappointed in you.” He shook his head. “Let me have that,” he said and Christopher promptly picked up the crumpled note from the floor and handed it to him. I thought I saw Mr. Phelps’ mouth form a grin as he read it, but he quickly turned to me and demanded that I get up and follow him.

“But I didn’t do anything,” I whined.

“You too, Christopher. Let’s go.”

“I didn’t do it.” Christopher didn’t move.

“I didn’t ask you if you did. Now move it.”

Christopher and I followed Mr. Phelps out onto the hallway where he told us to wait. That’s where the teachers usually lectured the troublemakers, but I had never been one of them. I was sure to get expelled now, and Dad would ground me for the rest of my life. I would never get to go to the Grand Canyon or to visit Uncle Sony. My life was over.

“You’re a piranha,” I said to Christopher and stuck my tongue out at him, while Mr. Phelps was busy assigning Cloe as the class monitor.

“Cloe, stand at my desk and keep an eye on everybody,” Mr. Phelps said and then turned back to Christopher and me. “Now, you two. What’s this all about?” He waved the crinkled sheet of paper in his hand.

“Christopher wrote it.” I said.

“Naw, uh.” Christopher denied it. “It wasn’t me.”

“You did,” I interjected.

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Stop right now,” Mr. Phelps ordered. “Go to the office, Christopher. I’ve had it with you.”

“But---” Christopher started to say, but Mr. Phelps interrupted him.

“Go.” Mr. Phelps held his arm out pointing in the direction of the principal’s office.

*Whew!* I thought. *Maybe I won’t get expelled after all.* I stood there watching Christopher walk down the hall. As soon as he disappeared around the corner, Mr. Phelps turned to me. “Here,” he said as he wrote rapidly on a pink notepad. “Take this to Mrs. Keitch.”

I took the note and walked two classroom doors over. I peeked through the glass window on the door. Somebody pointed at me and Mrs. Keitch looked up. She waved her hand telling me to go inside. I went in and handed her the note. She read it.

“Hmm. Tell Mr. Phelps that it’s duly noted.” She said.

“Ok.” I nodded and left.

Back in Mr. Phelps’ classroom everyone was quiet as he spoke over the intercom.

“Please send Vivian Zentera to the office ready to go home.” The voice at the other end of the speakers said.

“Ooooh,” the class said. I froze at the door. *Why was I being sent home?* I wondered.

“That’s not fair,” someone said. “Why does she get to go home?”

“Silence!” Mr. Phelps ordered. “Vivian grab your things from your locker and go to the

office.”

I wondered what it was. Maybe Christopher told the principal about my pushing Joey during the water fight, and being a traitor. *That stupid Christopher*, I thought. Now the principal, Mr. Griego, would put me on detention and everyone at school would say I was a traitor. I put my books back into my locker and grabbed my knapsack. There wasn't much in it, but I never left it at school. I walked slowly to the office because I didn't want to get expelled by Mr. Griego. I took each step by making the heel of one foot touch the toes of my other foot. This way it would take me a long time to get to the office and I wouldn't get there until it was time to go home anyway.

“What are you doing?” A teacher that I didn't know asked me. “Hurry on to wherever you're going,” she ordered. When I got to the door to the office, I stopped. I didn't hear anyone typing. It was very quiet. Then I heard footsteps behind me.

“There you are, Vivian.” It was Mrs. Holguin.

“Here you go,” I walked into the office behind her. “Mr. Phelps sent me,” I handed her my hall pass. That's when I saw Aunt Mandi standing by the counter. At first glance, I thought it was my mom, since they're identical twins they look almost the same. Except that Mom has two dimples—one on each cheek—unlike Aunt Mandi who only has one. They both are exactly the same height and they both have dark straight hair and dark round eyes. Even their voices sound the same, but I can always tell them apart.

“Hi, Aunt Mandi. What are you doing here?”

Her mouth opened but she didn't say anything. She looked over to the Mrs. Holguin. Aunt Mandi's face was as red as a tomato, and her hair looked like she hadn't had time to brush it. “Your father sent me to come get you.” She said slowly.

“But it’s not afterschool yet.” I looked at her but she looked at Mrs. Holguin again. The only time I got to leave school early was when I went to the dentist. I hated going to the dentist. My mouth always tasted funny, and the dentist was always telling knock, knock jokes that I didn’t understand. He was a silly man. “Am I going to the dentist?”

“Dentist?” She shook her head. “No, no. I’m here to take you home that’s all.”

“Why?”

“That’s because,” Mrs. Holguin said from behind the counter. “It’s your turn to go home early. Yes, that’s what it is. Everyone gets a chance to go home early once a year.” I was confused. They were both acting strange.

“Ok,” I said happy to be going home. “But why didn’t Mom come?”

Aunt Mandi looked like she was going to cry.

“Vivian, aren’t you glad to see your aunt?” Mrs. Holguin said. “She came to get you.”

“Yes,” Aunt Mandi said. “Aren’t you glad to see me?”

“Mmhh.” I said, but I didn’t understand any of it.

“Come let’s go get some ice-cream and I’ll take you to your Dad.”

“Ok. Are Javi and Leo coming?”

“No, they’re still at school.”

It didn’t make any sense, but I didn’t complain. I shrugged my shoulders and we left. Aunt Mandi fumbled with the car keys. She seemed like she was nervous. “We’ll go to your father first. Is that ok?”

“Ok,” I shrugged. Aunt Mandi was sure acting funny. I imagined that maybe we were going to a birthday party and Dad and Mom wanted it to be a big surprise so they hadn’t said anything.



“Whose birthday is it? Is there a cat in a bag?” I asked Aunt Mandi.

She jumped in the driver’s seat. “Cat in the bag?” She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Yeah, remember Uncle Joe’s surprise party? And the cat in the bag?” A few months earlier we had all gone to a fancy restaurant to celebrate Uncle Joe’s birthday, but Mom and Dad didn’t tell me about it, because they didn’t want me to let the *cat out of the bag*. I didn’t know what that meant because I never saw a cat in a bag before.

“Not today, honey. It’s nobody’s birthday.” She sighed. “How was school?”

“It was ok. Tomorrow’s our last day. We have a picnic...” I said, but stopped because I could tell she was only half listening. She drove looking straight ahead and didn’t say anything.

“Can I listen to some music?” I reached for the radio knob.

“Sure, sure.” She said and kept her eyes on the road and her hands on the steering wheel. She stopped for the red light at the corner of Harper Street. When the light turned green she kept going past the right turn onto Lackland Road.

“You missed our street,” I pointed behind me.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m taking you to your Dad.” She drove farther along Altura Avenue.

After she’d been driving for awhile, I was getting bored. The radio was only announcing the news. I kept turning the knob until I found a radio station that was playing music. I noticed Aunt Mandi wasn’t going in the right direction.

“This isn’t the way to Dad’s office,” I said to her but she didn’t answer. “Aunt Mandi?”

“Yes, honey?”

“This isn’t the way to Dad’s office.”

“I know. He’s not there right now.”

“Where is he?”

She pulled over and stopped the car so suddenly that the car behind us honked at her. She put her head down between her two arms on the steering wheel. After a few moments she took a deep breath and looked at me. This was the second time I thought she was going to cry.

“I can’t tell you. I just can’t.” She said.

“Tell me what? Is Dad ok?” I was getting very nervous. Aunt Mandi wasn’t making any sense.

“Your dad’s ok. He just wants you to be with him right now.”

“Why what happened?” I remembered the time when he fell off the horse and didn’t want Mom to know, so he had asked Aunt Mandi and Uncle Joe to pick me up and take me to him. “Is this like the time he fell off the horse?” I asked.

Aunt Mandi didn’t look at me. She just nodded then started the car up again and drove off. We drove up and down the hills of Yandell Drive. It was a one-way street with no stops for almost a mile and Dad used to drive fast going down like a roller coaster. I loved going up and down those hills. The houses along Yandell Drive were huge and looked like mansions. They were perched high on the hills with long winding staircases leading up to wide open porches. They were some of the oldest houses in the city. At the top of one hill stood the art museum. It had once been a home where there were fancy balls for rich people. I knew all of this because Uncle Joe was an architect and he and Dad liked to talk about how buildings were constructed. They would sit in the dining room drinking beer discussing the best architecture around town, while Mom and Aunt Mandi prepared dinner in the kitchen. I would play by myself under the table pretending I was a secret spy listening to conversations, while my cousins Leo and Javi would play with their Atari in the living room. They were much older than me. Javi was ten and Leo was twelve, so unless I was willing to play *military boot-camp* or football, they wouldn’t

bother with me.

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We were past the hills of Yandell Drive and were now in the middle of a lot of traffic. There were lots of stoplights. I still couldn't figure out where we were going. The only time we ever went downtown was when we went shopping or sometimes to pay the bills. Dad would take me along on Saturday afternoons after we'd stop at his office where he would make a few phone calls. Then we'd go to the drive-thru teller and pay the electric bill. Sometimes he'd park in a garage and we'd have lunch at the diner on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the department store. But this was different. It wasn't Saturday and Dad wasn't driving.

Aunt Mandi turned into a parking lot in front of a huge building. There was a gate like those that keep you from crossing the train tracks when a train is passing. The man at the booth gave her a ticket and the gate went up like a giant arm. Aunt Mandi drove through and parked the car.

"Where are we?" I said nervously. "This looks like a hospital." The only time I had been in a hospital was right before my great-grandmother, Nana, died. She lived across the border in Juarez City, and the hospital had been very far away. I went to go visit her once when she was there, but they wouldn't let me inside to see her. So Dad took me to the park, then he said Nana would go home and stay with us to recover. She lived with us until she died, but I don't remember her very well.

"It is a hospital. But don't be scared." Aunt Mandi smiled, but I knew it was a fake smile.

We walked through doors that opened automatically. Inside it was very cold and the noise echoed. There were lots of people sitting on chairs and sofas on one side of the big open

room. There was a row of giant plants in giant pots that separated the entrance from the seating area. Ahead of us was a huge counter with two ladies behind it. One was answering the telephone while the other was talking to the man in front of us. She gave him directions to the elevators.

“Hello,” she said to us.

“Hi,” said Aunt Mandi. “I’m looking for my brother in-law, Ben Zentera.”

“What is he here for?” The lady asked. She wore a chain around her neck that was attached to the ends of her eyeglasses and hung from her ears.

“He’s not a patient,” Aunt Mandi lowered her voice and leaned closer to the lady. “He’s visiting someone.”

“Ok,” the lady said. “Well who’s the patient?”

Aunt Mandi looked at me, then back at her and nodded her head.

“Ohhh,” the lady said. “I understand.” She winked at Aunt Mandi. “Would you like some candy, little girl?” The lady asked me pointing to a table at the other end of the room.

“No, thank you.” I said.

“Go on,” Aunt Mandi nudged me. “Go get some candy. Don’t be rude.”

I didn’t want candy. I wanted to know where Dad was but I knew they didn’t want me to listen so I went to where the lady pointed to get the candy. When I returned to Aunt Mandi she told me that Dad would come down in a minute.

We sat down behind the row of plants. There were a few kids playing on the carpet. Two girls were coloring with crayons while a little boy drove his toy car over their coloring books. “Stop it!” The girls slapped his hands but he kept doing it. At the corner there was a pretty woman crying next to a man. She had tissues in both her hands and kept blowing her nose

while the man had his arm around her shoulder and kept saying “there, there” to her. Most of the other people sitting in the waiting area were reading or talking softly.

“There you are,” Dad squatted down to his knees and hugged me tightly. “Thanks,” he said to Aunt Mandi. “You go up now. I’m taking Vivian out for a minute. We’ll be back.”

“Where are we going? Where’s Mom?” This was all strange. It seemed like I was dreaming.

Dad didn’t answer. He just led me to the exit. Outside it was warmer than before. I told Dad that I had drunk so much water earlier and now I needed to go to the bathroom.

“You can go at the library,” he said as we crossed the street. We went inside the public library. It was a small building but there were people quietly sitting at a few tables and reading. Dad asked the clerk about my using the bathroom. She pointed to it. When I came back out Dad was sitting on a children’s chair waiting for me. He looked like a giant. His knees were almost up to his shoulders and he had his elbows propped up on his legs while his hands were clasped behind his lowered head. I stood next to him without saying anything. He finally looked up.

“Dad where’s Mom?” I said.

“Viv,” he started to say something but stopped. “Let’s go get some ice-cream.”

That’s when I remembered that Aunt Mandi had said the same thing, but she hadn’t taken me to get any. Instead she had driven me to the hospital where Dad had been waiting for us. It didn’t make sense to me why we were there, but then I got it. I hadn’t seen Mom anywhere.

“I don’t want any!” I shouted. “I don’t want candy. And I don’t want ice-cream! I want to go home with my mommy.” I shouted.

“Shhhh,” said the librarian.

“Vivian, your mother is very sick.” Dad said. “You can’t see her right now. But she

told me to tell you that she's going to be ok."

"That's not true," I said. "Everybody's lying." I cried. "I want my mommy."

"Vivian, try to understand." He leaned towards me.

"No," I kicked at him and ran outside. But as soon as I got outside I looked around me and I didn't recognize any of the places or people. I wanted to go home.

"Stop!" Dad came rushing behind me. He grabbed my arm and pulled me towards his car. It was parked along the curbside. He opened the car door and told me to get inside the passenger's seat. I got in the car and when Dad closed the door. I began to cry. He went around to the driver's side and got into the car.

"Vivian," he began. "Don't cry, honey. The doctor says it's better for your mother to stay here tonight."

"Why can't I see her?" I sobbed. "Why can't I see my mommy?"

"She's resting now," he turned the ignition and pulled out onto the road while I continued crying. He didn't say anything else for a long time. We went past the college where there were many big kids walking to class carrying their books in the sunny afternoon. The mountains looked bigger here from the west side of town. Dad drove along Mesa Avenue, which is usually a fun road that is just as hilly as Yandell Drive, but I wasn't having any fun. He then turned onto a quiet street and drove up towards the mountains. There were many houses along the small road. I could see the houses up on the cliffs. My cousins, Javi and Leo, and I would make up stories about movie stars and rich famous people living in those houses, but Dad said that they were as ordinary as we were. This was the one time I heard Uncle Joe disagree with him.

"There's nothing ordinary about living on stilts," Uncle Joe said to Dad, and they both laughed.

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We were on Scenic Drive, which is a narrow windy road alongside the mountain. I thought we were going back home, but Dad stopped over at the Tourist Point. It was the place where people parked on a wedge protruding out of the side of the road. From this point tourists have the widest panorama of the border region. Standing there they can view two countries and three states. There were plenty of empty parking spaces and Dad parked his car in one of them. I had stopped crying but neither of us had said anything since we left the library.

“Viv,” Dad said. I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t say anything else for a while. “Let’s get some fresh air.” He tapped me on the arm and got out of the car. I got out and followed him down the steps to the viewing platform where tourists could stand to look out for miles and miles. Lined along the rim of the semicircle that formed the platform was a row of coin-operated machines that work like binoculars called tower viewers.

“Here,” Dad pulled coins out of his pocket. “We haven’t done this in a long time.” He placed a dime into the machine’s coin-slot and turned the knob. I climbed on the metal rod at the base of the tower viewer in order to reach the eyepiece. “Let me help you.” Dad said trying to lift me the way he used to do when I was four or five. He’d prop his foot on the metal rod and bend his leg so that I could sit on his knee to look through the viewer, but now I was too big for him to do that.

“It’s ok, Dad. I can do it.” I grabbed the handles of the tower viewer and looked into the eyepiece.

He didn’t say anything he just stood behind me letting me watch through the binoculars. It was a very bright day and I could see clearly to the horizon on the east. I turned the machine to the south and could see the city of Juarez, but when I turned the machine to the west, I

remembered that the hospital was in the west side of town. My mother was in that hospital and the doctor wouldn't let me see her. I let go of the tower viewer and it dropped like a bowling head. In the distance I could here the quiet roar of traffic down below the mountain. Except for the soft breeze blowing, everything was quiet. Dad and I were the only ones standing there. The timer on the tower viewer had been ticking and it suddenly stopped and I heard the dime drop. Dad put his arms around me and squeezed me so hard that I thought he would crush me.

## Chapter 8

When we got home the telephone was ringing. It was Uncle Joe. I handed the receiver to Dad. He didn't say much. He just stood in the hallway listening to whatever Uncle Joe was saying. "Let me call the neighbor's," Dad was saying while I was filling Lobo's water bowl. "If Vivian can stay with you tonight, it will be very helpful." He hung up and began dialing. "Hello, Mrs. Roman?" He said.

Dad arranged for me to stay at Mr. and Mrs. Roman's house for dinner while he went back to the hospital. I couldn't go to Grandma Lita's because she and Uncle Vic were also at the hospital. It wasn't fair. I missed my mom and wanted to see her, I wished the doctor would let her come home. Mr. Roman sat in the living room reading the newspaper while I helped Mrs. Roman set the table. She said I was very helpful and that she was glad I had gone over for dinner. I shrugged my shoulders. I watched her prepare the food but she didn't cut vegetables and toss salads like Mom. Instead she used an electric can opener and poured sauce and meatballs out of tin cans. She took out a box of frozen noodles and placed them in the oven. The food smelled different than Mom's food. There weren't any green vegetables or little herb plants on the windowsill like the ones Mom grew at our house. When we sat down to eat, I was



having a hard time putting the food in my mouth because it tasted funny.

“You haven’t taken a bite of your dinner,” Mrs. Roman said.

“I’m not hungry,” I said hoping that I wouldn’t have to eat that funny tasting food.

“Your mother will think I starved you,” she said.

“Let her alone,” Mr. Roman said holding his fork up in the air. “It’s been a long day for her. Why don’t you give her some of that fruit salad of yours?”

“That’s a great idea,” said Mrs. Roman and got up to serve me fruit and marshmallow salad in a bowl.

“Mmm, this is really yummy,” I said taking a spoonful of the sweet and creamy salad.

“How ‘bout some Scrabble?” Mr. Roman wiped his hands with a napkin and placed it over his empty plate.

After I helped Mrs. Roman clean up the dishes we went into the living room to play scrabble with Mr. Roman. We sat around the coffee table where he had already set the game out and was sitting on his rocking chair. Mrs. Roman sat on a corner of the sofa and I sat on the floor. After a while my legs were itchy and uncomfortable from sitting on the carpet. I felt tingling needles poking along my left leg because it had fallen asleep.

“Are you all right?” Mrs. Roman lifted her head to look at me from under her reading glasses. “Here, this will be more comfortable.” She handed me a yellow pillow from the couch. I placed it on the carpet and sat on it. It was soft and cushiony but it made me wobble and I tried different positions until I found my balance and was comfortable.

Mr. Roman was winning at first. Mrs. Roman had the least points, but then suddenly she began to get more points until she had more than both Mr. Roman and me. It was like at home. Scrabble was Mom’s favorite game, and she got excited and happy when she was winning. Dad

didn't like to play as much, but I did. I loved playing with Mom, because I always had so much fun even when I didn't win.

"It's your turn, Vivian." Mr. Roman said while writing down the score on his notepad. "We're out of letters and it looks like Mrs. Roman is too far ahead. Unless you come up with eighteen points, she wins."

"I don't have anything good." I said turning my letter stand so that Mr. Roman could see my letter tiles.

"Yup," he said. "Those are definitely difficult letters."

All I had left were a Q, Z, U, and F.

"Now, now," Mrs. Roman smiled and leaned back into the sofa. "You can't help her. That would be cheating."

"I won't cheat. I promise." I said studying the board for spaces to make a word.

"I know you won't, dear." Mrs. Roman winked at me. "It's Mr. Roman I'm worried about."

All the while Mr. Roman mouthed out words that began with the letter F. I looked for spaces where I could fit all my letters to make a word on the board, but there were hardly any empty spaces left. Mr. Roman began spelling out words that began with the letter U. I noticed a letter N along the third row from the top. The letter N was part of the word 'alpine' that was formed across the row. I could make the word 'fun', but the problem was that the letter E from 'alpine' was also part of the word 'cedar' so that the U from 'fun' would create the word 'uc' which is not a word.

Mr. Roman kept searching for letters on the board that would help me make a word and Mrs. Roman watched him carefully so that he would not cheat by telling me where to place my

letter tiles. It was beginning to feel like a test at school. Mrs. Keitch sometimes gave us crossword puzzles for our spelling and vocabulary tests. She said this was another way to make our brains work hard. Then I saw it! I saw what would make the best word of all. I lay my tiles down. First the Q, then the U, in the squares above the I of 'alpine.' Below the I, I placed the Z.

"Quiz," I said. "I spelled quiz!" I stood up.

"Oh, my goodness." Mrs. Roman arms up above her head and she stomped her feet on the carpet. "This is wonderful." She clapped her hands.

"I can't believe it!" Mr. Roman quickly added up the numbers. "This is outstanding," he wrote furiously. "Ten points for the Q and let's see, it's on a triple word square, two points for the U and I, and ten points for Z on a double letter square. That makes it 32 times two. A whopping 64 points!"

"Yippie!" I jumped up and down. I had never spelled a word that added up to that many points. I was so happy that I turned to hug Mom, but instead it was Mrs. Roman who was cheering next to me. "What's the matter?" She put her arm on my shoulder. "You won."

"Mom and Dad aren't here to see me win." I slumped my shoulders.

"This is quite a triumph," Mr. Roman took his eyeglasses off. "That sure was an excellent way to end the game." He grabbed a handkerchief out of his shirt pocket to wipe the lenses of his glasses.

"This deserves a treat. Don't you think?" Mrs. Roman rubbed my shoulder.

"Yes, Ma'am. It's my best score ever." I couldn't wait to tell Mom and Dad all about it.

"I have an idea," Mr. Roman got up from his chair. "Nobody move the board. I'll be right back." He put his feet into his slippers and went into the next room.

"I think this calls for a tasty desert. What would you like?" Mrs. Roman led me around

the corner of the room and into the kitchen. “We’ve got key lime pie, or let’s see here.” She opened the door to the freezer and a cloud of cold air escaped into the room. I couldn’t reach up to see what was in there but I could tell it was full of boxes and plastic containers. “Here we go,” she said. “I’ve got some strawberries and whipped cream. That’s it!” She took a container out and shut the freezer door. “We’ll have strawberry shortcakes. You like that. Don’t you?”

“Can I have chocolate syrup on mine?”

“Hmm. Sure why not.”

“I’ve gotten the Polaroid camera,” Mr. Roman called from the living room. “Let’s have a photo of this.”

Mrs. Roman was occupied preparing dessert. I went back into the living room where Mr. Roman was moving about with the camera over his face pointed to the coffee table. It was a very big camera like the ones I saw at the science museum. The back of it looked like an accordion and it had a big glass bulb on the top.

“You stand on the other side of the table,” Mr. Roman said looking up from the viewfinder. I kneeled on the carpet while leaning against the coffee table and he turned the board so that the letters were upside down when I looked at them. “Ready?” He said. “Smile.” He snapped the lever. I heard a popping sound while the bulb flashed brightly then turned black like smoke. I could see white spots in my eyes for a moment. “Here we go,” Mr. Roman pulled a strip of black paper out of the camera and waved it in the air. I watched while he separated the black plastic paper from the white part that was the photograph. “See here.” He held it up from the edges. “It’s not dry yet, but you can make it out.”

I looked at the picture. It was a greenish color but I could see my face next to the table where the Scrabble board lay. Mrs. Roman came into the room carrying a tray with three small

plates of strawberry shortcakes and a bottle of Bosco syrup in the center. I poured the chocolate syrup over my strawberry shortcake, while Mr. Roman turned on the television and tuned it to the Carol Burnett Show. I was afraid of spilling something on the nice blue carpet or on the furniture, because I wasn't used to eating in the living room. The only time I ever ate in the living room at home was on Christmas Eve when Mom poured us all a cup of eggnog to have with a sugar cookie before going to bed.

There was a knock at the door. Mr. Roman went to see who it was. "Is Vivian here?" I heard my cousin Javi ask. I set my plate down on the end table and went to the door.

"She's right here." Mr. Roman stepped to one side so that I could get to the door.

"Hi Javi."

"My mom says it's time for you to come home with us."

While I put my canvas shoes on and tied the laces, Mrs. Roman went to get a plastic container from the kitchen. She placed it in my hands and said it was for my dad. I bid them farewell. Mr. Roman followed me outside and watched as Javi and I walked two houses down then crossed the street to my house. I turned and waved at him just as I went inside. Aunt Mandi had taken off her shoes. I handed her the pink Tupperware container that Mrs. Roman had given me. She set it down on the dining room table. Then told Leo to put it in the freezer. Leo was busy with the cable box. He was looking for the Home Box Office channel.

"We're not here to watch television," Aunt Mandi told him. "Go put this in the freezer and feed the dog."

"Why can't he come, too?" Javi started for the backdoor. I could hear Lobo's excitement happy to see someone.

"Get him some fresh water!" Aunt Mandi called to Javi. "Vivian, honey. Let's get you

some clothes for tomorrow.” She headed for my bedroom. I followed behind her.

“Where are we going?” I opened the door to my closet. There were only a few items hanging from the rod. Mom usually left my clean clothes on the chair for me to put away, but she always put those that needed to go on hangers in the closet, because I couldn’t reach the closet rod without standing on a stool. I looked over to the desk chair but it was empty.

“You’re staying with us, tonight.” She looked through the closet. The only items hanging there were my winter pants and raincoat.

“Is Dad staying, too?”

“He’s staying with your Mom at the hospital.” She opened the drawers to my dresser and pulled out some underwear and socks. “Where should we put them?”

I knelt and pulled out my suitcase from under the bed. It was a small leather suitcase that had actually belonged to Mom when she was an airline stewardess in Mexico. I remember the first time I discovered it in Grandma Lita’s attic one day while I was playing and she was sewing. At the time I was in kindergarten.

“What’s this, Grandma?” I lifted the light blue suitcase up to her face.

“That’s your mother’s overnight case.” She threaded the bobbin. “She used to take it with her to work.”

“Where did she work?” I tried opening the suitcase by squeezing one of the two silver latches but I couldn’t do it.

“She worked for the airlines. *Volando*.” Grandma Lita spread her arms and flapped them in the air like wings.

“What’s *volando*?” I poked at the other latch and it moved slightly.

“*Volar, volar*,” Grandma Lita said flapping her arms again.

“Flying! You mean flying, Grandma?”

“Yes, in airplanes.” She said. “You’re momma, would fly in airplanes.”

“Can you open it?” I put the suitcase on her lap. She pinched the latches with two fingers and it popped open. Inside I found a long silky scarf with blue and white stripes. I pressed it against my face. It was smooth and soft. I caught the scent of perfume. There was also a small blue hat with a yellow pin on one side. Grandma Lita searched through an armoire until she found a blue dress with white buttons.

“This was her uniform,” Grandma Lita held it up for me to view. “I had forgotten about this. It was such a long time ago.” She sighed.

Inside a small pocket on the side of the dress, I found a plastic card with a small picture on one corner. It was a girl that looked like Mom.

“Who’s this, Grandma?” I showed it to her.

“Let me see,” she reached for her eyeglasses. She put her hand over my wrist and pulled me closer. Her hand was warm and shaky. “Ah, that’s your mother.”

“That’s my mommy?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “She was such a young girl back then.”

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Aunt Mandi went out of the room while I arranged my socks and underwear in the suitcase. She came back carrying a stack of folded laundry in her arms. “Here we go,” she set the clothes on the bed. “I found it in the other room.”

I picked out my favorite shorts and two t-shirts that I liked to wear and placed them in the suitcase.

“You need your pajamas and toothbrush.” Aunt Mandi’s knees were right next to my

shoulder. She was wearing sandals and had pink polish on her toenails. The hem of her skirt brushed against my pigtail. I looked up at her tummy. It made her shirt round like the Snoopy cartoon. I grabbed my Snoopy toy from the bed and put him on top of my clothes. I had gotten Snoopy for my last birthday. When I first saw him, I thought somebody had taken all of his stuffing out, but then Dad explained that Snoopy had a zipper in his belly so that I could store my pajamas in it.

I went into the bathroom and grabbed my toothbrush from the linen closet. It was inside a plastic case next to Mom and Dad's toothbrushes. I grabbed theirs too, just in case they had forgotten to take them along with them to the hospital. I placed all three into the side-pocket of my suitcase. Aunt Mandi checked that the windows were closed then left the room calling out to Leo to check that he locked the door to the alleyway after he threw out the garbage. I looked around the room to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. I grabbed my Holly Hobby knapsack and hung it over my shoulder then grabbed the suitcase and shut out the lights as I went out of the room. I sat in the dark the living room and waited for Aunt Mandi. When she went into the kitchen I followed her and sat in a chair without pulling it out from under the table.

"Mom, can we take Lobo with us?" Javi came in from the backyard pleading with Aunt Mandi. "He's going to be all alone."

"He's here to protect the house." Aunt Mandi was rinsing and placing the dirty dishes into the dishwasher.

"Aw, Mom." Javi stood at the screen door watching Lobo dig in the grass.

"We're leaving in a minute. Close the gate behind you and go out to the car." Aunt Mandi said over the running water from the faucet.

"Everything's closed," Leo came in just as Javi was going out. "I checked the alley gate



and the garage. Mom, did you know that Uncle Ben has a drum set back there?"

"Get your brother. We're leaving." Aunt Mandi told Leo. She grabbed her handbag and the keys from the dining table.

"Javi!" He shouted. "We're leaving!"

"I could've done that," Aunt Mandi shook her head and went out the front door. We followed behind her and she locked the door with the key. Lobo came around the corner from the driveway hauling Javi, who was holding the leash taut. Lobo was a strong German Shepherd. He didn't like being on a leash. I couldn't hold him. Whenever I tried to hold his leash, he'd drag me all around the yard until Dad ordered him to stop. Lobo also didn't let Mom take him on the leash. The only person he listened to was Dad.

"I didn't know your dad played the drums." Leo slugged me on the shoulder as we climbed into the car. "Do you ever play with them?"

"Sometimes." I said.

It was very dark outside. Leo and I waited in the car while Aunt Mandi insisted that Javi take Lobo back into the yard, but when Leo opened the door to get out of the car, Lobo climbed in and wouldn't get out. Javi tugged and tugged at him, but Lobo wouldn't budge. He trampled over me with his big paws and licked my face. The more everyone shouted at him to get out the more Lobo backed into the corner of the backseat. We all fell silent for a moment.

"I guess we can take him," Aunt Mandi finally said. "You'll have to take responsibility for him, Javi. You understand? If that dog tears up my furniture, I'll have a word with your father."

"Don't worry Mom. He can sleep in my room." Javi climbed in the backseat next to Lobo and without another word we all rode away to Aunt Mandi's house. They lived on the

other side of McKinley Canyon in a neighborhood with newer houses. Their house looked like the Brady Bunch's. It had a staircase that you could stand under and see people's feet as they went up or down the stairs. They had a swimming pool in the backyard and a white gazebo in a corner. Javi and I would play there and pretend we were on a stranded ship in a rainstorm or that we were standing on a boulder in the middle of a volcano eruption.

I had fallen asleep on the ride over to Aunt Mandi's house. When I awoke Uncle Joe was carrying me inside the house. He put me down on the couch. Leo was carrying my suitcase and Javi was dragging Lobo to his bedroom. My aunt said I could sleep in Javi's room if I wanted to.

"Aw, Mom," Javi said. "No girls allowed. Remember?"

"Vivian's your cousin." Uncle Joe said. Nobody said anything. I sat waiting for someone to say something. "How 'bout we all sleep in the screened porch, tonight." Uncle Joe patted me on the back. "I bet Lobo will love it there."

"Yeah. That's a great idea." Javi jumped and Lobo barked with excitement.

"Leo? We're all sleeping in the porch." Aunt Mandi knocked at the bathroom door.

Leo opened the door with the toothbrush in his mouth. He was wearing his Houston Oilers t-shirt. I went in the bathroom and changed into my pajamas. I brushed my teeth and spilled toothpaste on my *Muppets* nightgown. It was made out of the same material that t-shirts are made but it was long to my knees. I left my socks on because my feet were cold. When I got back to the room where we were going to sleep, I overheard Aunt Mandi tell Uncle Joe that she was going to the hospital in the morning.

"Can I come, too?" I rubbed at my nightgown trying to remove the toothpaste stain. Everyone got quiet.

"It's probably not a good idea." Uncle Joe unrolled the sleeping bags over the floor.

“Yeah, hospitals are boring,” Javi threw himself onto the sleeping bags laid out across the room. “That’s where people die.”

“Hush, Javi.” Uncle Joe slapped him on the back. “That’s not always true.”

“But my mom’s there. Is she going to die?” I knelt on the floor and bawled.

“No, Viv.” Aunt Mandi hugged me. “You’ll see. Your mom is going to get better.”

“From now keep your mouth shut, Javi.” Uncle Joe shook his head at him. “You made your cousin cry.”

“Yeah, Javi.” Leo smacked him on the head and they began wrestling until their dad stopped them. Aunt Mandi wiped my tears and took me into the kitchen for some milk and cookies. When she wasn’t looking, I gave my last cookie to Lobo. He wagged his tail and stood with his front paws on the edge of the table and lapped up the rest of my milk from the glass.

Uncle Joe turned out the light and got into the sleeper sofa next to Aunt Mandi while us kids slept on the sleeping bags. Lobo curled up next to my pillow and I could hear him breathing. Light shone from a car driving up the road and I watched the shadows crawling across the wall and up the ceiling until they disappeared.

## Chapter 9

I was the last to wake up in the morning. I looked for Aunt Mandi but she wasn’t in the kitchen. My cousins were already dressed and having breakfast. I stood at the doorway watching the cartoons on the small black and white television propped up on the windowsill that my cousins were watching. Lobo was eating from a bowl out in the patio.

“Where’s your mom?” I asked my cousins.

“She left to the hospital.” Leo spoke with his mouth full.

*That's not fair. I wanted go. Why didn't she take me?* I went out through the backdoor and petted Lobo. He had was busy gnawing on a bone and didn't try to lick me. I went back inside to watch some more cartoons.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Javi scooped chocolate powder out of the tin container and stirred it into his glass of milk with a spoon.

"I dunno," I said. "I wanted to go to the hospital." I moved closer to the television.

"What'd you wanna do that for? Hospitals are creepy. There's all that blood and everything. Remember when Nana was there."

"Stop it you numb nut." Leo smacked him on the head. "Can't you see her mom's dying."

"No she's not!" I shouted at them both. "You're lying." I ran out the back door.

"Ooh, you're in trouble, Leo. You made her cry." Javi said as Leo ran out behind me.

"I'm sorry, Viv." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't cry."

"Why'd you say that?" I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

"I dunno," he shrugged. "It's just that there was all that blood when your Dad found Aunt Angie on the floor. She was unconscious until the ambulance got there."

"When did that happen?" I sniffled.

"Don't you know?"

No, I shook my head.

"Come on don't cry. I didn't mean it. You're mom's gonna be ok." We went back inside.

"There you are, kiddo." Uncle Joe startled me from behind as he walked into the kitchen. Leo and Javi gave me that look to keep quiet about crying. "Ready for some pancakes?" He

tapped me on the back and took a seat at the kitchen table.

I nodded. Pancakes were my second favorite breakfast. My favorite thing to eat in the morning was a bowl of Cheerios with chocolate milk, but Mom would only let me eat that when I was sad and she wanted to cheer me up.

“Do you have any Cheerios?” I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

“Cheerios? Let me see.” Uncle Joe stood up to look in the cupboard above the refrigerator.

“No. Sorry. You sure you don’t want pancakes? Your aunt makes some killer pancakes.” Uncle Joe poured syrup over a stack of pancakes.

“O.k., but no syrup. I don’t like it.” I pinched my nose and shook my head.

“Ugh. No syrup?” Javi put his finger in his mouth pretending he was going to throw up. “That’s gross. How can you have pancakes without syrup?”

“Javi, eat your breakfast. If she wants pancakes with no syrup, she can have it.”

“Yeah, it’s a free country. So there.” Leo’s mouth was full and he ate without taking his eyes off of the television.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Uncle Joe tapped his shoulder with the newspaper.

After breakfast my cousins hurried to the bus stop and Uncle Joe kept on eating breakfast and reading his paper. I went into the bathroom to get dressed and brush my teeth, but I couldn’t get the comb through my hair.

“Vivian, are you ok, honey?” Uncle Joe knocked on the door just as I was wetting my tangled hair.

“I’ll be out in a minute.” I hastily pulled my hair into a ponytail, but I was having trouble with the bead at the end of the ponytail holder. It kept slipping when I tried to pull one bead over

the other. I gave up and went out into the hallway holding my hair with one hand behind my head. “Can you tie this for me?” I showed Uncle Joe the ponytail holder.

“Let me see here.” He took it from my hand. “What exactly is this supposed to do?”

“It ties around my ponytail,” I chuckled. Uncle Joe looked funny fumbling with the beads. He pulled and twisted at my hair but the bead kept slipping from him too.

“Here we go. I got it.” He stepped back and smiled at me. Then he began to laugh.

“What is it?” I felt my hair with my two hands.

“I’ve made a mess of it. Come look,” he tugged me by the elbow to the bathroom mirror.

“I can’t reach,” I jumped on my tippy toes because the mirror was too high.

“Here,” he closed the lid to the toilet and I climbed on it.

My ponytail was lopsided and half of my hair formed a bubble above my ear.

“Uncle Joe! I can’t go to school like this.” I laughed. “Everyone will laugh at me.”

“Don’t worry. You’re not going to school, today.”

“Why not?” I stopped laughing. “Today’s the last day of school. I’m supposed to go to the picnic.”

“Your Dad didn’t think you’d want to go.” He patted me on the back. “He asked me to drive you over to your grandma’s for the day.”

“It’s not fair,” I crossed my arms over my chest. “What did I do wrong?” I didn’t know why I was being punished. *Maybe Dad found out that I didn’t tell him about Mom’s stomachache and now he was mad at me.*

“You didn’t do anything wrong, kiddo. It’s just that your father thought you’d want to spend the day with Grandma.”

“I can’t do anything I want?” I sulked. Uncle Joe pinched his lips and didn’t say

anything. Then he asked me if I wanted to call my dad. I nodded my head. He picked up the phone and dialed, then handed the receiver to me.

“Hello?”

“Hi Dad. Why can’t I go to school, today?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to go.”

“But what about the picnic? Mom and I are supposed to be going.”

“Viv, your mom is in the hospital. You’re staying with your grandmother. I’ll pick you up later.”

“Why can’t Mom come home? Just like Nana did after she went to the hospital?”

“Don’t ask senseless questions. You’re mother is sick right now. Now do as you’re told.”

“But Dad, maybe Grandma can come with me to the picnic?”

“It’s too hot for her to be out all day.” His voice was louder.

“What about Mrs. Roman?”

“Now’s not the time to be arguing, Vivian. You can’t go. There will be other picnics.”

I knew Dad was mad at me, but I didn’t know why. He said goodbye and hung up. I turned to Uncle Joe who had been listening while I spoke to Dad.

“It’s going to be ok, kiddo.” He said. I bowed my head. I wasn’t feeling well. I wanted to go home. “Come on, I’ll drive you to your grandma’s.”

He waited while I grabbed my knapsack and my suitcase then we went out to the car together. Uncle Joe’s car was big and fancy. I couldn’t see over the dashboard like I could in Dad’s car. Uncle Joe turned on the air conditioner and I felt the cold air come up from under my feet. It made my legs and arms get goose pimples. The car smelled sweet like peppermint

candy. The day was cloudy and looked like it would rain. A flock of birds flew in the direction of the mountains. I noticed a hawk with wide wings circling high above. It seemed like it was floating in the air. I wondered if the kids at school had left to the picnic already.

## Chapter 10

Grandma Lita hugged me before she said hello. I kissed her on the cheek. Her face looked tired and her eyes were red. Uncle Joe set my suitcase on a chair and before he drove off to work he told my grandmother that Aunt Mandi would be by at noon. I went looking for Uncle Vic in the basement, but it wasn't there. Then I went into the room where Grandma Lita kept her television set. I took off my shoes and lay down on the couch pretending that I was floating on air like the hawk in the sky.

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The smoke coming from the grill woke me up. I knew Grandma Lita was cooking because she always picked the vegetables that grew in her garden and cooked them on the grill outside.

“There’s nothing healthier than fresh produce,” she would say.

I loved her cooking. It was always delicious and not spicy like Mom’s cooking. I went outside where she was standing by the grill. She wore an oven mitt on each hand and in one hand she held a pair of tongs that she was using to turn the vegetables as they cooked. In the other hand she held a paper plate that she used to fan the smoke away from her face.

By the time Aunt Mandi arrived lunch was ready. I helped set the table and we all sat down to eat. I wanted to know when Mom was coming home, but I could tell they weren’t talking about Mom being in the hospital because I was there. When I finished my sandwich I



went looking for a book to read. I found one but it had many big words I didn't know how to pronounce. I sat in the living room in Grandma Lita's rocker. I could hear my aunt and grandmother talking so I went to the kitchen door to listen, where they were still sitting at the table although their plates and drinking glasses were all empty. I didn't get what they were saying. Although I could speak Spanish, I didn't know the words they were using until I heard the word *sangre*. That meant blood. *Now it all made sense*. I thought. Everyone was mad at me for not telling Dad about the tissue with blood I had found the other day in the bathroom.

"But Mom told me not to tell?" I walked into the kitchen.

"Told you not to tell what?" They both said together.

"I didn't mean to do it. I promise Grandma." I bowed my head.

"Of course you didn't." Grandma Lita said.

"Didn't mean to do what?" Aunt Mandi put her hand on my chin.

"I saw it in the wastebasket, but Mom said not to tell Dad. She said she cut herself."

"Honey? What are you talking about?"

"The blood on the tissue. I saw it."

"When?"

"The other day. It was in the bathroom when Mom had a stomachache."

"Oh honey, that's nothing. Don't worry about that," Grandma Lita went to the counter and grabbed a bag of Brach's candies. "Here have a sweet. You'll feel better."

"But what's wrong with Mom?" I grabbed a caramel piece out of the bag and put it in my pocket for later.

"She's had an emergency surgery." Grandma Lita pulled me towards. I stood with my back to her while she untied my ponytail and smoothed my hair with her hands then wound the

ponytail holder around my hair. She dropped her hands over my shoulders and hugged me. “We’ve got to pray that she gets better.” She kissed the back of my head. “You’ll see she’s going to be well soon.”

“What’s an emergency surgery?”

“She became so sick that the doctor had to operate on her to make her feel better.” Aunt Mandi said as she cleared the table and placed the dishes in the sink. Grandma pulled out her set of Chinese checkers from the credenza and placed it on the table. I organized the colored marbles on the triangles while they washed the dishes. Afterwards Aunt Mandi went to rest in the bedroom while Grandma Lita and I played. She usually won, but I loved playing with her anyway, because she would tell me stories about Mom when she was a little girl.

“Grandma, tell me about the time when my mom hid under the bed so that you wouldn’t spank her.”

She smiled and began telling me the story. Although I had heard them before, I enjoyed hearing Grandma Lita’s stories. When she finished with one asked for another.

“Tell me about the one with the piglet.” I said.

We continued playing while she told me one story after another. Some stories were about Uncle Vic when he was a boy and others were about Aunt Mandi, and still others included all three of them. She also told me stories about her and my grandfather. I never met him because he died a long time before I was born, but I knew what he looked like. His picture was hanging in Grandma’s bedroom. It was a black and white picture with Grandpa wearing a white shirt and a black suit and tie. He looked like Uncle Vic but with a mustache. We had the same picture but it was smaller and it was in our living room.

## Chapter 11

When Aunt Mandi woke up, the three of us rode in her car to the hospital. Grandma Lita told me that I wouldn't be able to see Mom, because of the hospital rules that didn't allow children under the age of fourteen to go into the patient rooms. Just as we were arriving Dad was coming out of the elevator.

"She's wide awake right now," he said about Mom. "I'll take Viv for something to eat and you two go up. Would you like me to get you anything?"

"No, no. We ate," Grandma nodded. "And I've got some treats." Grandma patted her bag. She always carried a handful of Brach's candy. They were her favorite. Whenever I went to the supermarket with her she'd let me scoop them out of the cubbies and put them on the scale to weigh them because they were sold by the pound.

I went with Dad to the Luby's Cafeteria on the top of a hill near the hospital. We stood in the line just like at my school cafeteria, except the food was fancy and the people who served the food smiled and said hello. Dad let me have iced tea with lemon. He didn't say anything about my asking for a slice of chocolate cake and a bowl of gelatin with whipped cream.

"That's all you're having?" He looked over at my plate as he took out his wallet at the register.

"Yup."

We sat near a window. The glass was tinted dark and we could see people outside but they couldn't see us. The clouds were dark and it looked like rain. I ate my cake and gelatin, but Dad hardly touched the food on his plate. I had forgotten all about the last day of school until he mentioned it.

"It wasn't such a good day for a picnic, today." He stared out the window. I turned to

see what he was looking at, but all I could see was the parking lot.

“Do you have to use the bathroom?” He asked when I was done eating.

“Nope.” I licked the chocolate frosting from the tines on my fork.

“Don’t do that,” Dad said. “Let’s go. I’ve got to go home and change. Then I’ll drive you back and you’ll stay with Grandma for the night.”

“Why can’t I stay at home?”

“Because I’m staying with your mother. That’s why.” He shook his head and stood up to leave. “Here, wipe your mouth.” He handed me a napkin. I took it with me to the car.

“You’re going to be staying at your grandma’s until your mother is out of the hospital.” He drove out of the restaurant. “I want you to behave. Don’t cause Grandma any trouble. You hear.”

“When will I be allowed to see Mom?”

“Don’t start whining, Viv. It’s not necessary. As soon as your mother is better, I’m sure the doctor will allow you to see her.”

“Is she going to die?” When I said this, Dad slowed down the car and pulled over at the side of the road.

“What made you say that?”

“Leo said there was lots of blood and the ambulance came to our house.”

“Yes. Your mom fainted and the ambulance took her to the emergency room.” He started on the road again.

I thought it was strange that we rode on the highway, because Dad never liked driving on the highway. He said it was much more pleasant driving through the streets. We were almost home when it started raining. First, it was a few drops then they became bigger and soon the rain

was pounding on the roof of the car.

“Did you leave anything at school?” Dad stopped at the red light on Altura Avenue.

“I don’t think so.”

“Let’s stop over, just in case.” He turned onto Boone Street and stopped in front of the school. There wasn’t anyone outside because of the rain. A yellow bus turned the corner and stopped behind us. I watched the rain running down the car windows. It reminded me of the carwash that Dad would drive into and then the car would move all by itself with nobody driving. It was some sort of machine doing a magic trick.

“What time is it?” I grabbed Dad’s wrist from the steering wheel and turned it to look at his watch. The big hand was on the eight and the little hand was between the two and the three. It was almost three o’clock. The rain stopped and we both got out of the car. We walked into the school by the side entrance.

“Go get your things and meet me in the office.” He said.

“Can I talk to Celi when the bell rings?”

“What for?”

“I just want to ask her something.”

“Can’t you just call her on the phone?”

“Please, Dad?”

“All right, all right. Just don’t be long.”

I felt grown up to be walking in the hallway without a pass. The walls were all empty and there were stacks of textbooks by the classroom doors. As I went by I saw students sitting at their desks. One of the fifth grade classrooms was having a trash party. That meant they were tearing up the sheets out of their notebooks and throwing them away in the wastebasket. We had

done that yesterday in Mrs. Keitch's homeroom. I went by her classroom but the lights were out and nobody was there. They must've still been at the picnic.

I opened the combination lock to my locker. There wasn't anything in there but my books and purple cap. The cap had the letter W in white on the front. Mom had bought it for me because our school's colors were purple and white and our mascot was the Whitehawk. I grabbed the cap and shut the locker door.

"There you are." Dad stood at the end of the hallway. "Bring your books. We'll return them to the office."

I turned back and grabbed the books. They were too heavy for me to carry all at once. Dad lifted them off my hands. When Dad and I walked in, I noticed that Mrs. Holguin and Mr. Griego and the other two people standing in the office became quiet.

"She's a good kid," Mr. Griego patted me on the head. "She's one of the best we've got." It seemed like he was referring to me, but I knew it couldn't be right. He must be talking about Cloe Siegel or Annette Rincon. "Everything will work out. We'll see you next fall." He said shaking Dad's hand.

"You be good to your mamma," Mrs. Holguin hugged me. "She'll be all better soon." She handed me a box of brand new crayons. I put them in the inside of my cap and followed Dad out the door.

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At home I went out to play with Lobo while Dad took a shower and shaved, but Lobo wasn't in the back yard. He was still at Aunt Mandi's house. The backyard was all wet and the bucket that Mom used to mop with was filled with water. I heard Dad call me and I went back inside.

“Look, a ladybug.” I opened my palm to show what I had caught on a leaf. Dad smelled like soap and his hair was dripping wet. He was wearing his robe standing in front of the dresser in the bedroom.

“Take that bug outside and go wash up.” He said splashing aftershave on his face.

“But I’m not dirty.”

“Viv, don’t argue with me. You can’t walk in to see your mother carrying all those germs you tend to lug around.”

“I don’t have cooties,” I poked his arm. I was happy I was getting to see Mom. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her. “Circle, circle, dot, dot. Now you’ve got the cooties shot.”

“You need one too,” he poked me in the belly and I giggled. “You clown. Go wash up.”

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At the hospital Dad asked permission for me to see Mom. The doctor said I would have to wait until he finished checking all the patients. I sat with Grandma Lita playing gin rummy in the waiting room, while Aunt Mandi and Dad went to see Mom. After a while Grandma said she was tired and we got up to take a walk outside. It was raining again, so we went back inside to stay dry. We went into the gift shop and she gave me money to buy a gift for Mom. I searched around the store, but I didn’t see anything I liked until I saw a Winnie Pooh bear propped up on a shelf behind a picture frame. The store clerk said it wasn’t for sale, that it belonged to the store, but she changed her mind when Grandma Lita whispered in her ear.

“Why did you whisper in her ear, Grandma?”

“I had to make her an offer she couldn’t refuse.” She giggled. I giggled too although I didn’t know why we were laughing. Aunt Mandi and Dad were sitting in the lobby waiting for us. Grandma went with my aunt to the cafeteria at the other end of the first floor and I went

along with Dad on the elevator up to the third floor holding the bear in my hand.

“Don’t do anything that will get you noticed. You hear?” Dad warned me. He said that the nurses would send me back down to the waiting area if I made any commotion.

“I won’t.” I said looking as the elevator doors opened. I felt cold and detected the scent of iodine that Mom kept in the medicine cabinet. Whenever I cut myself she would put a few drops on my scraped knees and elbows. I would pull away because it stung and made my skin look orange, but then she’d put a band-aid over it and kiss it to make it better.

I saw a nurse come out of a room carrying a clipboard and a thermometer. She stopped at the doorway to ask Dad about me. While he explained that I was going to see Mom, I peeked into the room and saw an old man laying in a bed with white sheets over him and his head was tilted backward with white patches on his head and a scary machine beeping. I was scared. It reminded me of what Leo had said about the movie *Coma*. He said that people were part dead lying in the hospital hanging from wires. Dad told me to wait for a moment outside the door while he went in to see if Mom was awake.

“Come say hello to your mom, Viv.” He tapped me on the shoulder. I went into the room and saw an old lady sleeping in the bed. It didn’t look like Mom. Then Dad led me past the long drape hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room. My mom was sitting up in a tall bed with metal guardrails on each side. She was wearing a white gown and had a long clear tube that was thing like a straw attached to her hand. It led up to a hook hanging from the tall bedpost. Her face and lips were pale and her eyes had dark circles around them.

“Come honey,” she said and Dad nudged me towards her.

“Hi, Mom.” I lifted Pooh bear up to her and after she took it, I reached up to hug her but got tangled on the electric wires leading out of a metal machine next to her bed. She put her arm



around my neck and hugged my head. “What’s this?” I touched the white tape holding the plastic straw to her hand.

“It’s to help me recover.”

“When can you come home?”

“Soon, honey. Soon.” She coughed and moved her arm away from my neck. I didn’t move. I waited for her to stop coughing. Dad grabbed a plastic container and put it underneath her chin. I was scared. Mom wasn’t herself.

“Stand over here, Viv.” Dad pointed to a spot over by where he stood. I moved over next to him without saying a word. When Mom stopped coughing Dad fixed the pillows behind her and told her about my staying with Grandma and about the rain. Mom groaned when he moved her.

“Does your operation hurt?”

“Who told you about that?” Dad looked surprised.

“Grandma. She said that Mom had an emergency operation.”

“What else did she say?”

“Nothing.” I noticed that Pooh bear had fallen off the bed and picked it up. There was a tall table on casters. On it was a carton of juice like the ones I drank at the school and there was a plastic bowl with broth in it. Mom had probably eaten all of the noodles because there weren’t any left in there. There were two vases with different colored flowers and big green leaves. There was a light on behind a half opened door. I wondered what was in there. I leaned over to see and noticed it was a bathroom. Dad reached behind Mom and switched on the light, afterward he sat in the square chair with orange cushions. When Mom had fallen asleep, Dad walked me down to the lobby and I went home with my aunt and grandmother.

I stayed overnight at Grandma's just like Dad said and I didn't cause any trouble. Grandma said she liked having my company while Uncle Vic was at work. When he got home he cooked dinner so that Grandma could rest from being at the hospital all afternoon.

## Chapter 12

We hadn't gone on our trip to California, so on Memorial Day Uncle Vic drove me and my cousins out to Fort Bliss, the military base in our town. We met some of his friends at the cemetery where there were lots of people waiting to see a ceremony for the soldiers and sailors who had died at war. Some of the people wore uniforms and dark glasses. The sun was very bright even though it was only ten in the morning. A marching band was seated inside the giant gazebo at the center of the memorial garden that was surrounded by rosebushes. They stopped playing and stood still when a row of soldiers carrying flags began marching towards the open space in front of us. The people who had been seated stood by their chairs. The old men took off their hats and everyone stopped talking. I squinted my eyes trying to count the white headstones neatly lined up in rows, but there were hundreds and hundreds of them evenly spaced across the huge green lawn. Each one had a little flag sticking out of the ground in front. The smell of fresh cut grass tickled my nose and I sneezed. "Shhh," Leo said. The crowd was quietly watching another group of soldiers using their rifles like batons. They shouted words that I couldn't make out, and when they were done they stood very still holding their rifles against their right arm. From a distance came the shots from a canon that was fired lots of times. A man wearing a uniform stood alone playing a bugle. I had heard that music before because very early in the morning, if I had left my bedroom window opened, it would wake me up while it was still dark.

I saw a lady crying. She was wearing a black cloth over her face and held a pink handkerchief to her face. Another lady rubbed her back and shook her head. A little girl in a blue dress was running in the grass and giggling until a man picked her up. She squirmed in his arms and screamed until he put her back down and she ran to the woman who was crying. After the soldiers marched away the band played the national anthem and we all sat down. A tall man with no hair stood at the podium and spoke. He read a list of names and then talked about honoring the heroes of the Viet Nam war. After a while another man got up to speak. I figured he said a joke because everybody laughed. “What did he say,” I tapped Javi, and he shrugged his shoulders. When I asked him again he said, “pay attention.”

It was hard for me to pay attention because I was hot and thirsty. Everyone looked gloomy and sad because of all the soldiers that had died in the war and that made me sad too. It was like sitting in the hospital lobby waiting to go up to see Mom. They would only let me stay with her for a little bit then I’d have to go back down and wait, while all the grown ups could stay whatever amount of time they wanted to. Meanwhile, I would play with the other kids in the children’s room, but it was hardly any fun, because as soon as we did something that was exciting the hospital people would tell us to simmer down. All they would allow us to do was to boring stuff, like coloring books and puzzles, or kiddie television like *Sesame Street*.

“Our dad’s are heroes,” Leo bit into the cotton candy that had been passed out to all the kids after the ceremony. “They fought in the longest war in American history.” People were spread out across the cemetery. Some would stop to place flowers over a grave then they’d bow their heads as if they were in church praying.

“Let’s go see the graves over there!” Javi pointed to the area where one of the speakers had pointed. The man had said that that area was reserved for the soldiers who got lost in the

war and were never found.

“I don’t want to,” I stepped back. The band was now playing cheerful music and Uncle Vic and his friends were talking to a bunch of older girls.

“You’re a scaredy cat,” Javi yanked my pigtail. “You’re afraid.”

“No I’m not.” I crossed my arms. “It’s just boring.” I stuffed cotton candy in my mouth. “What’s so fun about some gravestone?”

“Aw, you party pooper,” he said and walked away.

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When we got back to their house, Aunt Mandi was in the shower and Grandma Lita was in the kitchen preparing food. Uncle Vic changed his shirt and went out to start the grill while I played catch with Lobo. I accidentally threw the ball into the pool and he jumped in after it and swam all the way across. I laughed.

“Come out and see this boys,” Uncle Joe shouted. Leo and Javi came running through the door. They pulled off their shirts and jumped into the pool, but Lobo had already climbed out. With the ball in his mouth he shook himself off and splattered water all over me. I ran from him, but he chased me and knocked me over. I rolled on the grass laughing. Uncle Vic grabbed the ball from Lobo’s mouth and threw it back into the pool. Lobo went after it. Then Uncle Vic picked me up and jumped into the pool holding me in his arms.

“Grandma and Aunt Mandi said we made a mess of our clothes, but I hadn’t had this much fun in a long time.

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A few days later, Celi called to invite me over to play on Saturday. Dad would drive me over to her house and Mrs. Jodorowsky would drive me home after dinner. I stuffed a towel into

my knapsack. Under my shorts and t-shirt, I had put on the new bathing suit and thongs that Mom had bought me for our trip to California. Celi and I had planned to play on the Whamo Slip n' slide that she had in the backyard.

“Have fun, but don't get carried away.” Dad reminded me as he turned into their driveway. Celi's father waved from the garage as I skipped to the house waving back at Dad. I could hear Celi and her next-door neighbor, Gino, screaming and playing out in the backyard. When her dad announced that I had arrived, Celi ran to meet me. Wiping her face with a towel, she stood dripping wet. A pool of water was forming underneath her.

“Outside!” her mother ordered from the kitchen. “You'll wet the carpet.”

“Come on,” Celi grabbed my hand. “You can change in the playhouse.” She wrapped a striped towel around her waist and stood guard at the door to her playhouse while I took off my shorts and blouse.

I ran from one end of the lawn and skidded into the slippery yellow tarp and screamed as I slid across it to the other end and came up completely wet. Since she was older than me, and Gino was in the third grade, Celi would always be the boss, but this time she let me call the turns. The three of us played until Mrs. Jodorowsky called us over to the patio table for Kool-aid and pretzels. When Gino went inside to the bathroom Celi and I sat quietly for a moment.

“How's your mom?” She said holding the Dixie cup between her teeth. When I didn't say anything, she quickly added, “Never mind. Mom said I shouldn't ask you anything about it.”

“It's ok.” I said. “She's getting much better but the hospital is boring. I can only visit her for ten minutes. Sometimes less.” It made me happy to have a friend that asked me about what was going on, because all the grown-ups had been acting strange. “I can't wait for her to come home.”

She put her arm around my shoulder. Then suddenly got up. “Don’t move.” She ran into the house. I was able to see through the window that she ran across the living room and ran right back to me. “This is for you.” She handed me a folded piece of writing paper. “Look inside.” I unfolded it to find a safety pin with different colored beads. It was a friendship pin for my collection. “I made it yesterday,” she smiled.

“Thanks,” I unclipped it and pinned it to my swimsuit.

“You’re still coming to the Grand Canyon. Aren’t you?” Celi spread her towel on the lawn.

“I dunno.” I spread my towel next to hers. “Let’s make a plan,” I said. “I’ll call to let you know when Dad isn’t busy. Then you call right back and ask him.”

“But what if he says no?” She looked up at the sky. “I know!” Her eyes sparkled the way they usually did when she was being sneaky. “Instead of me asking, I’ll give the phone to my mom and she can ask him.”

“That’s a great idea,” I smiled. “That’s our plan.” We hugged and ran back to the water slide.

Gino went home and we sat down on the patio to have burgers and potato chips. When we were full her mom excused us from the table and we went into the playroom that was down in the basement to see what her older brothers, David and Michael, were doing, but it was boring. They were on the pinball machine and wouldn’t let us play, so we went upstairs where Celi’s big sister, Julia, was sitting on a pillow on the windowsill talking on the phone and painting her toenails with purple nail polish. Her long black hair was rolled up in curlers. She was in the eleventh grade and almost going to graduate from high school. Celi grabbed the *Tiger Beat* magazine from her dresser and we sat on the floor to flip through its pages.

“She doesn’t mind if I take them after the new issue arrives,” Celi lifted it to show me the photos of the TV stars on the front cover. We were sitting on the carpet flipping through the pages when her Mom called us down because it was time to drive me home. Celi took the magazine in the car and all the way back to my house she talked about how she was going to join Shaun Cassidy’s fan club.

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I knew Dad had been napping when I got home because his hair was messy the way it was in the mornings. He unlatched the screen porch and waved at Celi and her mom. He asked me if I’d had fun, but then went into the kitchen to get a beer out of the refrigerator. It wasn’t dark yet, but I went into my room and changed into my pajamas, because the dampness of my shorts was making me cold.

“You’re mom is coming home in a couple of days.” Dad stood at the doorway. His shirt was wrinkled and some of the buttons were undone. Ever since Mom had gone into the hospital Dad didn’t seem to be himself anymore. Earlier that morning we had gone to visit Mom and I told her about Celi’s invitation to her house.

“Don’t forget to brush your hair. It’s very tangled,” Mom smiled but her eyes looked teary the way they did when she watched sad movies on television. She ran her hand down my back. Her hand was cold even though it was boiling hot outside. I turned to hug her.

“I won’t forget,” I said. “You wanna play some gin rummy?” I shuffled the deck of cards that Grandma had given me.

“Bring me that. Will you?” She pointed to a blanket lying on the chair. I grabbed it. It smelled like Dad’s cologne. “Put it over my feet,” she said. I spread the blanket over the white sheets that covered her. A nurse walked in and said hello to me, but I didn’t remember her name.

She wore a blue uniform and was short and pretty. She put a thermometer in Mom's mouth and held it there while looking at her wristwatch. I set up the cards on the rolling table, but then the doctor came in and I had to leave.

## Chapter 13

Aunt Mandi went to the bank while Grandma and I went into the supermarket. Dad had written a list of groceries for me to give to her. I got to push the shopping cart. I propped my foot at the bottom shelf and pushed with my other foot. "It says here a jar of pickles," Grandma squinted her eyes behind her spectacles. "But it doesn't say what brand. What brand does your dad like?"

"The sour ones." I swung from the cart.

"Yes, but what are they called?"

"I think it's this one," I grabbed a jar from the store shelving and placed it into the cart.

"Are you sure?" Grandma put her hand on her hip. "I don't want to get the wrong kind."

"That's the one." I rode down the aisle on the cart.

"Don't hurt somebody!"

A teenaged boy sacked our groceries and pushed the cart out to the parking lot, but Aunt Mandi wasn't there to pick us up yet, so he went back inside. Grandma opened the bag of potato chips and we munched on them while standing on the curbside. Sweat ran down my forehead and got into my eyes, while Grandma fanned herself with an envelope that she had pulled out of her handbag. "Everything will melt." Grandma rummaged through the brown paper bags and took out the carton of Neapolitan ice-cream. "Go ask for some spoons," she pointed at the ice-cream truck parked on the far side of the lot. Waves of heat rose up from the asphalt like little



wiggly lines. Grandma and I ate ice-cream right out of the carton until Aunt Mandi showed up.

“What took you so long?” Grandma frowned as we got into the car. “I’m about to faint in this heat.”

“I have some happy news,” my aunt placed the grocery bags into the trunk of the car. “But I’ll tell you later.”

I helped her with the bags and pretended not to listen, because I knew they didn’t want me to hear what they were saying.

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“I know something you don’t know!” Leo announced while we were playing in Grandma’s front yard.

“What? What is it?” Javi and I wanted to know.

“I’m not supposed to say.”

“You’re lying,” Javi jumped on his pogo stick. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true. I’ve got a secret.”

“Well then tell us.” I stopped jumping rope. “And we’ll believe you.”

“See if you can guess.” Leo said. “It’s two words.”

“Let’s make it a charade,” I suggested.

“Is it a movie or song?” Javi threw his pogo stick on the lawn. Leo signaled that it was just two words by putting up two fingers. Then he indicated that we should guess the second word. He bent his arms into a cradle and rocked them.

“Rocking! Rock ‘em my baby!” I shouted. Yes, yes Leo nodded.

“Singing! Lullaby!” Javi stepped in front of me. Leo pointed at me frantically nodding his head and waving his arm for me to keep guessing. The he bent back to stick out his stomach

and motioned an arch with his arm over his stomach.

“Santa Claus!” I shouted. No, no. Leo shook his head.

“Santa Claus?” Javi turned to me, but Leo kept motioning.

“Cry baby!” I said.

“Baby! Someone’s having a baby!” Javi jumped up and down.

“Aunt Manid! She’s having a baby!” I shouted.

“How’d you know?” They looked at me.

“I just guessed,” I shrugged, but I really didn’t know how I had guessed.

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We were sitting on the bleachers watching Leo’s team play baseball. Uncle Vic was sitting between Javi and me. He’d bought us cracker jacks and snow cones. We cheered when Leo made a home run.

My mom had been in the hospital for weeks now, but I was still staying at Grandma’s house, because Dad had to sleep after staying at the hospital all night or go to work. When I went with him to work, I just sat on a wooden schoolhouse desk that Dad had placed in the far corner of his office. He would sit at his desk talking on the phone and shuffling through papers while the men who worked for him came in holding clipboards and city maps and stand waiting for Dad to send them out on their assignments. Once in a while I would pretend that I was the boss giving out orders to others. I’d imitate Dad’s gestures while speaking into my toy phone and scribble on old legal pads that he no longer needed. Most times, I would sit quietly typing on the old typewriter that nobody used anymore. It had funny looking letters that I had never seen before. Tom, the office clerk, told me that it was the German alphabet and that the typewriter had belonged to an officer of the German Air Force, who had left it behind when he

was transferred out of El Paso to another base. I liked the funny looking keys. There was an A, an O, and a U with two dots on top, and there was a squiggly letter that looked like a stretched letter B. Typing slowly, I'd write letters to take to Mom at the hospital.

The doctor said she needed to stay there until she was strong enough to fight off the bad cells on her own. Whatever that meant. Dad never explained things to me, and if I asked Grandma she would change the subject. In the morning Grandma would go to the hospital with Aunt Mandi, and either I would go with her or go with Dad to his work. Sometimes I'd spend the day with my cousins and Uncle Joe. Everyday seemed different. I was getting tired of not knowing where I was going to stay for the night or where I was going to go during the day.

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Leo's team had won, and the game was over. Javi ran off to join Leo while the team gathered around the coach. I went with Uncle Vic to the car where we would wait for Leo and Javi to meet us. He had said he was taking us all to the hospital where he would pick up Grandma and the boys could go home with their mom.

"Uncle Vic?" I tugged at his shirt while he stood talking to a girl in the middle of the parking lot. Wherever I went with him, girls always came up to him and smiled and giggled. Grandma said that he was the most handsome young man, just like Grandpa.

"Yes, sweetie?" Uncle Vic was wearing dark sunglasses and a pair of shorts.

"I don't want to go to see mom in the hospital anymore."

"I know. I wish she would come home, too." He said.

"No, I mean I just hate going there," I told him. "I hate the hospital. Mom looks scary. She doesn't look like Mom anymore. She looks dead."

"Wait, a minute," he said to the girl he had been talking to. "Come here, Viv." He pulled

me aside. “What’s the matter? I don’t want to ever hear you say that.”

“But she can hardly talk to me, and her skin looks weird. I don’t ever know what to say to her, anymore.”

“Viv. Listen, honey. Your mom is very ill. You have to tell her that you love her.” He helped me up to the hood of his car and he sat on the bumper.

“But everyone lies. The doctor said she was going to get well, and she’s not. Dad doesn’t want me home anymore. He’s mad at me and it’s all because of Mom.” I bowed my head sulking.

“Have I ever lied to you, Viv?” He put his hands on my shoulders. “Well?”

“No,” I said.

“Look. You’re dad isn’t mad at you, honey. He’s very worried about your mom. I know you’re just a kid, but you have to be old enough to understand that this is a very difficult time for your parents. Your mom’s worried about you. And so is your dad.” He put his arms around me. “If you need to cry, go ahead.” He waited, but I didn’t cry. I tried to, but the more I thought about it, the more my eyes refused to make tears.

## Chapter 14

Dad put me on the phone to talk long distance with Uncle Sonny. He didn’t sound so far away, even though he was calling from California.

“Are you ready for the beach? We’ve got some great waves out here.” He chuckled. “You’re going to love it.” I was being sent to spend the Fourth of July in Los Angeles. Uncle Sonny planned to take me along with my cousins, Raquel and Manny, to Disneyland to watch the electric parade and fireworks.

It was going to be the first time I would fly on an airplane. Southwest Airlines had cheap flights out of El Paso International Airport and they were the safest airline they had never crashed and they went directly to LAX and the ticket agent assured Dad that I would be supervised.

“I don’t want her to get lost at the airport there,” Dad insisted. It had taken many discussions with Grandma Lita and Aunt Mandi for him to consent to my flying alone. He had opposed the idea, because I was easily distracted. I heard him describe me to the travel agent who was booking the flight. “She’s either daydreaming or paying attention to things that are irrelevant,” he said to her.

“What’s irrelevant?” I asked Dad on the way home.

“Loot it up,” he told me. Later, I pulled out the thick encyclopedia dictionary from the bookcase in the hallway, but I had no idea how to spell it.

Everyone kept reminding me not to say anything to Mom until I was leaving. On the day of my departure, Dad gave her an extra painkiller to keep her in bed while I said goodbye. She held me very tight to her chest and whispered in my ear. It sounded like she said, “nobody can have everything they want, so choose carefully.”

I think she meant that I shouldn’t get carried away buying souvenirs. As we walked through the terminal to the gate, Dad repeated the litany of instructions he had been drilling into my memory for the past month. “Don’t forget to write down the name of the stewardess that will escort you. And don’t forget to let her know if you need to use the bathroom.”

“You already told me all of this.” I scratched the back of my neck. The new clothes I was wearing were making me itchy.

“Don’t get sassy. Now, what’s Uncle Sonny’s phone number?” He said and I rattled out

the numbers like I had done a catrillion times before. He suddenly stopped at a payphone booth and began rummaging through my suitcase. "What's your uncle's address?"

"Dad," I whined. "Everybody's looking." I said, but he kept searching. Although he had already done so at home, he again examined everything to make sure I hadn't packed something at the last minute that would weigh me down.

"You have to travel lightly," he said. "I don't want you getting lost because you can't keep up as a result of carrying a heavy suitcase." He stopped and felt for something he had discovered between my clothes. "What's this?"

"It's my diary," I said.

Mrs. Roman had bought it for me as a gift. She said it would be a wonderful idea if I wrote down everything about my summer. "It'll be important to you when you get to be a teenager," she had said. "All young girls like to keep a diary." It made me feel all grown up. I could be like the big girls. When I showed it to Celi, she said that she already planned to get one. The next day she went out and got one.

"What do you need it for?" Dad didn't look happy about my having a diary.

"Dad, it's to write things down."

He didn't say anything for a second. "It's too heavy," he said.

"No it isn't," I balanced it on my head. "See?"

"Cut it out. We don't have time for this. Come." He closed the suitcase and we walked over to a newsstand with a magazine wrack that faced the bar where people were chatting and smoking. Some people held their suitcases, others set them on the floor, or on chairs. "Do you have notebook paper?" Dad asked the clerk. She looked around but they didn't have anything. "Something for girls to write on," He urged. The clerk bent over to grab something from behind

the counter. It was a box of colorful stationary sheets with matching envelopes and a pretty pen with a butterfly design. Dad weighed them on his opened palm. "I'll take it," he said and paid for it. "Now," he said to me as we continued to the gate. "Take some out of the box and you can carry them in your knapsack with you. This way you don't have to carry this bulky thing around." He stuffed my diary in his back pocket. I thought of protesting, but knew better.

We approached the counter at the gate. Dad asked all of the stewardesses for their full names and quizzed them about emergency landing procedures. I looked away pretending he wasn't my dad. "We won't let her out of our sight," a friendly woman with a poffey hairdo said.

"Good," Dad grinned. "You don't know my daughter. She wanders off." He was referring to the time when I was four and I wandered off while Mom was parking the car in front of our house. At the time Dad was teaching her how to drive, and Mom wasn't very good at it. While Dad was shouting out instructions to Mom and she was scraping the rims and tires of our Chevy Malibu against the curb, I wandered off. When Dad spotted me at the end of the block, he went chasing after me leaving Mom unguided. Mom, of course, panicked and backed into our next-door neighbor's DeSoto. The sound of clashing metal caused Dad's heart to skip. He ran back to see what had happened. "Damn! Angie. You've really done it now." Mom blamed Dad, and Dad blamed Mom. While they argued I kept walking until I reached the other end of a second block. "Wait!" Dad yelled. "Where the hell is Vivian?"

By then I had turned the corner onto Richmond Street. Mr. and Mrs. Applezeller stopped me from going farther. They were an older couple with grown children. They asked me my name and when I told them they looked it up in the telephone directory. But because I was only four, I did not know how to spell my last name, so they couldn't figure it out. Luckily, my father and mother had caused such a commotion that they had set the entire neighborhood to go looking

for me. After about a ten-minute search, Mr. Applezeller heard shouts calling for me. He went out to look, and lo and behold, there was Dad leading a search and rescue. He rushed past Mr. Applezeller straight into the kitchen where I was having milk and banana cream pie courtesy of Mrs. Applezeller. Dad lifted me out of the chair and wrapped his arms around me and promised to never let me go.

From that time on everyone called me Vivian Applezeller, because Mr. Applezeller had said that if my father hadn't claimed me, he and his wife would've adopted me as their own. Every holiday, Mom had me sign a greeting card to send to them. When Mrs. Applezeller died, Mr. Applezeller went away. I still didn't know exactly where he went because Dad and Mom gave me different stories depending on their mood. Sometimes they would say that the Mr. Applezeller went to live with his grandchildren. Other times they would tell me that he was in a place for old people.

Before I boarded the plane, Dad had me repeat all the addresses and telephone numbers I had memorized. "Just checking," he said. "Give your cousins a big hug and kiss for me. Don't fight with them. And don't cause your aunt and uncle any trouble," he hugged me and I crossed through the jetway. I sat on an isle seat just how Dad had instructed me. Pam, the stewardess that was looking after me, asked me where I went to school. When I told her I attended Coldwell Elementary she said that she had grown up near there.

"Will you be going to Austin High School?" she asked. I answered that I would. "That's where I went," she smiled. *Wow*, I thought. I want to grow up and be beautiful like her. She was very tall and had red hair with pretty eyes with blue eye shadow like a movie star. She wore a blue skirt and silky red scarf around her neck. She guided an old lady to sit next to me. The old lady spoke only Spanish and I said hello to her. She was excited that she was going to spend



summer with her grandchildren in West Covina. I didn't know where that was, but I smiled anyway. The plane was soon moving and as it sped up I felt a course vibration on the soles of my feet. I reached over to look out. I could see very far into the end of the sky. As the plane took off, the old lady held my hand and told me not to be nervous. I felt a tingling in my stomach as we reached higher and higher. I looked around to see what other people were doing. Three of the stewardesses where doing a presentation like a cheerleading routine without the cartwheels. Instead of pompoms they waved around yellow cups with elastic bands that they put over their faces like Halloween masks. I tried to understand what they meant by floatation device. When my ears popped, I got worried. *Oh no*, I thought. If I get an ear infection Dad will be really mad.

“What’s the matter,” the old lady asked me in Spanish. I tried explaining that my ears were popping. She grinned and said that hers too. I raised my hand to get Pam’s attention. She saw me and went right to me.

“When you need something just press this button,” she said showing me how.

“My ears are popping.” I put my hands over my ears.

“Just do this,” she said showing me how to unclog my ears by holding my nose and blowing. It worked. I could hear like normal again.

I took out the stationary sheets and the pen with the butterfly from my Holly Hobby knapsack and began to write. I had promised Celi that I would send her letters so that she could get mail all the way from another state. She was going to do the same and send me one from the Grand Canyon.

*Dear Celi,*

*Dad took away my diary and bought me this paper. It came with this pretty pen. I wish you could've come to the airport to see me off. I would've asked you but you're on your way to the Grand Canyon. Mom once told me that when she was young, people used to wear nice clothes to travel, like going to a family dinner, but Dad made me wear my blue jeans and a sweater. When I get back, I'll invite you over so that you can meet Yelena. She came to visit because my mom is sick. They're best friends. Kind of like you and me. Except they were friends when they were both stewardesses in Mexico. Dad said that's how he met my mom. It's boring right now. The people are all quiet reading or sleeping. The plane roars like a fast car. Kinda like Mr. Roman's DeSoto on Sunday mornings when he takes it out to go to church. I can't wait to go to Disneyland. What kind of surprise do you want me to get you? I've got to go to the bathroom, so I'll be back. Ok. I'm back. The restroom is smaller than the supply closet where Mrs. Amaro keeps the construction paper and the glue at school. Remember when we stole some last year. That was fun. We should do it again when we get back and start the fifth grade. I used up all of the red, white, and blue because I made Fourth of July cards for my aunts and uncles in California. Well, the stewardess just gave me peanuts and is serving me some Coke. So I will talk to you later. Your best friend, Vivian*

Uncle Sonny, my cousins and my grandparents were all waiting for me at the airport. It was scary because there were so many people and at first I didn't see anybody I knew, but then Uncle Sonny spotted me carrying the blue suitcase that used to be Mom's.

"There you are!" Uncle Sonny spread his arms wide open. "I didn't recognize you. You've really stretched out." He lifted me along with my suitcase in one quick sweep. "Give your Uncle Sonny a big hug."

"Hi, Uncle Sonny." I hugged him. He smelled like Dad.

“How was your flight?” Grandma Cal hugged me. She looked different than the last time I saw her.

“It was fine,” I said.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Grandpa said.

“Oh, hi Grandpa. I missed you.” I gave him a big hug and a kiss. Then I hugged my cousins, Raquel and Manny. Raquel was much taller than Manny, even though she was younger than him. Manny was fourteen and Raquel was twelve. They looked exactly like the school pictures they had sent me.

“Are you hungry?” Uncle Sonny asked me.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Come. Let’s get out of this busy place and get a nice meal.” Uncle Sonny said.

## Chapter 15

The neighborhood where they lived was surrounded by water and the houses had sailboats or yachts tied up to the docks at the edge of their backyards. Instead of having lawns they had sand because their houses faced the beach. The first day I was there we spent the whole day playing out there. Aunt Berta kept reminding us to put on our hats and rub sunscreen lotion on our face and arms. At the end of the second day, I was sunburned so badly that it hurt to put my clothes on. I was forbidden to stay out for more than ten minutes in the water, and then I had to go right back inside. I didn’t want to, but I knew that if Dad got any complaints about me, I’d be in humungous trouble when I got back to El Paso.

“If we can’t go to the beach, can we at least ride the ferry to Catalina Island tomorrow?”

Raquel pleaded with her mom while we had dinner on the deck.

“Absolutely not.”

“Why not?” Manny chimed in on the conversation as he shook the sand out of his shoes.

“Look at Vivian. She’s red as a tomato. If she gets anymore sun, she’ll get skin damage.” Aunt Berta said. I wanted to hide my face because I was embarrassed. I didn’t want Raquel and Manny to think I was ruining their summer.

“That’s because she didn’t put on any sunscreen lotion.” Manny reminded us.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m taking you three to the science museum tomorrow.”

“Aw, Mom. We went there last year.”

“But Vivian didn’t. And she’s our guest.”

At the science museum Aunt Berta would sit on a bench and wait while we walked around the exhibits. When we were done she’d walk us to the next one, and again sit on a bench and wait.

“Look at this,” Manny pointed excitedly. “It’s an x-ray machine. If you put your hand in here, it will show your bones.” He demonstrated by placing his hand into the slot. A light turned on and suddenly a skeletal hand appeared on a screen above the table. “You try it.”

“Uh, uh,” I backed away. I didn’t want to have an x-ray of my hand. I had seen one at the hospital one afternoon while I wandered off instead of waiting in the seating area. It showed the head of a patient. It looked exactly like a skeleton, but it wasn’t dead. I saw it move. Each time the doctor told the person to turn his head, the skeleton moved. It was creepy.

On the morning of the Fourth of July, we got up before daylight to drive out to Disneyland. Uncle Sonny said we had to make sure to get there early otherwise the line would be too long and it would take us a long time to get inside. The night before, Raquel and I helped Aunt Berta pack snacks, sandwiches, and drinks to take in a cooler. When we arrived there were

already many cars waiting to get into the parking lot as the sun was still just coming up. A man with a shining red flashlight was directing traffic. I couldn't see anything past the enormous black gate, because there were green shrubs behind the gate. We waited on the ticket line for a long while. Then we waited again in another line to the entrance. By the time we got inside, the sun was shining bright in our faces. I remembered to put sunscreen lotion and put my hat on.

The first thing I saw as I handed my ticket to the person at the entrance, was the giant face of Mickey Mouse made out of flowers and shrubs. It welcomed everyone to the home of Walt Disney. I saw a lady holding her daughter's hand and the man was holding a map of the park in one hand and with the other he held the lady's hand. I suddenly wished my parents were there. Uncle Sonny came up with a plan so that if any of us got lost or had an emergency we'd all know what to do. He had explained it the night before and reminded us on the ride there.

"If you're lost, what do you do?" He asked while we walked through the *Adventure Land*.

"Got straight to a ticket booth and tell them that I'm lost," I answered.

"I won't get lost," Manny assured us all.

"But if you do?"

"I won't."

"Manny," Aunt Berta poked him on the side.

"Ok. I'll go to the ticket booth and tell an adult that I'm lost."

"What if a stranger comes up to you?"

"Tell them that I'm not allowed to talk to strangers." I said.

"What if *they're* lost?" Asked Raquel. "Shouldn't I try to help?"

"No," said Uncle Sonny.

“Mom,” Raquel whined.

“Your father’s right. If you want to help send them to a ticket booth, or come tell me or your dad.”

The *Haunted Mansion* had all sorts of spooky things in it but I wasn’t scared until a headless pirate came charging at us. I screamed and everyone laughed. Then I laughed, too. By the time we got through *Splash Mountain*, the canoe ride, and the *Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, I was ready for a snack. Aunt Berta and I sat on a bench to eat cheese and crackers, while my cousins and Uncle Sonny continued on to the big mountain railroad to wait in line. This way by the time we caught up to them, we wouldn’t have to stand in line so long.

All day we waited in lines to get on the rides. There were so many people everywhere that there were even lines for a turn to sit down on the picnic benches to eat. Uncle Sonny took a place on the bathroom line while Manny went on the rollercoaster. When I had to pee, Aunt Berta took a spot on the line for the Dumbo ride. Finally, we all got to inside the *It’s a Small World* ride. It was my favorite ride of the whole day, but we weren’t able to go a second time because there were too many people in line and the fireworks and electric parade would start soon. The sun had gone down and it was now dark. We rode the monorail down to *Space Mountain* and afterwards walked back to the entrance at *Main Street*. Raquel and I browsed to the souvenir shops with her mom, while my uncle and Manny took a place along the parade route from where we would watch the fireworks.

I had so much fun, that the next day I slept until almost noon. When I got up Uncle Sonny said that Dad had called to say that Mom was going home.

“Yippie!” I cheered. I couldn’t wait to see her again, but I had one more day left before my flight home.

## Chapter 16

Uncle Vic and Dad were at the airport waiting when I arrived. Dad hugged me and said that I had grown, but I was only gone for five days. My uncle said I looked like a tanned California girl.

“How’s Mom?” I smiled. “I can’t wait to see her. I bought her lots of souvenirs.”

“Viv, don’t get scared when you see her. Mom is still taking lots of pain medication and she will need lots of time to rest.”

“I know, I know. But I can’t wait to see her.” I said as we walked out of the airport.

“She’s coming home tomorrow, ok. So we have to get ready for her.” Dad said without looking at me and got in the backseat of the car. His hair was disheveled and he hadn’t shaved yet. Uncle Vic drove home, and Dad sat in the passenger’s seat. I wanted to tell him all about my trip and the ocean and Disneyland, but he leaned his head back into the seat and closed his eyes. My eyes met with Uncle Vic’s in the rearview mirror.

“How was Mickey Mouse?” His eyes looked worried.

“It was ok,” I said, and we drove the rest of the way in silence.

The first thing I did when Uncle Vic dropped us off at home was to check the mail in the kitchen to see if I got a postcard from Celi, but I didn’t find one. Dad told me to unpack my clothes and put them in the hamper.

“Aunt Berta did all my laundry. So it’s all clean.” I showed him but he didn’t look.

“That’s nice.” He said and went into his bedroom and closed the door. I went into my room and unpacked my souvenirs. I sat there for a while with nobody to talk to, so I picked up my teddy bear. I told him all about the *Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. Then I tossed him aside

and buried my head into the pillow. I hated being home. I wished I was still at Uncle Sonny's.

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Grandma's face looked pale and worried. She opened the drawer to the cabinet then slammed it shut. She opened another and found a brush. We didn't say anything while she yanked and pulled to detangle my hair. When she was done she put the brush away and left the room. I followed her to the kitchen.

"Come on, let's go your uncle is waiting." She didn't look at me. Her eyebrows were squeezed together and her lips were tightened. She waited while I grabbed my knapsack and we went out to the car together.

"We're probably going to be late. It'll take us at least twenty minutes to get there with this traffic." Uncle Vic said.

"I'm not sure what's gotten into you, Vivian." She still didn't look at me. I knew she was mad because I had said I didn't want to go pick up Mom, because I wanted to stay home and surprise Mom by baking a cake for her, but my grandma was upset before I was able to tell her anything. Raquel had taught me how to prepare the cake batter and I had gotten Dad to buy me a box of cake mix.

"Grandma Lita," I said after a long time. "I want to stay home and make a cake."

"What is this nonsense?"

"Mom's coming home. Why do I have to go to the hospital?" I pouted. "I want to make her a cake."

"I've already told you. We're all going and you are not staying alone at home."

"But you're mad at me. Everyone's mad at me. Everybody hates me." I cried.

"Me? No." Her eyes opened wide. "I'm just upset that your mom is sick. I wish she



didn't—I wish. Oh, I don't know what I wish, but I'm not upset with you."

"Is she going to die?"

"What? Let's not think that. You're mother is going to be ok. You'll see. She's coming home. She's going to be fine." Grandma put her face in her hands and cried. Uncle Vic pulled into a driveway and stopped the car. He leaned over and put his arms around Grandma.

"Don't cry. It's supposed to be a happy day. Angie is coming home." He tried to cheer us up, but both of us kept crying. He turned his head toward me and motioned with his hand for me to say something to Grandma.

"I'm sorry, Grandma." I patted her on the back of her head. "I didn't mean to upset you. I won't do it again. I promise."

"Oh, honey. Come here," she reached over and we hugged. "You didn't upset me. It's all of this. I wish this hadn't happened to your mother."

Uncle Vic started up the car and we went on our way.

Dad and I had cleared away the things on the dresser to make room for Mom's things from the hospital. I had cut flowers from Grandma's garden and placed them on the nightstand for Mom. Dad hung new drapes that would make the room dark even in the middle of the day. He said they would help her sleep whenever she wanted to. He had bought her all her favorite foods, and we had cleaned the house until every room and every piece of furniture was perfect. Dad said that that would make her smile, but when we go to the hospital that morning, the doctor had changed his mind. Mom wasn't coming home.

"What's happened?" Grandma asked Aunt Mandi when we got there.

Aunt Mandi nodded without saying anything. Grandma looked at her and nodded back.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

Grandma looked at Aunt Mandi. Everyone was being weird, even Uncle Vic had started acting strange since the day at the airport when he and Dad picked me up.

“I didn’t say anything to her,” Grandma said.

“Why are we here? You’re scaring me.” I said. “Where’s Mom?”

“Come on, Viv. Let’s go outside.” Uncle Vic pulled me by the arm.

“No! Where’s Mom?” I got loose and ran to Grandma. “Where’s my mother?” I cried.

Just then Dad came around from behind me and lifted me in his arms. I cried and cried until all I could do was sob.

“She had a relapse,” Dad explained to all of us. “She’ll have to stay. They’re operating on her now.”

We were at the hospital all day. Even Javi and Leo came later. They wouldn’t let me see her for a long time, until Dad argued with the doctor.

“You have to let my daughter see her mother.” He shouted. I hadn’t seen him yelling at the doctors before. Grandma had told me that he had shouted at the nurses and doctors when they didn’t give Mom her medication or give her a treatment, but this was the first time I saw him do it.

“You’ll have to wait until she’s conscious.” The doctor said.

“Don’t you understand!” Dad’s face was red and he looked like he was about to explode. I knew he wanted to bang on his drums in the garage, but instead he grabbed the doctor by the lapels. “My wife is dying, damn it! You let my daughter see her.”

Uncle Vic and Uncle Joe stood on each side of Dad and pulled him away from the doctor. Dad yanked himself away from them and stared at the doctor.

“As soon as she regains consciousness, your daughter can go in.” The doctor said with a

shaky voice and went away.

Nobody said anything for hours. I wasn't hungry when Grandma brought me a bowl of fruit. When Uncle Joe offered me some I didn't want any ice-cream. I was mad. I didn't want Mom to die. I didn't want her to be sick. I wanted her to be all right like the other kids' moms. I wanted her to be like Aunt Mandi. They were twin sisters, why did Mom have to die, but Aunt Mandi was never sick? Later that night, Grandma woke me up while I was slept in the waiting room leaning against Uncle Vic who was snoring. She said that I could go see Mom now. We went into the bathroom and I splashed water on my face. Grandma combed my hair and straightened my clothes.

I walked quietly into Mom's room. She was lying on the bed. She didn't have the tubes and white tape all over her anymore. The only machine was the one that monitored her heart. It was going, beep, beep, with green lines going up and down on the screen. I stood at the door because she looked like she was sleeping. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me. She spread her arms wide open.

"Mommy, mommy." I ran up to her and hugged her. "I've missed you oh so much."

She tightened her hand around my wrists and held it tight. When she tried to speak her voice was hoarse and I couldn't understand what she was saying.

Tears ran down my face. I didn't want her to die. I wanted her to get out of bed and go home. I remembered what Mrs. Roman had said about dying. She said everybody had a different time to die. "Some people died younger than others," Mrs. Roman had explained.

"You be strong," Mom grabbed my face. "You grow up and be strong."

"It's not fair!" I bawled. She motioned for me to get on the bed next to her.

"Come, give me a kiss." She wiped my face.

“Listen, carefully,” she said. “You make lots of friends, honey. You play with your friends like you always have.”

Dad came in and tugged me away from her. I pulled away from him because I was angry, and sad, and scared all at the same time.

## Chapter 17

The day after Mom died, people kept stopping by with covered dishes and platters. The phone constantly rang. Mrs. Roman sat with Grandma and Aunt Mandi in our living room hardly saying anything. They passed the box of tissues back and forth. Uncle Vic went with Dad to the funeral home. I mostly stayed with Lobo in the backyard, until Leo and Javi came over with Uncle Joe. They didn’t say anything, until their father nudged them.

“I’m really sorry,” Leo hugged me.

“Me too,” Javi also hugged me. “I’m gonna miss Aunt Angie.”

“I thought you should have this,” Uncle Joe bent over to hug me, and he gave me a framed photograph of Mom and Aunt Mandi standing in front of a park bench.

“Thank you,” I sniffled.

Weeks after the burial, I was still waking up in the middle of the night. I would get out of bed and go in search of Dad, just to make sure he was still there. Sometimes I would hear him quietly weeping in the dark. Before Mom died, I had never seen Dad cry.

“Dad?” I said one night. “Don’t cry.”

“Vivian. You startled me.” His voice came from the direction of the window, and I noticed he hadn’t been in bed because the moonlight was casting his silhouette over the drapes.

“Mom said it’s ok to cry.” I went up to him and put my arms around his waist. He didn’t

say anything. He put his hands over his face and wept for a long time. Then he sat down on the floor and pulled me to his lap.

“Thank you, honey.” He rocked me in his arms.

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School was about start again. I hadn't seen Celi since the day her mother brought a casserole to our house. We didn't really talk that day, because she stayed in the car and waved to me from the window, then I went back to my room. I found out we wouldn't be in the same homeroom class this year because Dad called the school. Grandma Lita and Aunt Mandi took me to the shopping center to buy some new school clothes because when I tried on the pants and shirts in my closet, they no longer fit.

“You look like a stuffed sausage,” Grandma laughed. It was the first time I had heard her laugh so hard in a long time. They also took me to get a haircut because nobody new what to do with all the tangling.

“How 'bout we cut it up to your shoulders?” Aunt Mandi said. “You'll look adorable.” Aunt Mandi's stomach had grown bigger and she put my hand over it to let me feel the baby kick.

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The night before I went back to school, I laid out my clothes and shoes for the morning. I brushed my teeth and Dad tucked me into bed early, but I couldn't sleep. I got up and went into the living. Dad had fallen asleep with the television set on. He was sprawled out on the couch snoring. I stood there watching him for a moment, then turned the TV off and went back to bed.

In the morning, I didn't want to get up. Dad knocked at the door to my room wanting to know why I wasn't dressed yet.

“I’m not sure I want to go to school,” I opened the door.

“Why not?” He sipped from his coffee cup.

“Will people feel sorry for me?”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t want them to.”

“Nobody likes to be pitied, Viv. But pity is not the same thing as sympathy.”

“It’s not?”

“No, it’s not. When people say they’re sorry about your mom’s death, they are trying to tell you that they wish it hadn’t happened.”

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When I got to school, I was still nervous about what people would say. Dad kissed me and nudged me up the school steps. I walked into the school and there were kids everywhere looking for their homeroom classrooms. I looked around and saw many familiar faces, but over at the corner I saw a girl I had never seen playing across the street from Grandma’s house. She was standing all alone holding a Trapper binder and an apple in her hand. She saw me and walked over to me.

“Don’t you live on Stevens Street?” I asked. I had seen a new girl playing outside in the front lawn across the street from Grandma Lita’s house, but I had been too shy to go over and ask her to play and I didn’t see her after that.

“How’d you know?” She smiled. “We moved to that house last week, because my daddy got a new job.” She had her long light brown hair into braids with a yellow ribbon tied at the ends.

“My grandma lives across the street.” I told her.

“Really? Then we can play.” Her eyes sparkled. “I’m Melanie Keller.” The dimples on her face showed up with her smile.

“I’m Vivian Zentera,” I smiled back. “What grade are you in?”

“Fifth,” she looked at the paper she had been holding. “I’m in room 5A.”

“Me, too.” I motioned for her to follow me and we walked down the hall. “Why aren’t you going to Crocket? It’s closer to your house.” Uncle Vic once drove me from Grandma’s house to Crocket Elementary and it was exactly a quarter of a mile closer than Coldwell Elementary.

“My mom said she wanted me to come here because the principal speaks Spanish.”

“Really?” I remembered that’s what Mom had said. “My mom said that too.”

“Wow. Our mom’s should meet.”

“They can’t,” I lowered my head.

“Why not?”

“My mom’s dead.” My eyes got teary.

“I’m sorry.” She held out her hand. “That’s too bad. You wanna tell me all about her?”

Melanie said as we walked together towards our homeroom class.