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Milagro

ACCORDING TO THE St. Agnes Student Handbook, there are one hundred different ways to earn detention. I should know. In the last five weeks, here are the reasons Sister May sent me to detention hell:

Uniform violation: red lipstick. (Fine, I deserved this one. But I looked *good*.)

Uniform violation: pink lip gloss. (Unfair, because the lip gloss was the same color as my lips, only glittery. “Why bother wearing it, then?” my sister Lulu asked when I ranted about nun oppression. I don’t know how we’re related sometimes.)

Uniform violation: hair accessories. (My best friend

Carmen's genius idea. It turns out hair crystals are against the rules and are also the devil. It took two hours to get them out of my curls. I told Carmen if I ended up with bald spots, she had to buy me a wig.)

Improper conduct: whispering in church. (Also Carmen's fault. And Becca White's, for going up to communion with her skirt tucked into her polka-dotted granny panties.)

But today is going to be a life-changing day in the glamorous life of Milagro Zavala, for two very important reasons. The first is that if I survive today, I will have made it one whole week without getting detention. I'd like to thank Sister May and her overactive pad of orange detention slips, my brand-new collection of nude lipsticks (generously "donated" by the CVS on St. Paul's Avenue), and the St. Agnes Student Handbook, which says if you have more than twelve detentions, they will schedule a parent-teacher conference. This is why I have exactly eleven detentions to show for myself.

Mami and Sister May can't meet. They share a singular goal of wanting to ruin my life. With their powers combined, they're the sun and a magnifying glass, and I'm the withering ant, slowly dying from their depraved

experiment, called “How to Turn Milagro into a Proper Young Lady.” Keeping them away from each other is the only reason I’m awake and dressed on time today.

Making it to spring break without detention is also the only reason I’m sporting an unrolled kilt that almost reaches the lace on my over-the-knee knee-highs. (Sister May says she’s going to rewrite the St. Agnes Student Handbook to make my knee-highs a detention offense next year. It’s truly an honor to be an influencer.) Even though it kills me to dress like I’ve given up on living, it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make—if only because it is step one in my big plan for spring break: Operation Don’t Die a Virgin.

“Mami! MAMI! Wake-up time!”

I wait two minutes before I barge into Mami’s room, flinging open the door dramatically and hitting play on my phone, so the trills of Mami’s favorite crooner (Gloria Estefan, always) radiate from the embroidered pocket of my St. Agnes button-down.

“What a beautiful day to go on retreat!” I sing out, determined to get this show—that is, get Mami—on the road.

It’s 7:00 a.m., so of course, Mami’s body is a series of lumps under a deep red comforter and a mountain of brightly colored pillows. The scent of hairspray lingers in the room, soaked into the faded floral wallpaper after years

of exposure. I move around the room, checking Mami's outlets for any outstanding beauty appliances. When my older sister, Clara, was here, she was always trailing Mami around the house, unplugging the blow-dryer, turning the oven off, capping her lipsticks, and airing out aerosol-filled rooms. Now that Clara is away at college, I have taken her place as the de facto fire chief of the Zavala house. Much to everyone's surprise, including my own, I have done a fantastic job.

"Hellooo! Time to wake up!"

I walk over to the window and yank the blinds open. The lumps stir. Mami lifts her head out from under her blanket. Her hair is falling out of the silk wrap on her head, and she's squinting at me. The tendrils of her hair are crisscrossed on her face. She looks like Cousin Itt, if Cousin Itt invested in satin nighties.

"Ay, Milagro, por Dios," she whines.

"Tía Lochita is gonna be here in . . ." I check my phone. "Two hours. Let's get you packed."

I duck my head into Mami's closet and feel around for anything that resembles a bag.

I look back at Mami and she's no longer squinting at me. She's sitting up, her arms crossed over her chest. Her cleavage is impressive, even when she's not trying to show it off. I can't help but glance down at my chest and curse my pathetic A-cup boobs.

“Since when do you want to help me?”

I dive back into the closet and make an “umph” sound, tossing Mami’s favorite black stilettos over my shoulders behind me for packing. “I’m being a good daughter. Don’t make me change my mind.”

The second reason today is going to be life-changing is because today is officially my last day as a virgin. As soon as Mami takes off for a weeklong church retreat with Tía Lochita’s “Single and Single Again” ladies’ prayer group and Lulu leaves on her nerd field trip, Pablo and I are going to do it, in this house. It will be me, him, and my soul slowly departing to hell—that is, if Tía Lochita and Mami (and the nuns at school) are right. I can’t wait.

My plan has been ten months in the making, ever since the morning Tía Lochita called me with a huge favor to ask: One of her girls had bailed at the last minute, and would I want to make extra cash by tagging along to a cleaning gig? Technically I was her third choice (rude), since Clara was volunteering and Lulu was out collecting signatures for some random clean water proposal. I said yes immediately. I had visions of a sequined blazer, specifically the silver one that had been on the headless mannequin at Time Again, my favorite thrift store. I didn’t mind cleaning a stranger’s empty house, even if it meant suffering through Tía Lochita’s constant reminders to dust under the plates in

the cabinets. (“La Señora Gutierrez always checks. They all do. Never forget under the plates!”)

That morning, when Pablo Gutierrez stumbled into his kitchen and looked at me—really, really looked at me—I felt my stomach do somersaults and I got goose bumps down my arm. I knew I was going to lose my virginity to him. It was a feeling I had, like when I knew Clara’s plants were going to die, despite all of our promises to water them when she went to college. Or how eight years ago, when Papi got a new family, hundreds of miles away, I knew we would never hear from him again, not even on our birthdays.

Anyway, when Pablo smiled at me, it was a sign, better than anything written in ink. I would have bet on it, if I had any money. By the time his dimple appeared, I was a goner, ready to sink a quarter in it and collect my reward. No, what I really wanted to do was throw my hands in the air and yell: “Thank God I’m not going to die a virgin!” But I held on to my secret and kept on dusting.

I didn’t tell him later that night when he asked me out, his voice soft on the phone, almost a whisper. He was so quiet I made him ask again, even though I heard him the first time. He only ever texted me after that, but I liked that better, because then Lulu and Mami couldn’t creep on our conversations. I didn’t tell Pablo four weeks later when he said, “Milagro Zavala, will you be my girlfriend?” I said,

“Hell yeah.” We made out in the front seat of his new black Jeep, my lipstick leaving a cherry-red trail that started at his perfect lips and wandered down his jaw until it reached the monogrammed collar of his St. Anthony’s uniform.

Even when he started to get braver, his fingers wandering into the uncharted territory that began above my knee-highs, I still didn’t tell him. Two weeks ago, we were in his bedroom and his hands tugged at the top button of my kilt and I said no, but his hands kept on pulling, like he could feel it was inevitable too. Then the button popped off and I really had to say no. He said, “Why not?” I didn’t know how to say that I wanted to keep my secret a little longer, so I told him, “Please take me home.” That night, when I walked into my house, I had to hold my kilt together, lacing my pinky through the buttonhole. I pretended my hand was on my hip because I had an attitude, and not cold feet.

Last week he texted me, Don’t you ever think about it?

That question makes me so mad. I hate that just because I’m a girl, Mami, Sister May, and the rest of the world has decided I’m not supposed to think about sex stuff. Every day at lunch, Carmen and I go over all the reasons Pablo and I should do it already. We lay our French fries out on my blue lunch tray, one for each reason.

One long, greasy French fry for reason #1: Pablo is hot. Maybe more beautiful than me. That’s what Tía Lochita

said when Pablo first started hanging around, along with a litany of things that were suddenly wrong with my outfits: too short, too revealing, too much of everything. Tía Lochita says she tells me these things out of love; she doesn't want me to derail my life for the first boy who comes along. I get why she's worried: Pablo is stare-at-the-sun-and-forget-what-you-were-saying hot. It's his really long and dark eyelashes and his swooping hair that he gels and parts to the right, which only draws more attention to the deep dimple in his cheek, my favorite place to kiss him. On anyone else, his look would be pocket protector material, but on him, it's like looking at the photos of old movie stars that Tía Lochita keeps framed in her living room, as if they were her friends. Even after eleven months, looking at him hasn't really worn off, except for maybe when I have to listen to him talk. And nowadays, that's really all he wants to do, except for the sex stuff.

Reason #2 is worth two French fries: I don't know any other boys who I'd want to do it with, because I hardly know any boys at all. This is one hundred percent Mami's fault, for enrolling us in an all-girls high school. Most of the girls at St. Agnes rely on their brothers' friends for boyfriend sourcing, or they somehow manage to live next door to cute boys, or in Carmen's case, work the same shift at Regal Cinemas with a cute boy. But I do not have a job, and all my neighbors wear dentures. Finding Pablo was truly a

miracle, and the fact that he is Argentinian is the cherry on top. When I told him I was Peruvian, he didn't ask me about llamas or make a joke about eating guinea pigs. (Why are those the only facts people know about Peru?!)

Reason #3 gets ten French fries, because it's the most important: as previously mentioned, dying a sad virgin is my worst nightmare. Every time we see her, Tía Lochita reminds us that we could die at any minute, so we better pray every day. Truck runs you over, poof, you're gone. Bad sushi today, flesh-eating virus tomorrow. Being rich doesn't save you either, she likes to tell us. Money won't stop a bear from breaking into your fancy cabin and mauling your face off—it happened to her coworker's neighbor's sister, she swears. Every time she tells these stories, I think, *Please, God, if you exist, don't let me croak before I figure out what sex is. Also can you please give Tía Lochita new things to talk about?*

At this point, Carmen always interjects with her #1 reason: it's not a big deal. She says she didn't "lose her virginity" because it's a made-up story that aunties and abuelitas tell to make you behave, like Santa Claus or La Llorona. Carmen is adamant that when she and Levi had sex for the first time, she didn't lose anything.

The last reason (reason #5, and worth five French fries, except we've always eaten them all by this point) is that I like Pablo, like *like* him. I like that he always buys me ice

cream from the Mister Softee ice cream truck that does laps around St. Agnes and terrorizes last-period classes with its obnoxious jingle. It doesn't even bother me that he tells the same jokes over and over again, or that he can talk for hours without asking me a single question. He likes to share his interests. Last week, Lulu asked me if I loved Pablo and I told her she was too young to know how any of this stuff works, which is the worst thing to say to a big nerd like her. But I didn't know what to say. All I know is that Pablo whispered "You're mine" in my ear while we were slow dancing at the St. Anthony athletics formal, and it felt nice to belong to someone. I've decided that's enough for me.

"Oye. Milagro Isabela Zavala. I'm talking to you." Mami raises her voice from the bed, where she's scrolling through her phone, probably triple-checking that the other Indigo Hotel managers haven't mysteriously forgotten about her vacation, even after she asked for time off a whole month ago.

I'm trying to figure out what I can possibly say to Mami that won't make her suspicious, or lead to an hour-long discussion about how she "trusts me" to stay out of trouble on spring break, because even if she isn't, "God is always watching." Either conversation will make me miss the bus

and land me in detention (Improper conduct: tardiness).
When in doubt, blame Tía Lochita.

“Tía Lochita bet me that you’d be late. She said the last time you were on time, you didn’t need hair dye to cover up your roots.”

“She said what?” Mami snaps.

I step back out of the closet and look at her bed, which is now empty. Mami is on the move. She makes her way to her vanity and starts jabbing various wrinkle creams on her forehead and cheeks with alarming force. It’ll be a miracle if the lotions can permeate the deep scowl on her face.

“Maybe Tía Lochita can go on the trip by herself, if she’s so worried about being late. She doesn’t need to wait for me. I don’t wait for anyone.”

Crap. As usual, I’ve overdone it.

Way to go, Milagro.

My palms are instantly sweaty and I rub the corner of my uniform kilt back and forth between my two fingers, frantically thinking of a way to backpedal. “Oh, you know, maybe she didn’t mean it. She was probably grumpy because her Tuesday house ‘forgot’ to get cash for her tip.”

“I keep telling her big homes are too much work for her. Those CEOs are always tacaños. The richer they are, the cheaper they get. She never listens to me,” Mami says, her voice growing louder as she moves toward me. Her

shoulders are relaxed again, and she's not mad at her big sister anymore. Fights in our family are always like this: hot flames that go out just as quickly as they pop up. I don't think Tía Lochita and Mami have ever gone longer than twenty-four hours without talking, even at their maddest. She kisses me on the forehead, then gently pushes me out of the way with her hip, so she can change out of her pajamas. We trade spots, and I sit at her vanity now, tucking her lotions, lipsticks, and brushes into a mini bag for her.

“Yeah, I think she probably wanted to vent. She's not as mature as you.” As soon as the line flies out of my mouth, I know I've laid it on too thick. Ugh. I'm never this nice to Mami. I watch Mami's back stiffen in the mirror, and I prepare for her to whip around and say she's onto my master plan and she's not leaving. But instead, she turns around and holds something up to me.

It's a lone white Converse sneaker, or at least it was white at one point. It's the one Clara lost over winter break, the night before she was due back at the University of Iowa. All of us searched up and down the house, but we couldn't find it, even though our house is so small, it's practically bursting at the seams. On the car ride to the airport, Mami said the snowy Iowa winters would be good for Clara, since she wouldn't need her sneakers for a long time. She tried to make a joke out of it, calling Clara “Cenicienta”

and “Cinderella,” but no matter how hard Mami tried, she couldn’t make Clara crack a smile. Then Clara told her that maybe Mami didn’t know her any better than the guests at her hotel, and Mami was too stunned to respond. It was hurtful and didn’t even make any sense. Mami’s fancy boutique hotel serves way too many guests for Mami to ever get to know, even if it *was* her job. (Which it’s not—Mami’s job involves payroll, marketing, and occasionally stopping the lobby piano man from guzzling too many martinis.) After that, we rode to the airport in silence.

Tía Lochita says that families are like a rubber band: tension only brings us closer together. In our house, the tension stems from Clara, specifically the fact that she’s no longer here.

Clara is currently at the University of Iowa, fulfilling her destiny of becoming a doctor. Even though she’s been gone since September, it’s still all Lulu and my St. Agnes teachers ever want to talk about, how the brilliant and selfless Clara will one day invent a new surgical technique, revolutionize cancer treatments, or cure an obscure disease. It took a lot of convincing for Mami to let Clara go to Iowa, even with Clara earning a full scholarship (of course).

Mami’s suspicions about faraway colleges were confirmed when Clara came home for winter break as a

completely different person. College Clara never wanted to talk to us about her classes, her roommate, or college life—maybe she didn't think we would understand. The only thing we could get out of her was that college was much harder than St. Agnes, and she was too exhausted to do anything but sleep most of the time she was home. After months of missing Clara, it was like having a stranger with us. Clara sucked the energy out of our shared room. Even Lulu, who had signed up for a community college course over winter break, started doing her homework in the kitchen.

Mami reacted the only way she knew how: by going on a cooking spree, furiously working her way through her *Mi Lindo Peru* cookbook. All winter break, we woke up to Mami tucking tamales away into banana leaves, pounding spices in the molcajete that she'd found at a yard sale, or stirring cow intestines over the stove. She was sure the bubbling green liquid would make Clara feel like herself again. She shoved plates of crispy chicharrones in front of Clara's face. Mami said she wasn't going to let "Iweenies," as she started calling them, let Clara forget that she was Peruvian. Clara had ancestral Incan blood, and it was Mami's job to remind her that she was just as worthy as the Sallys and Plain Joes on campus.

After their fight in the car, I figured Clara would

make up with Mami over the phone, but if her apology call came, we never heard about it. Whenever I ask Clara about it during our rare video chats, she always looks away and mumbles that she can tell me after Mami gets over “it.” And Mami is even more vague, saying that Clara “knows what she did” and she’s still waiting for an apology. Even though College Clara is back at school, the damage is done. Mami has turned her scrutiny to me, and now every time I want to hang out with Carmen or Pablo, I have to sit through an avalanche of questions, or worse, Mami has invented a pile of chores I have to do. I’m not perfect like Clara, and I’m bending under the weight of Mami’s expectations. Maybe all along, Clara was too, and that’s why she picked a college so far away from us.

Clara’s stupid shoe is enough to make Mami’s lip tremble, and full waterworks are on the way. It’s just like Clara to find new and inventive ways to ruin my plans, even when she’s hundreds of miles away.

“Go get your sister,” Mami says quietly. “You don’t want to be late for school. I can pack on my own.”

In this moment, I’m not thinking about Pablo, or detention, or my spring break plans. I take a step toward her, but Mami shoos me away.

“Go, Milagro.”

I zip her bag closed and turn on my heel, out the door

and down the hallway. I did the best I could. Now all that's left is making the bus. According to my phone, Lulu and I have ten minutes to make it to the corner.

But when I walk into the kitchen, my stomach drops.

Lulu is sitting at the breakfast table, dressed in her favorite World Wildlife Fund shirt and a pair of paisley boxers. Her hair is erupting from the messy bun perched on her head, which is hovering over a textbook that's big enough to contain all the secrets of the universe and then some. Her homework is sprawled over the kitchen table, a jumble of charts and graph paper, blue and red pens, and a dingy gray eraser the size of her fist.

She's got her brows furrowed and she's staring at her book like it might contain the solution to frizzy hair. I've seen this look before. It's the look that moves librarians to keep the library open an extra hour later, just for her. (Meanwhile I can't get them to forgive a fifty-cent fine.) It's the kind of concentration that causes Lulu to miss her bus stop because she's too engrossed in her book, forcing Mami to drive five neighborhoods away to pick her up.

It's an intensity that can only mean one thing: there's no way we're making it to school on time.

2

Lulu

ACCORDING TO THE World Wildlife Fund, the vaquita is the rarest mammal of the ocean. They are the color of a stormy sky and they are shaped like a dolphin that ate one too many tamales. Vaquitas are stubborn and stocky. They spend their entire lives in a tiny bay, flitting between Mexico and California, and their refusal to leave the familiar warm waters of home means that one day, there will be no more vaquitas left. Only ten exist in the entire world, not that anybody cares. How could they, with such a rude name? Who could possibly want to save the “little cow” of the ocean when you could devote your life to some sleek and shiny dolphins instead? Life is not fair to the vaquitas of the world.

“Lulu! What are you doing?”

My head snaps up from my endangered species book. It takes a second to realize that Milagro is yelling at me.

“I’m reading,” I say, gesturing to the book in front of me. “You should try it sometime. You might actually like it.”

Milagro scowls. “We have ten minutes to make our bus. We gotta get moving. Chop chop!” She claps her hands at me for extra emphasis, but I refuse to rush.

“School?”

“Yes, your favorite place in the world. We have to go! Let’s go!”

“Okay,” I say, gathering my books and pencils slowly. I move like my limbs are stuck in molasses, knowing the slower I go, the more annoyed Milagro will get. It’s pay-back for locking me out of our room last night so she could try on every article of clothing that she owns. I know she did this because she left all her clothes on the floor.

“Lulu! Ten minutes!”

I roll my eyes at her and move a tiny bit faster. Technically Milagro is right that St. Agnes—specifically the fifth-floor science lab—is my favorite place in the world. On a normal day, it’s me who’s shaking her awake and dragging her away from the mirror so we won’t be late. I’m not rushing because, unlike Milagro, I pay attention to these things. I actually know when the bus will get here. There’s no way I’m going to be late today.

In twenty minutes, I’m supposed to be rehearsing

interview questions with Mrs. Johnson, bringing me one step closer to becoming a Stanford University High School Summer Scholar. Not only is Stanford the leading school in conservation biology, it's also where my favorite biologist in the whole world, Dr. Sophia Yu, serves as the director of Stanford University's Ocean Institute. And they have a twelve-week summer program that is 2,847 miles away from my house. It was Mrs. Johnson's idea to apply. She helped me fill out the application and write the essays back in September, even though I didn't think anyone would care about my research, or as Milagro likes to call it, "stomping around in puddles and smelling like a wet dog." (Milagro does not care about Baltimore's vital role in the ecological health of the Chesapeake Bay.)

I've spent the last six months scrolling through Stanford's website, clicking on bio after bio of all the professors and researchers who work there, but I've been dreading the interview, which is officially four days away. One wrong answer could derail my dreams of becoming one of the high school students on the wrinkled pamphlet that lives under my pillow. They all beam with ear-to-ear smiles as they peer into microscopes, toss Frisbees across an impossibly green lawn, and clink milkshakes in front of Stanford's iconic Hoover Tower. The program promises research that will change the world and friends who will last a lifetime, two things I would like very much.

Last year, my closest friends were the seniors in the Sierra Club. Even though I was a lowly freshman, they still invited me to every signature drive, local protest, and playground cleanup. When they graduated with Clara, the club fell apart—a mix of lack of interest and limited club funding. I’m on the leadership committee with a few other freshmen, and we’re trying to get more people involved, but it hasn’t happened yet. I know I have to be patient, but it’s hard not to be tempted by a summer of instant lifelong friends who have the same goals as me.

“Lulu, you’re going slow on purpose! Hurry up!” Milagro whines. She’s standing in front of the kitchen sink and inspecting her chin for pimples in the reflection of the window.

“Milagro. Why are you making so much noise in the morning?”

Milagro and I both turn to look at Mami, who enters the kitchen. She’s dressed in an impossibly tight pair of jeans. The kind that say, “Hello! I have curves and I’m not going to apologize for it.” Mami yawns and walks over to me to give me a kiss on my head. Her gold Virgen de Guadalupe necklace gently bumps against my neck. She slides one hand over my shoulder and with the other hand, she traces the bright red cherries on the oilskin tablecloth.

“I was thinking, maybe I shouldn’t go on this trip.”

Both Milagro and I look at each other, but neither of us says anything. Me, because I don't want to encourage Mami to bail on Tía Lochita's trip. Milagro, because her mouth is fish gaping, opening and closing as she tries to figure out exactly what to say.

Mami continues, "It's going to be a bunch of old ladies. Wouldn't it be better to stay home with my girls? We could have so much fun."

Mami's hand on my shoulder doesn't feel like love anymore. It feels like an anchor, tying me to this kitchen seat, to our little house, to Baltimore, the only city I've ever known. Mami looks down at me with a smile so wide, I can see the silver fillings in the back of her mouth.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The old cat clock ticks loudly, his eyes shifting left to right as he surveys the room. The clock hasn't told time correctly since Mami hung it up, but it used to hang in *her* mami's kitchen back in Peru, so she refuses to get rid of it.

Mami seems unconcerned by our lack of response. "Don't you think? It could be fun. Like the old days."

My stomach clenches. I have to say something.

"Mami, I'm not going to be here, remember?" I take a deep breath and continue, "I'm going on the St. Agnes field trip. I have my interview with Stanford at the end of the week?" My stomach churns even saying this out loud.

“Oh, right,” Mami says, all casual. But her hand is tightening on my shoulder, so I know she hasn’t forgotten.

Six months ago, when Mrs. Johnson nominated me for the program, it was the best day of my whole life. I burst into the kitchen to deliver my news.

“It sounds boring.” Milagro was blowing her nails dry. “Do you really want to spend your summer inside, leaning over a cold lab table?”

I threw my hands in the air. “I would spend my whole life in the lab if I could.”

Mami frowned. “Milagro. You need to take your studies seriously, like your sisters. Pablo can’t be your only hobby.”

Milagro glared at both of us before stomping out of the room, but Mami didn’t care. She told me, “I’m so proud of you. And I bet Clara will be too. We’ll have to get you an interview outfit.” She pulled out a giant stack of coupons from inside our junk drawer and started to riffle through them.

I never got my outfit. Instead, Clara came home for winter break a totally different person, and Mami began having serious second thoughts about college. She started frowning whenever she saw me in my Stanford sweat-shirt, or when I showed her all the research options I could choose from. By the time Clara went back to Iowa, Mami went from bragging about her oldest daughter’s full ride

to college to telling us at least once a week that Iowa was nothing special, and there were just as many great colleges in Baltimore.

As usual, Milagro interrupts my thoughts. “Mami, you have to go on this trip. Tía Lochita will be so disappointed if you don’t. And you know how much better you feel after you pray. And Lulu will be safe because the trip has two whole chaperones. A teacher and a priest.”

Detention and hell. What else could make us behave? Milagro is trying hard to sound normal, but she’s talking way too fast, her words spilling over each other. I stare at her, trying to understand why she suddenly cares about Mami’s spiritual life.

Mami’s eyes are shiny, and she blinks really fast before sighing. “Fine. I’ll go with Tía Lochita and her prayer group. But if I come back looking like an old lady, years closer to death, it will be all your fault.”

“With that outfit? You could never look like an old lady. Speaking of, Lulu! You need to put your uniform on. Chop chop!” Milagro says again. It’s even more annoying the second time. Mami moves away to the sink, giving Milagro the perfect opportunity to slap her noodle arms on my chair and drag me out from under the table.

I stomp off, moving quickly to get away from Mami and Milagro. Milagro trails me down the hallway.

“Um, can I get a little privacy?” I say, turning to her before I open the door to our room.

“Psh, for what? We share everything.” She reaches over me and opens the door for both of us. Milagro is right: we’ve always shared a room. Clara and me in bunk beds—Milagro says Clara lords over us from the top bunk—and Milagro on her own twin bed. Even now, months after Clara left, I keep expecting to see her perched up on the top bunk, twirling her hair as she reads through her AP Bio textbook.

I take a few exaggerated steps over the clothes and bras and lacy underwear that Milagro has strewn across our floor and grab my uniform, changing in the corner, where I can avoid Milagro’s judging eyes. She is always quick to catch my imperfections, of which there are many, starting with the heavy-duty sports bras that I like to wear (“But Lulu, why wouldn’t you show off your rack? They’re HUGE!”) and ending with my faded undies and black bike shorts that I wear under my kilt. I’ve told her a million times that I don’t care that they’re ugly, because they’re comfortable. And since when does underwear have to be anything more than functional?

“Okay, perfect, let’s go!” Milagro says the second I slip my feet into my ugly uniform black-and-white oxford shoes. I grit my teeth and try to keep from pointing out that I am not a small child or rambunctious golden retriever. I’m a

high school sophomore who wants nothing more than to be left alone with a pile of books, a bag of Cheetos, and an endangered species documentary.

Things didn't used to be this way. Until I started high school, Clara, Milagro, and I were inseparable. We'd do our homework tucked away in a corner of the lobby of Mami's hotel, then race each other in the giant swimming pool during the hotel's happy hour. We started to drift apart when Clara signed up for nightly SAT classes that kept her late at St. Agnes, followed by weekends volunteering at church. Milagro was the next to drift off, thanks to Pablo. But even as we got busier and busier, we were still a bonded atom: the Zavala Sisters. In quantum theory, chemical bonds keep atoms in line, keeping them from turning into bombs or floating away. If Clara was here, she'd tell Milagro to leave me alone, and then we'd work together to figure out whatever Milagro has up her sleeve. But Clara is at college in Iowa, leaving Milagro and me unstable. We are electrons buzzing around, full of reckless energy that can't be contained. Occasionally we collide and sometimes I even think we're finally bonding, until Milagro says, "Can you please stop talking about nuclear fission. It's very boring."

I throw a few books in my bag, and then Mami walks us to the door and hugs us both goodbye. She squeezes us tight,

like she's not going to see us for years, instead of a measly six days. Mami's coconut shampoo mingles with Milagro's favorite Victoria's Secret perfume. It's like I'm at the mall and not in the middle of a sweaty family huddle.

"Be good, okay?" Mami says to the top of both of our heads.

Milagro breaks free first. She tells Mami, "We always are." Her hand finds mine and she drags me away, out the door and down the street. We've moved a total of three feet when I hear Mami call me back. "Luz."

"What?" I glance back at her. Mami hardly ever uses my full name.

"Promise me that you'll stay here this summer," Mami says. Her eyes are wide open and extra exaggerated by the fake lashes that she and Milagro are obsessed with. "Not like Clara. There are so many programs you can do here, Luz."

There it is again.

"You don't need to go far away. Not yet," Mami says, her hands shoved deep in her jean pockets. *Not ever* is what she really means.

All the street noise fades away. My heart is racing, and I can't stop staring at the wrinkle down the middle of Mami's forehead, the one that appears every time Clara calls and doesn't want to talk to Mami on the phone. Sometimes I see that wrinkle on me. From her spot in the doorway,

she can't see Milagro mouthing the words "Tell her what she wants" and anxiously pointing at the bus, which is two blocks away and slowly making its way toward us.

Milagro squeezes my fingers, her glitter talons digging into the top of my hand. I think of the smiling students on the Stanford brochure, who look nothing like me. I probably won't be accepted to the program. Mami's dark brown eyes are pleading with mine. Her hand grips the splintered door frame of our house, and her lip trembles. It takes a second to form the words that I know she wants to hear, the ones that make me crumble on the inside. "I promise."

My words are quiet, nothing more than a whimper, but they act like Photoshop magic. The wrinkle disappears and Mami is back to smiling. She gives us a tentative wave and closes the door.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Milagro calls over her shoulder as she drags me to the corner. She doesn't know my world is crashing around me.

"Sure," I say. Look how good staying home turned out for the vaquitas.