

CHAPTER ONE

LYING IN BED, VICTORIA GAZES AT THE PHOTO TAPED TO THE wall beside her pillow. In the moonlight, she can see how she and her mother were smiling for the camera, their long brown hair done up for her mother's last birthday.

I miss you so much, Mamá. I don't want to turn fifteen without you. I can't. And the twins—poor little ones. Every day they ask for you.

Victoria imagines her mother answering, her voice kind and full of love. "Don't worry, *m'hija*. Everything will be okay."

When will everything be okay, Mamá?

Victoria tosses and turns. She cannot sleep. She wishes that her mother were still alive, and she and her brothers were back home in their old neighbourhood on the other side of Paraná.

I'm still in Betina's room.

The wall is covered with posters of *cumbia* singers. An

oval mirror with a red plastic frame hangs above her cousin's empty bed. *She's probably at her boyfriend's.*

Victoria's twin brothers are asleep on a third bed. It is jammed into the small room against a huge old wardrobe, which holds their few belongings.

A snore rumbles from the next room. The slow rhythmic sound comforts Victoria. *Doña Norma is much nicer than Aunt Marta. But she's so old.*

Hours seem to pass.

Victoria wonders if the twins are stirring. She gets up to check on them. They're sleeping deeply. *No nightmares so far.* Victoria watches them dream. They lie back-to-back with their feet sticking out from underneath the quilt. Damian sucks his thumb, while Martin twists his hair.

On the other side of the small house, Aunt Marta and her boyfriend, Juan, argue. Martin whimpers and turns over before settling again.

Victoria returns to her bed and covers her ears. She thinks of her mother tucking her in while humming the tango.

Sleep, mi amor.

The angels will watch over you.

Dream, mi amor.

If tomorrow you don't find me

with you when you awake,

look to the heavens, beloved.

That's where I will be. . .

Victoria buries her head in the pillow and cries silently.
The angry voices grow louder.

"I'm sick to death of this place," Juan says. "If you don't send those kids to an orphanage, I'll leave for good!"

I wish he really would leave instead of always pretending he will.

A truck backfires by Victoria's window, drowning Juan's voice out for a moment, and then his ranting is back. "And the old lady—always bothering us. And her snoring! It drives me crazy. She should go live with her son in Buenos Aires."

"*Idiota*, Doña Norma owns the house," Marta shouts. "And I don't see *you* bringing in any money. Maybe you should go and look for work."

Glass shatters on the street. Someone screams. Victoria scrambles to the window.

Three boys are on top of Danny, the grocer's son, pounding him. A broken bottle is on the ground beside him.

"You'd better get the money, *hijo de puta!*"

One of the boys looks up at Victoria's window. The scar on his forehead is bright red in the moonlight. Victoria draws back into the room. *I hope he didn't see me.*

After a long moment, Victoria peeks out from behind the curtain again. The boys are jumping into the back of a rusty pick-up truck. Danny is painfully making his way to the grocery.

As the truck speeds off, the boy with the red scar shouts, “You better have the money tomorrow, Danny!”

Poor Danny. . .

“Go to hell!” Marta yells. A violent slam shakes the house. Juan barrels down the street.

Victoria pulls the curtain shut. Juan looks drunk and she doesn’t want him to see her at the window.

There is a forlorn cry inside the room, followed by a second. The twins are awake.

“COME ON, GET UP! MOVE YOUR LAZY BUTT!” AUNT MARTA’S voice wakes Victoria. “There’s a mountain of ironing to do, and you’ve got to take the skirts to Mrs. Meitry and get the medicine for Doña Norma.”

Victoria drags herself up, tired from lack of sleep. The twins’ bed is empty. She hears a shout and a laugh—they are playing outside with the kids next door. *It’s good they have new friends and can have some fun.*

This morning will be no different than any other since she and her brothers came to stay with their aunt: Victoria will clean the house, iron clothes, deliver them to clients and make lunch. *Another “wonderful” day.*

She is washing the breakfast dishes when her aunt comes in to boil water for *mate* to drink while she sews.

Victoria takes a deep breath. “*Tía*, since the twins are

going to start school, I was thinking that I. . .”

“Oh, so you’ve been thinking, have you?” her aunt snaps.

“Yes,” Victoria says. Now that she’s started, she may as well continue. “It’s just that. . .I’d like to go back to school.”

“Stop bothering me with your nonsense.”

“Please, Tía. My mother. . .”

“Don’t even think about it.” Her aunt is furious. “You have too much to do around here. I can’t slave away all day so the *princesa* can live in luxury.”

But Victoria has dreams. “I’d still be able to help out. School is only a few hours a day.”

“I said no. Now peel those potatoes for lunch!” Kettle in hand, her aunt storms out of the kitchen, leaving a trail of steam behind her.

“Some day I want to be a teacher,” Victoria says. But nobody hears her.

She peels the potatoes. *Aunt Marta doesn’t care about me. She just wants me to work for her. Mamá would want me to go to school.*

“What are you cooking up, *cosita*?”

Victoria freezes. It’s Juan. He puts a hand on her waist and leans into her, his breath stinking of the cheap nasty wine he drinks.

She ducks away and shoves him. Juan staggers and tries to stay upright. Victoria shows him the peeling knife and yells, “Keep your hands off me!”

“Hey, *linda*, don’t get upset about nothing.” Juan smiles as he speaks, showing his yellow teeth. His eyes are bloodshot.

Why does Aunt Marta stay with this man?

Juan moves toward her.

“Get away from me, disgusting pig! Don’t ever touch me again!” Victoria shouts. She runs to Betina’s bedroom and slams the door shut.

“VICTORIAAAA!” HER AUNT SHOUTS. “GET BACK TO THE kitchen and finish cooking lunch. Stop wasting time!”

Why doesn’t she ever believe me when I tell her about Juan? Can’t she see for herself what he’s up to?

“VICTORIAAAA! What are you doing? Get out of your room and stop sulking!”

Victoria looks at her mother’s photo—she was so kind and strong for us. *I have to be strong as well.*

“*Mierda!* VICTORIA!” Her aunt is shouting again, now from Doña Norma’s room. “VICTORIAAAA! Bring the mop. The old lady has pissed on the floor again. VICTORIAAAAAA! DO YOU HEAR ME?”

IN THE EVENING, VICTORIA RETURNS LATE FROM PICKING UP her aunt’s sewing. Juan’s bike is crowding the narrow entry hall, so she squeezes by it, careful to keep the clothes from

brushing up against it. The house is quiet—except for Doña Norma’s snores.

As soon as Victoria enters the dining room, Juan comes in from Marta’s room. “Hi, cosita!” He reeks of alcohol.

Victoria steps back in disgust and fear. “Where are the twins and Marta?”

“Who cares where the hell they are. We’re okay without them,” Juan says, cornering her against the wall.

“Leave me alone.” Victoria shoves the sewing at him and spins away. But Juan lunges at her, grabs her arms and presses against her. His smell nauseates her. In horror, she punches and kicks at him; but the more she struggles, the more violent he becomes.

Finally, Victoria sinks her teeth into his arm, biting hard. Juan yells and slaps her sharply across her face. Reflexively, she knees him, and Juan doubles over and falls down.

“Go to hell, hijo de puta!” Victoria says, and she bolts into the street where she can choose her own destiny.

