

Secrets

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Chapter 1

Lupe: Thursday, History Class

Qué aburrido. How boring. No matter if I think in Spanish or English, it's the same. This class will never be over.

Outside the window, I can see palm trees swaying in the wind. I know that escaped parrots sometimes roost in them, but I've never seen one. I hear someone tapping my desk with a pencil. I look up, startled. I see Ms. Chandler staring at me.

"Pay attention, Lupe," she says. "That goes for the rest of you, too." But most of us are tired. Some of us have jobs after school. Some of us help out with our younger brothers and sisters. Some do both. We all have a lot on our minds, but Ms. Chandler wants our full attention.

Ms. Chandler waves a stack of papers.

Oh, no, I think. Skye, who sits next to me, nudges me. She's wearing a tight blouse with rhinestone buttons and a very short pleated skirt. My mamá would not let me wear something so flashy to school. I try to blend in with skinny jeans and a large plaid shirt of my brother's.

Skye leans over and says, "The tests. I bet I bombed mine."

"That's right, Skye. The history tests from last week," Ms. Chandler says. Her hearing is extra sharp, or else she can read lips. And forget about passing notes or texting during class. If she catches you, Ms. Chandler reads them out loud. *Not cool!*

I feel panicked. I have to get the best grade on the test. I made a mental promise to Papá that I would be the best student in our sophomore class, no matter what. Mamá says I shouldn't put that much pressure on myself, but

it's the only gift I can give him, now that he's gone.

I hear Skye jabbering at me. I wish Skye would not talk to me in class. She reminds me of those chirping parakeets we used to keep in Mexico City.

In the back row, Ms. Chandler gives Tyler his test. I bet he'll try to attract attention. I bet right. Tyler, a showoff, not only groans but leans back in his chair so quickly that he falls backward. There's a huge crash. I roll my eyes. *El payaso*, the clown.

"I'd be groaning, too, if I were you," Ms. Chandler says to Tyler. "You obviously need to spend more time with books instead of basketballs."

Most of the kids look upset when they look over their tests. My hands feel damp with sweat as I wait for mine. I need a scholarship to get into college. I need to make my parents proud, even though only one of them is here.

When Ms. Chandler reaches me,

she smiles. She says, “Ms. Martinez, I wish I had a whole classroom of bright young ladies like you.” I blush, hoping no one hates me for what she said. One way *not* to make friends, I’ve found, is getting a lot of positive attention from a teacher. Then again, they won’t be my friends once I’m in college. Who cares if I’m lonely now?

Two minutes before the buzzer, Ms. Chandler walks to the front of the room. She has long dark hair that is always pulled back and she wears suits every day, as if she were a banker. She says sternly, “We’ve been over this material a *hundred times*. We need to pass these practice tests to get ready for the state tests this spring. Why is Ms. Martinez the only one who seems to do well on them?”

“Because she learned everything in Mexico first, just to make us look stupid!” Aiden Miller jokes. Aiden always wears a sports jersey—usually

a Warriors jersey. His dad is a trainer for the pro basketball team, and Aiden brags about it every chance he gets. The kids all laugh at Aiden's joke. I blink back tears of embarrassment and let my hair fall over my face.

Ms. Chandler raps the desk with her pencil again. I hear her say sternly, "She didn't move here from Mexico for the sole purpose of making you look stupid, Mr. Miller. See me after class."



After the buzzer rings, I pick up my books and go to the hallway. I'm still shaky. Near my locker, Taliah, Aiden's girlfriend, is talking to Tyler and some other cool kids. I don't trust them. They're popular, even though they don't seem to care about anything except making fun of people.

Maybe if I keep my head down they won't notice me. Then Aiden comes out of the class and walks toward me.

“Hey, Martinez!” Aiden says. I twist a strand of hair nervously.

“Why do you make us look bad in Chandler’s class?” he asks.

I don’t answer. I wish I could instantly disappear.

Then Tyler walks over. I try to walk away, but I’m not fast enough. “You got it wrong, Aiden,” Tyler interrupts. “It’s your *jersey* that makes you look bad.”

I don’t laugh because Tyler *el payaso* is just as bad as Aiden. They’re best friends, but all they do is make jokes at other people’s expense.

The kids laugh at Aiden now, they have forgotten all about me. People can be so shallow and cruel. Even Taliah laughs, because her boyfriend is pretending to punch Tyler.

I gather my coat and backpack and head toward the exit. *Oh, no.* Tyler is calling to me. “Hey, wait up,” he says. I’m almost to the front door, but Tyler runs up to me.

He holds the door open for me, but I don't trust him.

"I like your cross necklace," he says. "Is it real gold?"

"Yes. I got it for my *quinceañera*." I say the word with pride, wanting Tyler to know I'm proud of my culture.

"What's a *quinceañera*?" he asks. His pronunciation is terrible, but at least he tries.

"It's a ceremony for fifteen-year-old girls." I don't tell him it's a rite of passage for becoming a woman. He would just tease me. "I have to catch the bus," I add.

I look up at Tyler. I am short for an American girl, only five feet two. He must be a foot taller. He looks serious. I wonder if he's setting me up for a joke.

"It's pretty," he says. "It looks nice on you."

I blush. I can't believe he said that! Does he mean it? I'm almost late to catch the bus. I rush out because my shift at the

restaurant starts in an hour. I don't turn around to see if he's watching me. On the bus, I look up at the palm trees and the fog coming in from the ocean. I feel the tiny gold cross around my neck and remember. I loved the church ceremony and the *quinceañera* party after. I was sad at the party, though, because I couldn't waltz with Papá. I waltzed with my brother instead. I sigh. I still miss Papá so much.

Chapter 2

Tyler: Friday, Lunch Break

The lunch server scoops an enormous amount of mystery meat into my bowl, not caring if it slops over the side. I know I can make a joke out of this if I add some dialogue from that horror movie I watched last night. I stroll over to the tables. My friends and I have the good table in the center. I sit with Aiden, Taliah, some guys from the basketball team, and a few other kids. I gag and pretend the food is poisonous, but no one pays attention. Everyone's listening to Taliah. I can see that she's changed into her cheerleader uniform for the rally this afternoon.

She stands up and spins around in a circle. "My mom used hot water and my cheerleader outfit shrank

in the wash!” she says. Her outfit is skintight and barely covers the parts of her that are supposed to be covered according to school rules. She doesn’t seem embarrassed about it at all.

I decide to change my joke tactics. Everyone’s gaga at Taliah anyway. I pull out my cell phone and point the camera at her. I say so everyone can hear, “Wow, you want to do that twirl again, but more slowly this time? I bet I can sell this shot!”

Everyone laughs. Taliah stands next to me and starts hitting me on my shoulder. I can’t tell if she’s angry or is flirting with me. Mainly, I think she just thinks she looks hot. And she does, if you’re into her kind of looks.

A school monitor heads our way, obviously annoyed. She doesn’t want to deal with kids who are hitting each other, even if it’s just in fun. She doesn’t want to protect me ... not that I need protecting from Taliah, who’s way

smaller than me. I pretend to cower in fear, and everyone laughs even harder.

I feel a rush of happiness. The class clown strikes again! It takes the sting out of my bad grades. I can't believe I failed that test in Chandler's class yesterday. What will I tell my parents? Since they're divorced, I have to go through it twice—so I have to do it quick. If I don't, one is bound to find out from the other, and that's never a good thing. Rotten news seems much worse if they hear it from each other.

Across the cafeteria, I notice Lupe, the smart girl from Ms. Chandler's class. She's taking her tray over to the bins by the exit. I don't know why, but I seem to be the only guy who thinks she's cute. She acts stuck up, like she doesn't like me, but I walk over to her anyway.

"So, Lupe," I say. I stand in front of her, but not too close, so she doesn't get annoyed. "What's that short for?"

Lupe bites her lip. I smile at her, waiting for her answer. *What should I do?* I wonder. I don't want to stand here like a dork forever.

"It's short for *Guadalupe*," she finally says.

"Would you rather be called that or *Lupe*?" I ask.

"Why don't you leave me alone?" she asks suddenly. She turns around, her body shaking.

Why is she so angry? Does she think I'm making fun of her name? "Hey, chill," I say. "*Guadalupe's* a cool name. It's kind of like a pretty version of *guacamole*."

"Do you think that's *funny*?" she asks. She turns angrily and scrapes her food into the compost bin and tosses her silverware into the basket.

Sometimes a joke just doesn't work. I feel stupid, and it's not the first time. The truth is that I feel stupid a lot at school, like people will find out the truth about me. I do things without

thinking, and I can't concentrate, and there's a name for it. It's called ADHD. Sometimes I feel like I should just wear a badge that says *I have ADHD!* I hate it. Even now, my mind is racing, wondering if I should go back to the table with my friends, trying to remember if I brought my chemistry homework to school, thinking about what else I can say to Lupe so she'll like me.

"Hey, it was a *joke*," I say. "I like your name!" Lupe takes a step back and I realize I'm coming on too strong. *Why can't I stop running my mouth?* And sometimes I forget I'm so tall. Just standing too close to people makes them uncomfortable sometimes.

Some kids line up behind us to scrape and stack their trays. No one else liked the mystery meat, either.

"I know you're just looking for an easy laugh with your friends," Lupe says.

“No, you’ve got me wrong,” I say. “I’m cool. I’m an athlete, remember?” I pretend to dribble a basketball, shoot, then trip over my shoes. Sure enough, she finally smiles. Making fun of athletes is maybe too easy, but it works.

“So? What do you want?” she asks. She frowns and looks suspicious.

“It’s a little embarrassing, so let’s sit over here,” I say. I guide her to an empty table and hold out a seat. After a pause, she sits. Did she think I’d play a prank? Maybe pull the chair away before she sits down? I’m not *that* immature. She puts her books and notebook down close to her, as if to protect herself.

“How do you get good grades all the time? You pass tests that most people fail,” I say. I hope I don’t sound desperate, but I can’t think of a joke.

Lupe looks at me curiously. “I *have* to get the best grade in the class. It’s hard to explain why.” She pauses, like

she just thought of something. “Maybe I’ll tell you my secret to getting good grades . . . if you tell *me* something.” She picks up a pen and starts doodling on a piece of paper. She’s finally relaxing, I think.

“Let me guess,” I say, grinning. “You want to know how I got to be so funny, right?”

“No, not exactly,” Lupe says.

“I give up,” I say.

“You and Aiden,” she says. “You always have something to say. I never know how to talk to people.”

I sigh. This is harder than I thought because I like her. I really do. “Look,” I say. “I’ve known Aiden since first grade. We like to make people laugh; you know, joke around. It’s not like we plan it. It’s just . . . well, it feels good to make people laugh.”

“Not when they’re laughing *at* you,” Lupe says. I’ll give her this: She’s a straight talker.

“You want to know how to talk to people?” I ask. I look around in an exaggerated way, as if I’m a spy with a secret. Sure enough, Lupe smiles. I lean closer to her. I smell her shampoo. *Strawberry*, I think.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” I whisper. “I’ll tell you my secret of how to talk to people—how to be more *comfortable* with them—if you tell me your secret for acing tests.”

Lupe sits back in the chair, puts down her pen, and stops doodling. “How did you guess what I really wanted to know?” she finally asks.

“That’s part of my secret,” I say. “But if you want to know it, you’ll have to help me. Is it a deal?”

Lupe gathers up her books and notebook. “OK, it’s a deal,” she says.

Before she leaves, I tear off the doodle she’d made on a piece of paper. It shows a treble clef and music notes on staff lines. One thing about ADHD,

it doesn't get in the way of my music. My brain can concentrate when I play guitar, especially challenging pieces. I'm pretty good at music, if I do say so myself.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Oh, it's nothing," Lupe says. "I like to jot down music when I get nervous. My dad played guitar ..." Her voice is low and she looks like she's about to cry. Something's going on here.

"I could play that for you," I say.

She shakes her head but doesn't say anything.

"Can I keep it?" I ask. I start to whistle the school song.

"It's not *that* song!" Lupe says. I notice she smiles a little.