

two

¡Shhh!

The day after my cousins leave, Papi goes to work early, taking Mundín with him. Now that none of my uncles are around, Papi has a lot more to do at the office.

I'm alone at the breakfast table, already feeling how long and lonely this Saturday is going to be without Carla. Chucha and Mami and Ursulina, the cook, are in the kitchen, discussing what's needed at the market. Lucinda is still sleeping her beauty sleep that will last all morning long. Outside, Porfirio is watering the ginger plants, singing a Mexican song.

*The woman I love ran off with another—
I followed their footsteps and murdered them both.*

What a cheerful start to my day! I'm thinking when, suddenly, Porfirio stops singing. I glance out the window.

A half-dozen black Volkswagens are crawling up our driveway.

Before the cars come to a complete stop, the doors open, and a stream of men pour out all over the property. In their dark glasses, they look like gangsters in the American movies that sometimes come to town.

I run to get Mami, but she's already headed for the door. Four men stand in our entryway, all dressed in khaki pants with small holsters at their belts and tiny revolvers that don't look real. The

head guy—or at least he does all the talking—asks Mami for Carlos García and his family. I know something is really wrong when Mami says, “Why? Aren’t they home?”

But then, instead of going away, this guy asks if his men can search our house. Mami, who I’m sure will say, “Do you have a *permiso*?” steps aside like the toilet is overflowing and these are the plumbers coming to the rescue!

I trail behind Mami. “Who are they?” I ask.

Mami swings around, a terrified look on her face, and hisses, “Not now!”

I race to find Chucha, who’s in the entryway, shaking her head at the muddy boot prints. I ask her who these strange men are.

“SIM,” she whispers. She makes a creepy gesture of cutting off her head with her index finger.

“But *who* are the SIM?” I ask again. I’m feeling more and more panicked at how nobody is giving me a straight answer.

“*Policia secreta*,” she explains. “They go around investigating everyone and then disappearing them.”

“Secret police?”

Chucha gives me her long, slow, guillotine nod that cuts off any further questions.

They go from room to room, looking in every nook and cranny.

When they come through the hall door to the bedroom part of the house, Mami hesitates. “Just a routine search, *doña*,” the head guy says. Mami smiles wanly, trying to show she has nothing to hide.

In my room, one guy lifts the baby-doll pajamas I left lying on the floor as if a secret weapon is hidden underneath. Another yanks the covers back from my bed. I hold on tight to Mami’s ice-cold hand and she tightens her hold on mine.

The men go into Lucinda's room without knocking, opening up the jalousies, lifting the bedskirt and matching skirt on her vanity, plunging their bayonets underneath. My older sister sits up in bed, startled, her pink-foam rollers askew from sleeping on them. A horrible red rash has broken out on her neck.

When the men are done searching the room, Mami gives Lucinda and me her look that means business. "I want you both in here while I accompany our visitors," she says with strained politeness.

I run to her side. "Mami, no!" I start wailing. I don't want her to go with these creepy policemen. What if they hurt her?

The head guy turns to me. With his dark glasses on, I can't see his eyes, only the reflection of a terrified girl clinging to her mother. "What are you crying about, eh? *¡Tranquila!*" he orders.

It's as if his steely command cuts off the breath in my lungs. I can't even move when Mami gently undoes my hands from around her waist. She follows the men out, pulling the door closed behind her.

Lucinda turns to me. She's scratching the rash on her neck, even though Mami has told her not to. "What is going on?"

"Chucha said they're secret police," I tell her. "They were asking for the Garcías, but Mami acted like she didn't know." My voice breaks when I think of Mami all alone with them right this moment.

"The SIM know perfectly well where the Garcías are," Lucinda says. "They just want an excuse to traipse through here. And of course, they'd love to get their hands on Papi."

"But why?"

Lucinda looks at me as if I'm a lot dumber than she thought I was. "Don't you know anything, Anita?" Her eyes stray up to

my hair. "You've got to do something with those bangs," she says, brushing them back with her hand. It's the closest she can come to saying something nice when she sees how scared I am.

Lucinda and I wait in her room, listening at the door, tense with concentration. When we don't hear noises anymore, Lucinda turns the knob carefully, and we tiptoe out into the hall.

The SIM seem to have left. We spot Chucha crossing the patio toward the front of the house, a broom over her shoulder like a rifle. She looks like she's going to shoot the SIM for tracking mud on her clean floors.

"Chucha!" We wave to her to come talk to us.

"Where's Mami?" I ask, feeling the same mounting panic I felt earlier when Mami left with the SIM. "Is she okay?"

"She's on the *teléfono*, calling Don Mundo," Chucha explains.

"What about . . . ?" Lucinda wrinkles her nose instead of saying their names.

"*Esos animales*," Chucha says, shaking her head. Those animals, the SIM, searched every house in the compound, getting more and more destructive when they didn't find what they were looking for, tromping through Chucha's room, turning over her coffin and tearing off the velvet lining. They also stormed through Porfirio's and Ursulina's rooms. "Those two are so terrified," Chucha concludes, "they are packing their things and leaving the house."

But the SIM stay. They sit in their black Volkswagens at the top of our drive, blocking our way out.

At dinner, Papi says everything will be fine. We just have to act as if the SIM aren't there and carry on with normal life. But I

notice that, like the rest of us, he doesn't eat a single bite. And is it really normal that Mami and Papi have us all sleep on mattresses on their bedroom floor with the door locked?

We lie in the dark, talking in whispers, Mundín on a mat by himself, Lucinda and I on a larger mattress, and Papi and Mami on theirs they placed right beside ours.

"How come you don't just stay up on your bed?" I ask.

"Keep your voice down," Mami reminds me.

"Okay, okay," I whisper. But I still don't get an answer. "And what about Chucha?" I ask. "She's all by herself at the back of the house."

"Don't worry," Mundín says, "I don't think a bullet can get through that coffin!"

"Bullets!" I sit right up in bed.

"Shhhh!" my whole family reminds me.

Those black cars sit there for days and days—sometimes there's only one, sometimes as many as three. Every morning, when Papi leaves for the office, one of the cars starts up its colicky motor and follows him down the hill. In the evening, when he comes home, it comes back with him. I don't know when those SIM ever go to their own houses to eat their suppers and talk with their kids.

"Are they really policemen?" I keep asking Mami. It doesn't make any sense. If the SIM are policemen, secret or not, shouldn't we trust them instead of being afraid of them? But all Mami will say is "Shhhh!" Meanwhile, we can't go to school because something might happen to us. "Like what?" I ask. Like what Chucha said about people disappearing? Is that what Mami worries will happen to us? "Didn't Papi say we should carry on with normal life?"

"Anita, *por favor*," Mami pleads, collapsing in a hall chair. She leans forward and whispers in my ear, "Please, please, you must stop asking questions."

"But why?" I whisper back. I can smell her shampoo, which smells like coconuts in her hair.

"Because I don't have any answers," she replies.

Not that Mami is the only one I try talking to.

My brother, Mundín, who's two years older, sometimes explains things to me. But this time when I ask him what's going on, he looks worried and whispers, "Ask Papi." He's biting his nails again, something he stopped doing when he turned fourteen in August.

I try asking Papi.

One evening when the phone rings, I follow him into our living room. I hear him say something about some butterflies in a car accident.

"Butterflies in a car accident?" I ask, puzzled.

He seems startled that I'm in the room. "What are you doing here?" he snaps.

I put my hands on my hips. "Honestly, Papi! I live here!" I can't believe he's asking me what I'm doing in our own living room! Of course, he immediately apologizes. "Sorry, *amorcito*, you startled me." His eyes are moist, as if he's holding back tears.

"So what about those butterflies, Papi?"

"They're not real butterflies," he explains softly. "It's just . . . a nickname for some very special ladies who had an . . . accident last night."

"What kind of an accident? And why are they called butterflies anyhow? Don't they have a real name?"

Again a *shhh*.

My last resort is asking Lucinda. My older sister has been in a vile mood since the SIM cornered us in our own house. Lucinda loves parties and talking on the phone, and she hates being cooped up. She spends most of the time in her room, trying out so many hairstyles that I'm sure that when we finally leave the compound and go to the United States of America, Lucinda will be bald.

"Lucinda, *por favor*, pretty please, tell me what is going on?" I promise her a back rub that she doesn't have to pay me for.

Lucinda puts her hairbrush down on her vanity and makes a sign for me to follow her to the patio out back.

"We should be okay out here," she whispers, looking over her shoulder.

"Why are you whispering?" In fact, everyone has been talking in whispers and low voices this last week, as if the house is full of fussy babies who've finally fallen asleep.

Lucinda explains. The SIM have probably hidden microphones in the house and are monitoring our conversations from their VWs.

"Why are they treating us like criminals? We haven't done anything wrong."

"Shhh!" Lucinda hushes me. For a moment she looks doubtful about continuing to explain things to a little sister who can't keep her voice down. "It's all about T-O-N-I," she says, spelling out our uncle's name in English. "A few months ago, he and his friends were involved in a plot to get rid of our dictator."

"You mean. . . ." I don't even have to say our leader's name. Lucinda nods solemnly and puts a finger to her lips.

Now I'm *really* confused. I thought we liked El Jefe. His picture hangs in our front entryway with the saying below it: IN THIS

HOUSE, TRUJILLO RULES. "But if he's so bad, why does Mrs. Brown hang his picture in our classroom next to George Washington?"

"We have to do that. Everyone has to. He's a dictator."

I'm not really sure what a dictator does. But this is probably not a good time to ask.

It turns out that the SIM discovered the plot and most of our uncle's friends were arrested. As for Tío Toni, nobody knows where he is. "He might be hiding out or they"—Lucinda looks over her shoulder. I know just who she means—"they might have him in custody."

"Will they disappear him?"

Lucinda seems surprised that I know about such matters. "Let's hope not," she sighs. Tío Toni is a special favorite of hers. At twenty-four, he's not that much older than she, at fifteen, and he is very handsome. All her girlfriends have crushes on him. "Ever since the SIM uncovered that plot, they've been after the family. That's why everyone's left. Tío Carlos and Mamita and Papito—"

"Why don't we leave, too, since we're not going to school anyway?"

"And abandon Tío Toni?" Lucinda shakes her head vigorously. Her pretty auburn hair is up in this hairdo called a chignon, like Princess Grace wears in her magazine wedding pictures. It comes undone and cascades down her back. "What if he comes back? What if he needs our help?" Her voice has risen above her usual whispering.

For once in the last few weeks, it's my turn to tell someone else in our house, "SHHHH!"

About two weeks after my cousins leave, Mr. Washburn comes for a visit. He has been stopping by briefly every day since the SIM

raid. "How're those little ole bugs?" he asks mysteriously, looking out the window to where the black Volkswagens are still parked. Papi always replies, "Still biting."

But this evening, Mr. Washburn has a proposition to make. He sits in the study with Papi, talking in English. Mami looks from one to the other as if she's at a tennis match eagerly awaiting the outcome of the game. Unlike Papi, Mami has a hard time with English.

"Sounds like a great idea," my father is saying. "Anita!" He calls me in from the hallway, where I've been trying to be invisible so no one will ask me to leave. "We're going to have neighbors. What do you think of that?"

Just as long as the neighbors aren't the SIM, I'll be glad for anyone living in the compound with us. It's creepy being in a place with so many empty houses. Besides, I'm so lonely and bored without Carla or any of my other cousins around. "Who's moving in?" I ask.

"*El señor Washburn,*" my mother says, smiling. It's the happiest I've seen her in weeks. With someone from the United States embassy living next door, the SIM might not bother us anymore.

But the best news of the evening is that Mr. Washburn has a family that will be joining him—a wife and two kids!

"How old are they?" I interrupt.

"*Cotorrita,*" Mami reminds me.

"Sammy's twelve and Susie will be fifteen in February."

"I'm going to be twelve next week!" I blurt out in English. Mami hushes my rudeness again, but I can tell she is proud of my being confident in a language she finds so hard to learn.

Mr. Washburn gives me a wide smile. "Happy birthday in advance. And by the way, young lady, you speak English very well."

That night, I replay his compliment over and over in my head. It's the nicest thing that has happened to me in weeks. Actually, the second nicest, because a few days later, the Washburns move in. And the SIM move out!

I watch through the hibiscus hedge as workmen carry boxes into the Garcías' house. A boy follows them, his hair so blond it looks almost white, as if it sat in a bucket of bleach overnight. Later, after everything has been taken inside, the workmen come out and set up a trampoline under the tall ceiba tree. Then the boy climbs up on it. I'm sure he's going to tear a hole in that trampoline the way he jumps and jumps on it.

One time when he's up in the air, he catches sight of me lurking behind the hedge. "Howdy Doody!" he hollers. At first, I think he's calling me dirty, "Howdy, Dirty!" Before I can think what to do, he jumps off the trampoline and comes over.

"It's Howdy Doody time! It's Howdy Doody time!" he sings as he pumps my hand. I must look very confused because he asks me if I've ever watched Howdy Doody on TV. He talks so fast in English that I'm not sure I understand what he's saying.

"We don't have a TV," I explain.

"You *don't*?" He looks surprised. "But I thought you were rich. My dad says you own this whole park!"

"It's not a park," I correct. "It's a compound."

"What's that mean?" His blue eyes light up. "Is it like a harem?"

I'm not sure what a harem is, so I know the compound can't be that. I explain how my grandparents bought the land way back, and when each of their kids got married, they built a house on the

property, and that's how the place became the family compound, which really is just five houses and one bachelor pad, surrounded by a high wall to keep strangers out, and lots of us grandkid-cousins dressed in each other's hand-me-downs. "But now everybody but us left for the United States of America," I say sadly.

"That's where I'm from," Sammy says, puffing out his chest, as if someone is going to pin a medal on it. "Greatest country in the world."

I want to contradict him and say that my own country is the greatest. But I'm not sure anymore after what Lucinda told me about us having a dictator who makes everybody hang his picture on their walls.

"Want me to teach you the property?" I offer, eager to change the subject. When he stares back blankly, I know I haven't said what I want to say in English.

"You mean, do I want you to show it to me?"

I hang my head with embarrassment.

"No big deal," he adds. "I never do good in English and it's my native language."

I like him instantly for not making fun of my English.

"Let me tell my mom," he says before we set off. When he comes running back out, a tall, red-headed woman wearing a frilly apron stands at the door waving hello to me.

We spend the rest of the afternoon exploring the compound—the lily pond with wishing coins we can't see at the bottom because it's gotten so slimy; the old Taino cemetery, where Mundín discovered a carved stone Chucha said would bring rain; the wild, overgrown plot where my maiden aunt Mimí will someday build a house if she ever gets married. Showing it off to somebody makes

the place I've always known suddenly a lot more interesting. But I can't show him everything because a little later, his mom calls him inside to get his room in order so he can sleep in it tonight.

"See you later, alligator," Sammy yells over his shoulder.

"Tomorrow?" I ask.

"Sure," he calls back.

Just thinking about tomorrow's meeting, I feel so excited. I only wish Sammy had not called me an alligator. I know it's just a stupid American saying, but I really don't appreciate being called such an ugly animal. Even *cotorrita* is starting to get on my nerves. Honestly! People are always reminding me about my manners, but where are theirs?

The next day, Sam and I are exploring down by Tía Mimí's orchid shed, where the orchids have grown straggly since Porfirio left. Right next to the shed is the bachelor pad that Tío Toni built last year, a tiny *casita* like the ones in the country, with wooden shutters that latch up from the inside and a big padlock at the door. Tío Toni and his friends liked to sit around half the night talking in hushed voices. Now that I know what they were really up to, it feels creepy going near the place.

As we come in view of the *casita*, I stop in my tracks as if I've seen a ghost. The door to Tío Toni's *casita* is opened a crack!

"What's up?" Sammy wants to know.

"It's not supposed to be open," I whisper. The *casita* has been shut up since late summer, when Tío Toni disappeared.

"Maybe your maid left it that way when she cleaned?" Sammy suggests. By now he looks a little nervous himself and is talking in whispers.

I shake my head. Chucha is the only one left working in the compound. She doesn't have time to do extra cleaning.

Slowly, we creep up to the door and glance in. Someone is moving around in the darkness inside!

We run back so fast that I can feel my heart racing long after my legs have stopped. Later, bouncing together on Sammy's trampoline, we promise not to tell our parents about our discovery just yet or they won't let us explore the compound anymore. We jump up and down, trying to touch the lowest branches on the ceiba tree. When Mrs. Washburn comes out with lemonade, we climb off the trampoline.

"How are you children doing?" she asks. She has big, blue, wide-open eyes and looks as if she is always surprised.

"Fine and dandy," Sam says quickly, raising a finger when his mother isn't looking and crossing his lips.