

*Almost Free*

"He's coming!" Oscar yells from the nursery room we use as our classroom. We've been playing hide-and-seek with his three little sisters. Since Oscar is It, I wonder if he's trying to trick us into coming out of our hiding places. "Hurry up or you'll miss him!"

I look at the clock in the hallway, and sure enough, it's five-fifteen. El Jefe will be walking down from his mother's mansion, past Oscar's house next to the Italian embassy, all the way to the *avenida* by the ocean. Every evening of the week, he follows the same routine. Oscar says El Jefe is really strict about his schedule and does things right on the dot, not a moment before or after. He is superstitious that if he's off by a minute, something awful will happen to him.

I race down the hall so I can catch a glimpse of El Jefe, surrounded by his throng of bodyguards and important people from his cabinet. The first time I saw this afternoon parade, I was surprised to recognize several men from the group that gathers at our house every night to talk about getting rid of El Jefe.

I don't say so to Oscar. I don't say much even at school these days. Many times, when we play hide-and-seek to keep his little sisters entertained, I won't come out of my hiding place when I hear "Ally ally oxen free!" But like Papi, Oscar seems to understand my silence and goes on talking to me anyway.

"El Jefe's not wearing his jewelry today." María Eugenia, the oldest of the three little sisters, has joined us at the front window.

"It's not jewelry, it's his medals," Oscar corrects.

"Why can't they be jewelry?" María Eugenia protests. "They're gold."

"There's twenty soldiers," María Rosa pipes up. She just started learning numbers, and so everything she sees, she counts up. She's the youngest of the three little girls, all of whom have María as part of their name. Mrs. Mancini is really devoted to the Virgin Mary, Oscar has told me. Even *he* has María in his name, Oscar M. Mancini. At school, Oscar always refused to say what his middle initial stood for.

"Why does he have so many soldiers?" María Josefina, the middle sister, wants to know. All three little girls are now crowded at the window.

"Because," Oscar answers shortly.

"Because what?"

Curiosity runs in the family.

"Shhh, he's going to hear you!" Oscar warns. The three little girls fall silent. Oscar has already told them that if they get caught spying, they'll be taken out on the street and shot.

"That's strange. He's wearing his khaki today," Oscar points out. El Jefe always wears his white uniform, except on Wednesdays, when he heads for his country home at night. Then he wears a green khaki outfit. But today is only Tuesday.

"He probably has a new girlfriend," Oscar guesses. El Jefe keeps all his girlfriends out in his country house, where his wife never goes. Otherwise, she would surely murder them.

I shiver, remembering how El Jefe spotted Lucinda at Susie's

party and started courting her with roses. Quickly, I draw back from the window. What if El Jefe looks up and sends his SIM up to get me? "So, you are the girl who never cries!" he would greet me.

No, señor, I rehearse my reply. *I am the girl who hardly talks anymore.*

After El Jefe passes by, I stand a while at the window, looking up at a glint of silver in the sky. The daily Pan Am flight is departing for the States. The García girls left on that flight, as did my grandparents, uncles, and aunts and their families; then Lucinda and Susie; and finally, a few days ago, Sam and his mom.

Oscar comes up beside me. The little girls have been called to their baths. We are alone in the nursery. "Are you sad because of Sam leaving, Anita?"

It's sweet of Oscar to care. But I don't know how to tell him that I haven't been spending all that much time with Sam. In fact, the last time we saw each other alone was when Sam came over to say good-bye. Sam talked on and on about how excited he was to be going back to the United States. He handed over a present, a little Statue of Liberty paperweight that I was sure his mother had picked out.

"Thanks," I managed to murmur. I wanted to say something more. After all, Sam was my first love. There was a time when my heart would play jump rope when I saw him crossing over to our house. But those feelings had completely fizzled out. Sam had grinned when Charlie made fun of me. Why hadn't he defended me? Maybe he just hadn't been brave enough to stand up for me? Not being brave is easier to understand than being plain mean.

"It's scary being the ones left, don't you think?" Oscar is saying. I look down at the fists my hands have formed without my even

telling them. Suddenly, I'm so grateful to Oscar for admitting he's scared, too. Now I don't have to feel as if I'm going crazy all by myself.

"You know what Papi says?" Oscar asks. His voice is real quiet as if we're in a secret place together. "You can't be brave if you're not scared."

I know *exactly* what he means! Oscar sure seems a lot older and wiser than when he used to ask Mrs. Brown a lot of questions. I smile back at him.

He leans toward me, and for a moment I think he's actually going to whisper a secret in my ear. But instead, his lips touch my cheek. It's an odd moment to be getting my first kiss!

Shortly after that, Papi comes by to pick us up. He honks the horn for us to come quickly. Usually, he gets out of the car and visits with Doña Margot, Mrs. Mancini's mother, while Mundín and María de los Santos, Oscar's older sister, finish up their game of Parcheesi. Doña Margot, who lives with the Mancinis, chaperones María de los Santos whenever boys come to visit. That means she hangs around María de los Santos to make sure nothing happens, rocking in her rocker and falling asleep after a while. Mundín, who just turned fifteen, has a terrible crush on Oscar's sister, who's a whole year older than he. She wears her hair down her back in one long braid, which she unbraids and rebraids whenever she gets nervous. At least her nails are intact.

Doña Margot stands on the balcony and waves for Papi to come in.

Papi waves back. "*No puedo, Doña Margot. Tengo un compromiso.*" He can't come in. He has a commitment. Maybe one of his after-dinner meetings with Tío Toni and his friends.

I gather my things and race downstairs to the car. Usually, I hurry to beat Mundín so I can sit in the front next to Papi. But today I have to get away from Oscar. It isn't that I'm sorry he kissed me. I just can't find the words for the mixture of confusion and pleasure I'm feeling.

Sitting in the car, I'm sure Papi can tell that a boy has kissed me. But Papi seems distracted, turning on the radio, then turning it off, honking the horn a few more times before Mundín finally appears at the door. From the balcony, María de los Santos waves her languid good-byes as my brother climbs in.

On the drive home, Papi keeps forgetting to slow down for the lying policemen. "Are you going out tonight, Papi?"

He doesn't answer me right away, which is unusual. I speak so rarely these days that when I do, people make a point of paying attention to me.

"Eh, Papi?" I ask again.

Papi turns to me with that if-looks-could-kill look in his eyes, but the minute he realizes who I am, the look shifts, and he smiles. "What was that, Anita?"

I try again, but the words have slipped from my mind.

"She asked if you were going out tonight." It's Mundín from the backseat. Just last Wednesday, Papi and Tío Toni's friends gathered at our house, talking in excited whispers. Then everyone got into their cars and drove off. Later that night, I heard the Chevy coming back, doors closing, and then Papi and Tío Toni explaining something to Mundín and Mami about Mr. Smith not showing up at the picnic site.

"Going out? Yes, yes, I'm going out tonight," Papi says absently.

"I heard he was wearing his khaki today," Mundín notes.

Papi looks in the rearview mirror and nods.

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We drive through the compound gates, past the empty guardpost and the deserted García house. A few days ago, Mr. Washburn was issued revised orders to vacate the compound and have no further dealings with any dissident elements. He has moved to the consulate downtown, where he'll be staying until his return to the States in late June.

Our driveway is crowded with cars parked at screwy angles in a hurried way. Just inside the door, someone has turned the portrait of El Jefe to face the wall. Tío Toni and his friends are gathered in the living room, talking in excited voices. Mami rushes out to the entryway to greet us, her eyes wide and frightened. She whispers something to Papi, who gives her the same nod he gave Mundín in the car.

Mami's eye falls on me, and her face struggles for composure. "How was school today?" she asks, but she doesn't notice my blushing or wait for an answer. One of the men comes back in from his car with a heavy sack in his arms. "Aquí no," she snaps, motioning with her head toward Papi's study. She doesn't want the man unloading his gear in front of me.

Mami's still trying to keep stuff from me because she worries about my being so quiet and thin. But for weeks now, I've sensed that some big thing is about to happen, big enough to distract Mami from fussing as much over little things, which is fine with me.

I'll come back from school and find her at the typewriter in Papi's study. When I ask her what she's typing, she says, "Just some work for your father." One time, right before she burned the trash in a coal barrel in the yard, I found a page all crumpled up. I uncrumpled it and read CALLING ALL CITIZENS ON TOP—the rest was

like a Declaration of Independence in Spanish, listing the freedoms that the country would now enjoy. "All citizens are free to express their opinions, to vote for the candidate of their choice, to receive an education. . . ." I felt like I was reading something George Washington might have written, only it was typed instead of handwritten, and thought up by my papi and his friends instead of by a bunch of white-wigged colonial men.

Mami also worries a lot about Mundín. Now that he's fifteen, he won't be treated as a minor if the SIM start rounding people up. Mami has had several discussions with Papi about sending Mundín to New York to my grandparents, but Papi reasons with her that there is no way Mundín will be granted permission after Lucinda never returned when her visa expired. And such a request might tip off the SIM that something big is about to happen.

"Children, tonight an early supper," Mami is saying, as if Mundín and I are six and nine instead of twelve and fifteen. "Then off to your rooms."

"I'm going with Papi," Mundín announces, pulling himself up straight as if he is twenty-one instead of fifteen.

"¿Usted está loco?" Mami asks him. Are you crazy? She's using the formal *usted* as she always does when she's angry with us. "Mundo!" she calls to my father, who has gone ahead into the living room and is greeting all the men. Papi comes back out and Mami explains what Mundín is proposing.

Papi puts his hands on Mundín's shoulders. All he has to say is, "If anything should happen to me . . .," for Mundín to bow his head obediently.

After a spaghetti supper that none of us can eat, Mami, Mundín, and I go into Mami and Papi's bedroom to listen to the radio and

wait. Radio Caribe, the government station, is having a recitation contest, but most of the poems are about El Jefe, so Mami turns it off. I think about my cousin Carla winning her eraser in the shape of the Dominican Republic at the children's recitation contest last year. But I can't remember the winning poem she recited. Perhaps it, too, was about Trujillo.

Every few minutes, Mami or Mundín goes to the window and checks to see if any of the cars have come back. I have lots of questions in my head, but I can't find the words, nor do I want to make Mami any more nervous by asking them.

We sit on the big bed, paging through the *Life* magazines Mrs. Washburn left for us when she moved out. There are lots of pictures of the handsome President Kennedy and his pretty wife, Jackie, who looks a little like my beauty-queen aunt, only paler and less made up. There are also pictures of the astronaut the Americans have put up in space. He's curled up in a capsule like an unborn baby. The capsule's name, *Freedom 7*, is written in big block letters on its side. I imagine him out there, spinning farther and farther away from the planet Earth, as lonely and scared as I feel deep down inside myself.

The knock at the door makes us all jump. It's Chucha. Do we want our beds turned down? Mami nods absently.

"I'll help," I offer, wanting to get out of that tense room. As Chucha and I fold up Mundín's bedspread, I tell her about the astronaut flying in outer space.

Chucha narrows her eyes as if trying to see something that has been a long way off but is now coming closer. "Get ready," she whispers.

"For what?" I gasp. I wish Chucha wouldn't talk mysteriously when I'm so nervous!

Chucha lifts her arms and pumps them up and down, her purple sleeves billowing. "Fly, fly free," she reminds me.

Of course. Chucha's dream: first Lucinda, then Mundín, and then Mami and me flying in the sky. I had pictured us taking off to the United States of America, angel wings on our shoulders. Now I imagine us crammed inside a space capsule, headed for who knows where.

Just then, Chucha and I hear the cars honking their way up the driveway, doors banging shut, excited voices in the front of the house. Out in the hall, Mami and Mundín are racing to the door as the men come trooping in, brandishing guns. "*¡Que vivan Las Mariposas! Long live the Butterflies!*" they greet us. Papi picks up Mami and twirls her around, then sets her down and does the same to me.

"Is it true? Is it really true?" Mami keeps searching Papi's face to make sure it's safe to celebrate.

Papi's face is flushed and happy. "It is true, Carmen, true, true, true. After thirty-one years, we are free again!"

Tío Toni, who has been trying to get someone on the phone, comes back to the entryway. His face is grim. "No one can find Pupo," he announces to the men.

"What do you mean no one can find Pupo?" Papi asks, then hurries away to the phone and begins dialing some numbers.

Who's Pupo? I want to ask. The desperate look on all the men's faces means that Pupo is someone really important they have to find.

"If that bastard double-crossed us . . .," one of the men is swearing, but another man hushes him so they can hear what Papi is saying.

"Did he say where he was going or when he might be back?" Papi's voice is calm and casual, a friend trying to get ahold of a

friend to chat. But he's winding the phone cord around and around his hand, as if he means to strangle his fingers. "No, no message, nothing important. I'll call back."

When he hangs up, Papi's face is as grim as Tío Toni's. He begins issuing orders. A couple of men are to go by Mancini's house. Someone else is supposed to do something else, and someone else is supposed to go somewhere else and tell someone something. I can't keep it all straight because of all the shouting and running around, plus my heart is beating so loud! I put my hand on my chest to calm it down and look over at Papi, hoping he'll glance my way and wink and tell me everything's going to be fine. But he's reminding the different groups before they take off that the most important thing is to find Pupo and bring him here to view "the evidence." It seems only Pupo, whoever he is, can give the signal that will make everyone fall in line.

Mami's face is a china cup someone has dropped on the floor. "And what happens if you don't find Pupo?"

Papi glances over at El Jefe's portrait, which was turned to the wall earlier in the evening. With all the ins and outs, someone must have brushed against it, and the picture has twisted itself back around. "If we don't find Pupo, it's every man for himself," Papi explains, looking from one face to another. Everyone seems to understand.

Papi heads for the bedroom, Mami clinging tearfully to him. I wait in the hall until they come out again, Papi patting his shirt pocket, a gun handle visible under his belt. At the front door, he kisses Mami, then he kisses me, avoiding our eyes, as if he doesn't want us to see how worried sick he is.

I want to say good-bye to him, but the words are stuffed inside my mouth like a gag keeping me from talking. From the entryway,

I watch as the cars start up, their different lights aimed in all directions, like searchlights going crazy. Across the way, the García house is dark. If only someone were next door to help us now! For the first time since my family and then the Washburns left, I feel angry at all of them for deserting us.

Mami suddenly turns, looking around frantically. "Where's Mundín?" she asks me, as if I'm keeping tabs on my older brother. "Mundín!" she calls. Her desperate voice rings out in the empty house. "Mundín!"

Chucha is locking up the garage and hosing down the driveway, which seems a strange thing to be doing in the middle of the night. When she hears Mami calling, she turns off the hose and comes back in.

"Where's Mundín?" Mami asks her.

"I saw him get into the first car," Chucha replies.

"Ay, no!" Mami wails. She races to the phone, but in her desperation, she dials several wrong numbers before she gets the one she wants. "Doña Margot," she cries out, "is Mundín there?"

She must hear what she wants to hear because her face relaxes. "Under no circumstances let him out of your sight!"

When she hangs up, Mami wears a cross look on her face. "When this is all over, I'm going to give that boy the punishment of his life."

Chucha shakes her head slowly. "No, Doña Carmen. It's too late for that. Why, Mundín is already a man! He has flown the nest."

I look out the door and down the dark driveway. The whole flock of our family has fled. Only Mami and Chucha and I are left.