

*Night Flight*

For the rest of the night, we wait and wait for Papi's return. Chucha goes off to her room to light her candles and pray to San Miguel. I try praying, too, but as I kneel beside Mami, all I can think about is how to escape if the SIM come to our door. No suicide pill for me! I'm going to fly, like Papi and Chucha said. I want to be free!

The best idea would be to run to the back of the property, past Tío Toni's *casita*, and take the back road to the crowded market-place. We could probably find someone to carry a message to Mr. Washburn at the consulate. Monsito! Maybe if Mami gave him all the money in the safe, he'd help us out? It's strange to think that now we are the beggars, but instead of asking for alms, we're asking for help so as not to lose our lives.

*Lose our lives!* The words grip my heart. Will the SIM really kill us? Will they torture me if I don't talk? How can I explain to them that it's not personal, that I'm not talking to anyone? That I forget words even when I try not to?

I look over at Mami, hoping she'll say that everything's going to be all right. But her hand is shaking so badly that she can't even finger the beads on her rosary. Mami's scared, too! Oscar said you have to be scared to be brave. I just have to stay one step ahead of being scared. If it's just a small step, maybe I can do it.

*Where is Oscar right now?* I'm wondering. Is he awake and

scared and trying to be brave, too? I touch the place on my cheek where he kissed me. Maybe after being Joan of Arc for the revolution, maybe then I can go back to being a normal girl and fall in love with Oscar?

Finally, Mami and I decide to try and get some rest. As if my room might be safer now than hers, Mami lies down beside me on my bed. We keep Mundín's transistor radio tuned to the one official station, hoping Pupo will make his announcement. But all they play is a program of organ music that reminds me of High Mass at the cathedral and has the same effect. I drop off to sleep.

Later on, I'm awakened by the sound of sirens. "It's nothing," Mami says soothingly, but her hand on my back is ice-cold.

I turn in the dark and look toward where I think her face might be. The words for what has been uppermost in my mind all night tumble out. "Mami, are we going to be okay?"

She doesn't say anything for a long time. I wonder if she has fallen asleep or if she is also beginning to lose her memory of words. Finally, she replies, "Like Chucha says, we're in God's hands now."

"Who's Pupo, Mami?" I ask. The way the men were talking, our lives are not in God's hands but in Pupo's.

"Pupo is the head of the army. He was supposed to announce the liberation. It looks like he failed us."

*But won't lots of other people help?* I want to ask. I'm thinking of the policeman who didn't denounce Mr. Washburn when he spotted the guns in the trunk of the car; the thousands of people who, Tío Toni has said, will be brave because of the Butterflies. But the words are again sinking down to the bottom of my memory.

"Without the army, we're lost." Mami begins sobbing. "And to think we were almost free."

I reach out and stroke her back, like she just stroked mine.

The organ music plays on, like a funeral that will not quit.

The rest of the night is a blur as I fall in and out of sleep, everything running together, the dreaming and the waking, the García sisters standing in the snow in a place called Central Park in the snapshot they sent us; the eraser in the shape of the Dominican Republic; Sam bouncing up on his trampoline but never coming down, until he is an astronaut tumbling away into outer space; Oscar's little sisters hanging out the window, their heads like three shiny black bowls; Oscar leaning over but instead of kissing me, branding Wimpy's eagle tattoo on my cheek; Chucha dragging her coffin into Lorena's room; the blood on Lucinda's sheets becoming the blood Chucha tried to hose down from the driveway tonight; then the sounds of cars coming back, wheels squealing, doors banging shut, calls left and right; the scared whispers, the rushing-around steps, Tío Toni's voice, and Papi's and Mami's; and then the endless silence through which I am falling down, down, down—

Chucha is shaking me awake. Sunlight is streaming in through the jalousie windows. Before I can ask her what's the matter, gangster men in their dark glasses storm into the room, thrusting their guns here and there in the corners of the closet and under my bed, in search of something they cannot find.

Chucha and I clutch each other and watch the men pulling open drawers, throwing my clothes on the floor. Soon another bunch of men come into the room, pushing Mami in her nightgown before them. "Traitors!" they shout.

Mami rushes to me and holds me so tight, I can hear her heart pounding in my head. I'm too terrified even to cry.

When they're done with our room, they nudge us with the barrels of their guns into the living room. A tall, skinny man with a thin mustache sits in Papi's chair, directing the operation. Men run in and out, reporting their finds. They refer to him as Navajita, little Razor Blade. I don't want to think how he came by that nickname.

"Have a seat," Navajita offers, as if this were his house, not ours. He stretches his mouth like a rubber band, showing us his teeth. It takes me a second to realize that he's smiling.

We sit and wait, cringing at the sound of glass breaking, things smashing as his gang ransacks the house and the grounds.

"We found El Jefe!" a SIM agent comes shouting into the room. The skinny man stands abruptly, as if there's a spring under him. His profile is as sharp as a razor blade. "In the trunk of the Chevy," the agent explains, "locked up in the garage."

"Take them in," Navajita orders. The SIM agent hurries out, shouting orders.

From the front window, we can see a swarm of black Volkswagens, engines starting up. Papi and Tío Toni, hands tied behind their backs, are being pushed toward one of the waiting cars.

Mami races to the window. "MUNDO!" she cries out. My father's head jerks around before he's shoved into the car.

"Where are you taking them?" Mami wails.

"Where they took El Jefe," Navajita replies grimly.

Soon the other agents who have been scouring the compound gather in their cars, driving over the lawns, leaving a trail of smashed-up flowers and muddy wheel marks. I try to catch a glimpse of Papi or Tío Toni, the backs of their heads or a flash of

their profiles, some little bit of them to hold on to in my memory. But I cannot remember which car is theirs or whether it has already gone ahead to a place where I don't want to imagine what is waiting for them.

The minute they disappear, Mami begins making phone calls, trying to find someone who can help us. But everybody seems to have taken flight. Spooky funeral music keeps playing on the radio. Wherever Pupo is, he has not been found to make his announcement that El Jefe is gone. Instead, the SIM and Trujillo's son and brothers seem to be in charge, and they are going to make the whole country pay for the murder of El Jefe.

We huddle together in that wrecked house, not knowing what to do with ourselves. Everything that used to be in a drawer or on a shelf is smashed and broken on the floor. Mami's jewelry, my charm bracelet, the silver in the velvet-lined box in the dining room, and Papi's car have been confiscated, now "property of the state." Even the wishing coins at the bottom of my grandparents' pond have been fished out. The last time the SIM raided us, they were very polite compared to this. We're in real trouble now.

Mami and Chucha and I start to clean up, but Mami breaks down. "What's the use?" she sobs. I keep right on, helping Chucha, trying to stay one step ahead of being terrified. But the panic is stirring inside me, a big black moth of scaredness flapping around inside my chest that can't get out. I sweep and dust and clean extra hard, as if that's going to set it free.

Finally, Mami manages to reach Mr. Mancini, who comes right over, shaking his head at the mess the SIM have made of our house.

Mami is trying to control herself, but she keeps dabbing at her

eyes with one of Papi's handkerchiefs. Every time she blows her nose, she sees the monogram and that gets her started crying again. "We've got to do something. Ay, Pepe, please, God, we've got to do something."

Mr. Mancini bows his head, as if he doesn't want Mami to see the bad news written all over his face.

"Ay, Pepe, they'll murder us all, *ay, Dios.*" Mami is sobbing uncontrollably.

Mr. Mancini escorts her to a chair and offers her his handkerchief, since Papi's is all wet and balled up. "*Cálmese, Carmen.*"

"*Por favor, Pepe, por favor, we've got to find Washburn.*"

"What we must do at the moment is find you a safe place. The SIM will be back, believe me. If they can't get the confessions they want, they will come after the wives and children. They're already rounding up the boys in some families."

"Mundín!" Mami's hands are at her throat.

"Mundín is fine," Mr. Mancini reassures her. "Now you two ladies get a few things ready, *prontísimo*. You are coming with me." His eye falls on Chucha, who's standing by, listening to all this.

"Chucha, I suggest you close the house and go off to your people."

"These are my people," Chucha replies, crossing her arms.

"Anita," Mami says, "go with Chucha and collect some of your things."

"And bring some of Mundín's things as well, Chucha," Mr. Mancini adds, giving Mami a small nod.

While Chucha packs a bag for Mundín next door, I try to gather up some clothes, but my room is such a mess, I can't even find two matching socks. A big heap lies on the floor: school clothes and dresses and torn blouses all thrown together with panties and

shoes. Papers are scattered everywhere; my books and pencils have been emptied out of my schoolbag; even the diary I stashed away months ago on a shelf in the closet has been hurled near the door. Seeing everything I own thrown around like trash makes me want to give up. I tell myself, *Be brave, be strong*. But when I see that pathetic little monkey hand from the smashed lamp sticking out from inside one of my tennis shoes, I collapse, sobbing, on top of all my stuff.

"¡Vengan!" Mr. Mancini is shouting from the entryway for us to come.

I try to stand but I cannot move. The same paralysis that has attacked my voice now seems to have taken hold of my legs.

Chucha hurries into the room. She takes one look at me and begins stuffing clothes in the laundry bag that once hung behind my door, a rag doll's face on a hanger with her body an empty sack. When she's done, she pulls me to my feet and wraps her arms around me as if she is filling me up with her courage.

"¡Ya! ¡Ya!" It's time. Fly, fly free! She yanks up my laundry bag and, at the last minute, scoops up the diary and stuffs it inside. Pushing me before her, we race out the door, my legs gaining strength as I fly through the house to the waiting car, Chucha urging me on.