

CHAPTER 1

"Yaqui Delgado wants to kick your ass."

A kid named Vanesa tells me this in the morning before school. She springs out with no warning and blocks my way, her textbook held at her chest like a shield. She's tall like me and caramel. I've seen her in the lunchroom, I think. Or maybe just in the halls. It's hard to remember.

Then, just like that, Vanesa disappears into the swell of bodies all around.

Wait, I want to tell her as she's swallowed up. *Who is Yaqui Delgado?* But instead, I stand there blinking as kids jostle for the doors. The bell has rung, but I'm not sure if it's only the warning or if I'm late for first period. Not that it matters. I've been at this school for five weeks, and Mr. Fink hasn't remembered to take attendance once. A girl near his desk just sort of scans the room and marks who's out.

"Move, idiot!" somebody grunts, and I follow the crowd inside.

It's Darlene Jackson who explains the trouble I'm really in. She's a student aide in the guidance office, and she knows all about Yaqui Delgado. "She was suspended last year for fighting." We're in the lunchroom, so Darlene has to shout for me to hear. "*Twice.*"

I've only known Darlene a few weeks, but already I can see she loves drama, especially if she has a front-row seat and it's someone else's catastrophe. Her mother is one of those nosy PTA types, too, so Darlene always seems to know whose parents are getting divorced, who failed last semester, or what teacher will be fired at the end of the year. Don't ask me how, but that little spy even knew that our science teacher's husband had dumped her. Before Ms. O'Donnell got past her swollen eyes to teach us about Newton's laws last week, the whole class knew her love life was in shambles.

Darlene pushes up her glasses and tells me the whole rumor: "Yaqui Delgado hates you. She says you're stuck-up for somebody who just showed up out of nowhere. Oh! And she wants to know who the hell you think you are, shaking your ass the way you do." Darlene lowers her voice. "She even called you a *skank*. Sorry."

I'm stunned.

"I shake my ass?"

Darlene studies her egg-salad sandwich for a second.

“Definitely, yes.”

Interesting. I’ve only had an ass for about six months, and now it seems it has a mind of its own. If only my friend Mitzi were here to see this! Last year in ninth grade at my old school, I was a late bloomer. *Planchadita* — ironed out and hipless — nothing at all like Mitzi, who got her curves in fifth grade.

It was Ma who first noticed my body changing, but she wasn’t exactly tactful about my getting *cuervo*. “Put on a bra already, Piddy,” she said after she noticed a man on the bus gawking at my chest one day. “You can’t go around with two loose onions in your shirt for all the boys to stare at,” she snapped, like it was my fault that man had helped himself to the show.

Lila — that’s Ma’s best friend in the whole world — is the one who took me shopping for lacy bras the next day.

“Be proud, *mi vida*,” Lila whispered to me in the bra section of the store as I stared, shocked, at all the red lace and bows. “And keep your shoulders back.”

This ass shaking is probably Lila’s fault, too, now that I think about it. It’s all the dancing we do. She’s been teaching me to merengue the way they do in her favorite clubs. Right before school started, she introduced me to her collection of old Héctor Lavoe records. We’ve listened to them so much that I’ve got the tunes stuck in my head.

“Move your feet small, like you’re on a brick,” she said when we danced across her apartment. “But the hips? Shake them big, *mami*.” She gave her bottom a good one-two to show me. “*Así*.”

Maybe now I’m stuck on swivel. Who knows? When Lila walks down the street, men’s eyes get glued to her junk. Even bus drivers slow down to see. Ma says she’s a human traffic hazard.

Darlene finishes nibbling down to her crusts and tosses them inside her paper lunch bag.

“Maybe you could practice walking normal,” she suggests with a shrug. “You know, a little less wiggly. Like me.”

I try not to choke. Darlene does not *walk normal*. She leans forward as if she’s being led by her nose with an invisible rope. I’d say she scurries.

“I think I walk just fine,” I tell her.

“Suit yourself, then,” she says. “All I know is that Yaqui Delgado is gonna crush you.” She demonstrates by balling up her lunch bag and casting a knowing glance at the table across the lunchroom. That’s where the Latin kids sit.

The first day I got here, I stood with my tray, just sizing up the neighborhood. The Asian kids were clustered near the middle. The black kids had a bunch of tables to themselves. I spotted the Latin zone right away, but I didn’t know a single one of them from any of my classes. As I got closer, a few of the guys grinned and elbowed each other, but none of the girls looked like they were going to make

room. In fact, it was downright chilly how they stared at me. Darlene was the one who waved me over.

So here I am at the corner table near the trash cans—the worst real estate in the cafeteria. Since we moved, I’ve had to start over. Our table is all the kids from our fourth-period science class, like Sally Ngyuen and Rob Allen. They’re both in the tenth-grade physics class with Darlene and me, which I’m finding out is an international breeding ground for outcasts here at Daniel Jones High School.

Right now Rob is looking scared—even for him. He’s not an ugly guy, but he’s skinny and pale. The knot in his neck is bobbing, and the rims of his eyes look as pink as a hamster’s. He’s crazy smart, which I like, though he might be more popular if his brain came in a more attractive package. He can solve a physics problem even faster than I can, but what does that get him around here? Not a single friend that I can see—and I would know. His locker is next to mine.

“Who’s going to crush you?” His voice cracks a little as he stares at the balled-up paper bag.

“No one,” I say.

“Mind your own business, Rob,” Darlene snaps. She turns back to me and rolls her eyes. Even in a group of geeks, there’s a pecking order, and Darlene’s on top. Rob glares at her, but he shuts up.

“I don’t even know Yaqui Delgado, Darlene,” I tell her with a shrug. “I’m not worried.”

“Well, she knows *you*. And she hates your guts. You’re new here, Piddy, so take my word for it. You’re as good as dead. These Latin girls mean business. If I were you, I’d stay home tomorrow.”

I stop chewing and give her a look.

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a Latin girl, too, Darlene.”

Darlene rolls her eyes—*again*—like I’m the stupid one. White-skinned. No accent. Good in school. I’m not her idea of a Latina at all. I could point out that Cameron Diaz is Latina, too, but why bother? It won’t change Darlene’s mind.

“Yeah? Then why aren’t you sitting with them?” she asks.

The color rises in my cheeks as my eyes flit across the room. It’s because those girls are a rougher bunch—nothing at all like Mitzi and me. Still, I won’t give Darlene the satisfaction of knowing that. It’s bad enough when Coach Malone read out my last name in PE and the Guatemalan girls in back gave me weird looks, even though they should know better. “Yon Spanish?” they asked. I ignored them.

“My last name is *Sanchez*, remember?” I finally say to Darlene. “My mother is from Cuba, and my dad is from the Dominican Republic. I’m just as Latin as they are.”

I finish off my peanut-butter sandwich and force myself to make small talk with Rob for the rest of lunch

period, just to annoy her. This is harder than it might seem. He's not much of what you'd call a conversationalist; I think he's out of practice. His thoughts more or less explode from his mouth without warning.

"I'm going to make a dagger," he blurts out.

It takes me a second to realize he's talking about our English project. We're starting to work on our *Julius Caesar* presentations.

"Watch out for 'zero tolerance,'" I tell him. "I know a kid who got suspended for a water pistol in sixth grade." It was my neighbor Joey Halper, early in his career as a goon.

Rob shrugs.

"I'll say it's Reynolds Wrap before I whip it out."

"Creeper. What are you whipping out?" Darlene sneers.

Rob turns red, and that pretty much ends our chat. Thankfully, the bell rings just then, and we join the stampede for the door. I can't help but look over my shoulder at those girls. I don't see Vanesa, but maybe one of them is Yaqui. Maybe she's watching me right now, staring at my swishy ass, hating me. I hold my books tight and press forward in the crowd, keeping my hips as still as I can.

CHAPTER 2

How I got into this *lío* at Daniel Jones High is because the lobby staircase in our old apartment building finally gave way, and Ma said, “*Hasta aquí!*” Otherwise, I’d be at Charles P. Jeantet on the better side of Northern Boulevard, and nobody would be after me at all.

But every week, something would happen in the building to rattle Ma. No hot water from the boiler on Mondays. Mr. and Mrs. Halper fighting so bad, Lila sometimes called the cops. Dog turd from the old boxer in 1D that’s ninety-one in people years and can’t make it outside in time anymore. It was all getting on Ma’s nerves — not exactly her strong point — and that day when the stairs went *pfft*, she’d worked overtime, too.

I was in Lila’s living room, watching our soap opera, when we heard the crash. It sounded like a *whoosh* followed by a truckload of china breaking. The front door even shook a little. Then came Ma’s screams.

“¡Dios mío! ¿Qué es esto? Help!”

Lila grabbed the old plunger handle she keeps in case of burglars, and we headed out the door. Sure enough, there was Ma standing a cloud of genie smoke, knee-deep in rubble where the five lobby steps had crumbled right under her feet. Covered in all that marble dust, she looked like a Greek statue of herself, only furious, the way you’d picture Medusa. Her hands were shaking; the veins in her neck were ropes. Even after we dug her out and got her upstairs, I could tell she wanted blood.

“¡Sin vergüenza! We can’t live like animals! We’re decent,” she shouted into the heating pipe. It ran down the stack of apartments, all the way to the super’s place near the laundry room. She smacked a frying pan again and again against the metal to make sure he heard her over the hum of the dryers. Hearing Ma wasn’t going to be a problem, of course. The whole building was probably listening in on her *escándalo* through the pipes; maybe even the whole block could hear. That tells you how mad she was, because if there’s one thing Ma hates, it’s looking low. The worse thing you can be is a *chusma*. She thinks we get a bad rep as Latinos, which she’s always trying to undo by being extra quiet and polite all the time.

“Calm yourself, Clara.” Lila adjusted the flame under the teakettle and opened up the cupboard to look for honey. “You want a heart attack?”

"I don't want to calm down!" Ma's face was nearly purple.

"What if someone calls the cops on us?" I asked, trying to help. What's more *chusma* than *that*, right? It got Ma's attention.

She gave the pipes one more smack before tossing the frying pan aside. Then she flopped into a kitchen chair, exhausted. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes to send a prayer to *el Señor*, though who knows if he still listens to her, since it's been fifteen years since she's gone to church. When she opened her eyes again, it was like the irises had been drained of their color and all that was left was steely silver. Her voice was low.

"No, I don't want a heart attack, Lila. And, no, I don't want cops. What I *want* is to move. The Ortegas are lucky they got out when they did." The Ortegas are Mitzi's parents. They moved to Long Island in May to get away from the "bad element" in our neighborhood.

Oh, no, I thought. Not this again. Ma is always threatening to move when she's upset about something—but it's never anywhere reasonable, like Maspeth or Ridgewood. It's always Hialeah or Miami, or should I say, *Me-ah-me*, aka Cuba with food. Sometimes she goes so far as to make us start packing. Once she got so annoyed about the icy walkway out front that she brought home boxes from work and announced that we were leaving

for Florida. Luckily, we're the only Cubans in the United States who don't have relatives there, so we wouldn't have had anywhere to stay. Lila found her a good pair of rubber-soled boots on sale instead, and we stayed put.

I had to think fast.

"Mitzi says Long Island isn't so great. The people are snobs." It's a lie. I talked to her last week. She likes it fine, even with the all-girl Catholic high school that came with the deal. "Why don't we just sue the super?" Even this seemed easier than packing up the apartment in boxes—and Ma likes court shows. "Who knows? We could get rich if you're hurt. Do you have a limp? Are you traumatized?"

Ma gave me an exasperated look and turned back to Lila.

"I'm serious. It's not just talk like the other times. And if you don't believe me, look."

She got up, opened the cupboard, and reached for an old El Pico coffee can from the top shelf. When she opened it, I gasped. Inside was a drug-dealer-size wad of bills.

"Ma!" I said. "Did you rob a bank?"

"Don't be fresh. I've been saving," she continued. "And now it's finally time. Lila, get me the phone number for Mr. Wu."

Lila stared at the money and didn't say a word. Mr. Wu is her old boyfriend—a Chinese guy who grew up in

Uruguay—but he’s also the owner of Happiness Home Realty, the biggest realtor in this part of Queens.

Ma meant business.

So, Lila set the whole thing up, just like Ma wanted. All she had to promise was a dinner with Mr. Wu, and he said, “¿Cómo no, linda? I’ll be happy to show your friend what I got.” Like I said, no man can resist Lila.

The next day, the three of us were standing with Mr. Wu in front of a two-family house at the corner of Forty-Fifth and Parsons Boulevard, not too far from our old place. A FOR RENT sign was taped inside the empty window on the second floor, Mr. Wu’s smiling picture overlooking the bus stop.

Mr. Wu was grinning at Lila stupidly as he fumbled for the keys to the apartment. It had been at least six months since Lila had called it quits with him, but I could tell he was hopeful, like all her old boyfriends are for a while afterward. I tried not to notice him practically drooling. Men just get weird around her, like the air gets electric and they go blind to everything except for her. Lila wears heels and sells Avon part-time, when she’s not doing *champú* at Salón Corazón. She’s nothing like Ma, who is Hanes brief three-packs and a worried face. Lila’s hair never shows roots, and when she walks by, it’s all Jean Naté and talcum that makes men want to cling to her tighter than her sweaters.

“Too bad she’s loose,” Ma says when she hears Lila’s pumps clicking down the stairs for a date in the city. I don’t think she means it—or if she does, it doesn’t stop her from loving Lila. I know because I can see the worry lines cutting deep between her eyebrows as we watch Lila through the blinds. Some nights I turn over and find the other side of the bed empty and Ma still waiting at the window for Lila to come home.

Lila isn’t bad, though. She’s just alive in a way that Ma is too tired to remember. It’s like Lila can still hear the rhythm in a salsa on the radio and not just complain about the noise.

“*Bonito*, right?” Mr. Wu tried yet another key and jutted his chin at the rosebushes hanging over the chain-link fence. It had been a warm September, so they were still pushing up blooms. I nodded to be polite, but it didn’t make the place look any better to me. The house looked too quiet. It had no stoop for people to gather on. Nobody was playing out front. And it had those white scrolled bars on the window that scream, *Break-ins happen here!*

Lila circled my waist.

“Only a block away from the school,” she whispered in my ear.

“That’s a selling point?” I asked.

“Okay, maybe not, but at least it’s a short walk.”

I could see Daniel Jones High clearly from the front

door. The school takes up half a block and is painted the pale green of disinfectant. There are grates on the windows and blacktop with a long cement wall covered in drawings and neon tags: *Julius 174. 10-ass-itty. Slinky.* Art and barrio all mixed in.

"Here we are!" With a click and a bow, Mr. Wu finally threw open the door. "Utilities included, too, *señoras.*"

He stared at Lila's butt the whole way up to the second floor.

Nothing deterred Ma. Not the ugly blue rug with the mysterious dark stain that I pointed out. Not the dead roaches turning to dust inside the cabinets. Not Mrs. Boika, a nasty Romanian lady downstairs who stared at us without even saying, *¡Hola, qué tal?* or anything. Not even when I asked her how we would move her scratched-up piano from our place to this. It's an upright Steinway that hasn't been tuned in all the years we've had it, but suddenly I was protective.

"It's not like in the cartoons, you know, where movers lower it out a window," I said. Ma ignored me—was she planning to leave it behind after all these years? I wondered—and said the new apartment was perfect. There was a bus stop right outside the door—and no loud neighbors or slobbering dogs to make a mess of things.

"Those were her exact words," I told Mitzi on the phone. "It's perfect." I was sitting on our fire escape later

that day, miserable. In the summer, Mitzi and I used to paint our nails out here. Now I picked paint chips off the metal and tossed them down.

"Maybe you'll like it better," she said. "You never know."

"Be serious. I'm switching schools in September of sophomore year. The new place has barred windows. I won't know anybody. How is that 'perfect'?"

Silence.

"Are you still there?" I asked.

"Yeah, sorry. At least school just started, right? Anyway, I need to work on this stupid lab report for physics."

I sighed. A five-alarm fire wouldn't get between Mitzi and her homework. Her dad was a doctor in Honduras, even though here he only works in the lab at a clinic. He has plans for Mitzi to be a surgeon. She'll probably like it, though. She's the only kid I knew who didn't make naked Ken and Barbie kiss. Instead, she would amputate their limbs with blunt-edge scissors, their putty-colored little feet lined up on the front stoop.

"What time is it?" she said. Papers shuffled in the background. "¡Ay! I gotta go to practice."

"Practice for what?" I asked.

"I'm playing badminton for school."

"The game with the little net thing? That's a *sport*?"

"Yeah, can you believe it? And I suck."

"So why are you doing it?"

“Why else? Mami wants me to make friends.”

This made us both laugh. Mitzi has always been kind of shy, her mother’s exact opposite. It got really bad when the boys in our class went insta-stupid over Mitzi’s boobs in elementary school. After that, it was me who had to tell the boys to shut their filthy mouths—and ask for the movie tickets and the explanation for the homework, too.

“You coming to Queens soon?” I don’t want to say *I miss you* because she already knows that.

“The first weekend that I don’t have a game. Maybe we can go shopping for your birthday present.”

I couldn’t answer through the tight feeling in my throat.

“Look, Piddy, don’t worry. It’s going to be okay,” Mitzi said before we hung up. “Take it from me. You can’t do anything about moving, anyway, so try to make the best of it. Besides, people always like you. You’re going to kick butt.”

I was already missing Lila as the three of us packed up our old kitchen a week later. I was sitting at the piano bench, plucking at the stuck keys.

“Ay, Clara, tell this kid to stop with the sad face; she’s breaking my heart.” Lila taped newspaper around two plates and kissed my forehead. “Your *mami’s* right. You can’t stay here.” She wiped the lipstick off my skin with her

handkerchief and tucked it back inside her bra. "The whole place is turning to dust."

Ma looked up and frowned at me.

"Piddy, stop that racket and help us. And quit moping. You should be thankful." She yanked tape over a box of pots. "The new apartment's not far, and— did you see?— it even has a yard."

I gave her a stony stare.

"That patch of dirt?"

"It has *roses*," she said. "You can sit outside with a new friend from school and smell their perfume," she continued. "That's good for a young girl."

"Ay, Ma . . ." I muttered.

"'Ay, Ma,' what?" she mimicked.

I sighed.

Ma is always inventing endless things that are "good for a young girl"— which means, specifically, me. Hemming pants. Washing out underwear by hand because "What decent woman puts her private things in a public washer?" Learning to fry chicken so it isn't bloody near the bone. Speaking rudimentary French. Cross-stitching pillows—I kid you not—so I'll know how to stitch my baby's initials into its bibs someday. All sorts of pointless things that are supposed to improve me "for the future."

Too bad I have other plans in mind.

Ma doesn't know it, but I'm going to be a scientist. I

want to work with animals, big ones like elephants, maybe even live halfway across the world. It's weird, I know. There aren't any elephants here in Queens, not even at the zoo. But we have the National Geographic channel, so I know they're smart and they can feel and hear things people can't. They can keep a herd's whole history—all the good and the bad they've ever seen—in their memory. If I told this to Ma, her screams would touch the sky. “*¡Elefantes?*” She'd nag about malaria and the smell of dung I'd never get out from under my nails. She'd ask me what kind of decent girl is interested in elephants. And so on.

It's times like these I wish I were Lila's daughter instead. Not that Ma doesn't love me—or that Lila likes elephants. It's just that Lila doesn't *bother* me. She's never had kids of her own, thank God, so she doesn't have the slightest idea of what's good for me. She doesn't ask me if I've done my homework or where I've been. When Ma works late, we fill up on butter cookies for dinner and watch the good shows that Ma calls trash. If I were Lila's kid, life might actually be fun.

“Forget smelling flowers,” Lila said. “A pretty girl like you? Boys will be sending you roses of your own!” Then she wiggled her eyebrows. “The good news is you'll have your own room. Just think, now you'll have *privacy*. Every sixteen-year-old girl needs that.”

“She's not sixteen yet,” Ma muttered.

"A few weeks . . ." Lila said, winking.

I looked around at the packed boxes and felt my throat go dry. I already hated the new apartment and Daniel Jones High School. I hadn't felt this bad since Mitzi's moving van pulled away from our street.

But I held my tongue. Getting my own room *was* the only shining piece of good news in this whole thing. It meant I wouldn't have to share a sofa bed with Ma, who snores and takes my covers. Still, the "pretty" part was ridiculous. I've never been one of the pretty girls. Mitzi's the good-looking one, all curvy like a guitar. I'm tall and skinny. My eyes are wide set and the color of mud. Joey Halper says I look like a toad, presumably now one with a booty. Sometimes he croaks *ribbit* from his window when he sees me outside and wants to say hello.

"That's right," Ma said. "Your own room. No more lumpy sofa bed." She paused over a bowl with a melted rim. "Maybe now you won't slouch."

Through the window, I could see the empty lot next door and the bowl of milk I had left there that morning. I moved the jade elephant on my chain back and forth nervously. Sometimes the sound of my necklace makes me feel calm.

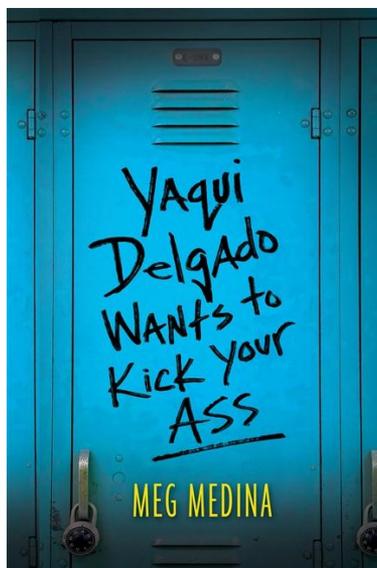
"What's going to happen to the kittens?" I asked. The mother tabby I'd been feeding near the cellar had been roaming with a low belly for days. She'd grown to the size

of a raccoon. The litter would come any day. I thought of what could happen without me: dogs, the cold, rotten kids, even the super with a shovel. He's an idiot that way.

"Cats are wild at heart, *mi amor*. They figure out how to survive." Lila came to the window and closed her hand around my cold fingers. "Now, give me a hug. Good things are waiting for you, Piddy. I promise."

Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass

Meg Medina



Buy online from
an indie bookstore



Buy on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

BARNES & NOBLE
BOOKSELLERS

BUY NOW



CANDLEWICK PRESS

www.candlewick.com