

TAMI CHARLES

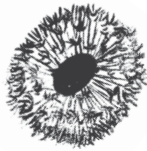
*"Redemption is a heartbeat away."*

—GUADALUPE GARCIA MCCALL,  
AUTHOR OF *THE PURA BELPRÉ*  
AWARD WINNER  
*UNDER THE MESQUITE*

BECOMING  
BEATRIZ



BECOMING  
BEATRIZ



TAMI CHARLES

Charlesbridge  
  
TEEN



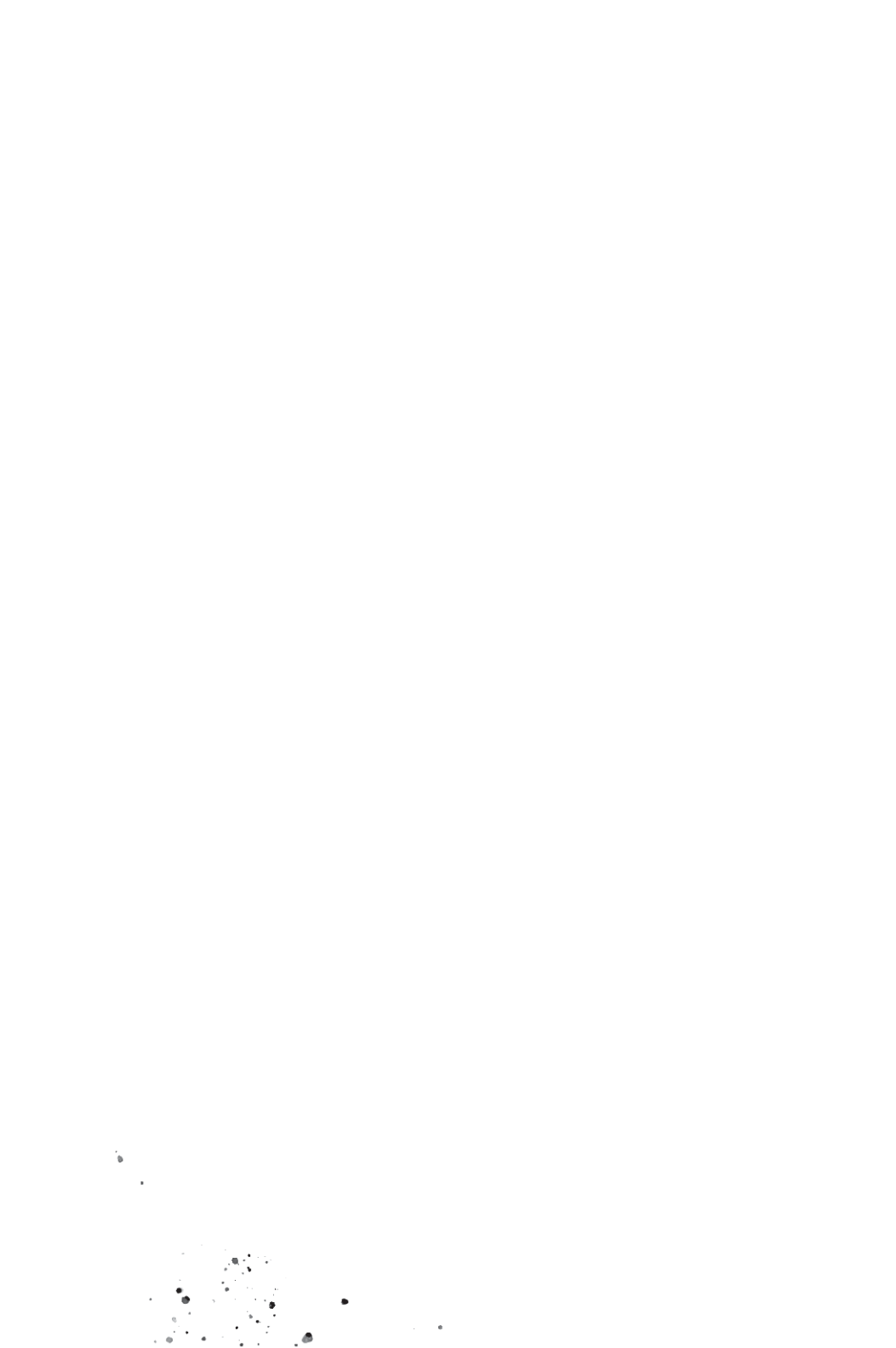
# ACT 1: UNRAVELING



iFAMA!  
QUIERO VIVIR  
PA' SIEMPRE.

-BEATRIZ, AGE 12, 1981

(FIRST GRAFFITI TAG AS A DIABLA)





## FRIDAY, APRIL THIRTEENTH

THEY SAY WHEN YOU see a wishmaker flower, you're supposed to make a wish and blow.

I thrust my body to the ground, press my face to the pavement, and wish away the first gunshot and the panicked faces and screaming voices circling around my 'hood. The wishmaker juts out of a gap in the sidewalk—pays me no attention. Instead it searches the sky for the sun and leaves me realizing this shit's all my fault. I should've let Junito be.

*Crack!* The second shot rings out louder than the first. I still hear the radio from the bodega blasting Héctor Lavoe and Willie Colón's "Todo tiene su final." A minute ago, I'd begged Junito to dance salsa with me. Ignored his warnings to stay in the house today. Pulled him into the rhythm and lost myself in the lyrics—everything has an end.

Ain't this some bull.

*Crack! Crack!* More bullets soar above us, shattering the window of our bodega. Shards of glass land on me. I pant through heavy breath and squinted eyes, screaming my

brother's name. I turn my head and see Junito reach for the Glock in his boot. He aims it at the silver Trans Am and pops off a couple rounds.

It's not cold out, but I shiver. Questions fill me up faster than bullets slice the air. Who ordered this hit? Why does God hate me? Because that's the only explanation I got for him making my birthdate and death date one in the same.

And who made up that stupid wishmaker flower saying anyway? Because whoever did can kiss my nalgas. Twice.

The silver Trans Am comes to a screeching halt in front of the bodega.

More shots.

Who are they? What do they want?

Junito jolts upright, glass falling off of him, and fires off again. I stay on the ground, my chest heaving in and out, tiny pieces of asphalt piercing my cheek.


But then tires skid and smoke against the asphalt before accelerating down Broadway. Just like it happens in the movies. This is the magic of Junito Mendez. No matter what, he always forces the bad guys away. I'd seen it before—but not like this, not this bad, not this close to home.

DQ yells out from the bodega, "We're good in here!"

"Todo bien!" Mami cries out, but I can hear the lie in her voice. On the surface, we're fine. Just a busted store window and some penny-candy buckets with fresh bullet holes. Look a little deeper, though, and you'd see the truth.

Junito stands up and flashes DQ a knowing look. Then he starts to run down the alley toward the empty lots. And even though he told me to stay inside earlier, I follow him. Listening is not my thing apparently. The farther I run, the quieter the music gets.





“Don’t worry. They’re gone.” I can barely get the words out from trying to keep up.

Junito whips his head around fast, the anger in his eyes stabbing right through me.

“What are you doing? I told you to stay back!” His voice is untamed.

“Why didn’t *you* stay?” My voice matches his now.

We finally stop running and tuck ourselves against the brick wall of the abandoned alley, positioned between two buildings.

“I don’t need to be on the scene when the police show up, that’s why. Por dios, you don’t listen!” Junito pulls two loose bricks from the bottom of the wall, wipes the Glock clean, and tries to hide it in the empty space. He can’t make it fit.

In the distance, I hear the faint sound of sirens, see Junito frantically searching his pockets.

“¡Carajo!” he curses.

“Why were they coming for you, Junito? Tell me right now!” I demand.

In the past, we’ve had one, maybe two gangs outside of Newark try to claim our spot. Never worked though. Junito was a force like that. Either you bowed down or you caught the heat.

Junito finds the switchblade in his boot and starts pounding out another brick like mad. “Not today, Beatriz. All you gotta know is I ain’t letting nobody take over what I built. And sometimes you gotta send a message to let people know that.”

Translation: Something went down last night and Junito started a war.

“Oh yeah? And if these pendejos don’t back down like the others? What then?” My voice loses its balance.

Junito finally gets the brick loose and jams the gun inside. “You ain’t gotta worry about that.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me in real slow. Together, we take turns breathing. Inhala, exhala. Just like Mami always says to calm us down.

“Let’s wait a couple more minutes before we go back, and when five-o starts asking questions, let me do the talking,” Junito says. “Everything will be fine.”

I want to believe Junito. That it’ll be okay.

“Let’s talk about something else,” Junito insists.

I lift my face to the midmorning sky, picture myself flying through those clouds. “You ever wonder what you could be outside of this place?”


Junito fixes his eyes real hard on the ground. I know this ain’t no kind of life for us. He knows it too. But what choice do we have? Go back to being dirt poor, like we were when we first got here? Or worse, return to Aguadilla? Even if I wanted us to go back to the island, I already know what his answer would be. *Hell no. There’s a monster waiting for us there.*

“I’d start fresh . . . in San Francisco.” Junito hesitates before he says the last part.

I feel a sharp twinge in my stomach. Because deep down I know who he would go there for. The infamous TJ Martin.

“Anyway, that ain’t possible right now.” Junito adds the switchblade to the hole and slips the first brick in.

A familiar voice creeps inside my head. The one that repeats over and over again that I’m the reason Junito can’t



live the way he wants. But I won't carry that load all by myself. Papi's the first to blame. Then me. And the Diablos.

I look at my watch. The tick of each second feels like an eternity. I'd spent the morning practicing the dance for my quinceañera and then dodging bullets. Tonight I would have to pretend that none of this ever happened.

"There's gonna come a day when we won't have to do this no more, Junito. One day I'll be a professional dancer and make enough money to buy Mami one of those big houses over in Vailsburg or Mount Vernon. Maybe even away from Jersey." I face him square on.

But Junito laughs, pointing the second brick my way. "What I tell you about watching that stupid show *Fame*? That's television, pipe-dream stuff. This is reality."

Anger builds up inside. "Whatever, Junito!"

"When you live in a city where cocaine is king, dancing ain't gonna pay the bills." He crawls to the edge of the building and takes a peek down the alley.

Junito doesn't know what he's talking about. Right there in the midst of the abandoned buildings tagged with my first graffiti—*Fame, I'm gonna live forever*—in the empty field where my dancing dreams once bloomed, I envision a life far away from this place.

I don't notice there's someone behind me. Only hear the click of a gun and feel the hot metal kissing the back of my head.

"Looks like we get a two-for-one today." His accent sounds like he's from Nigeria or something, mixed with French too.

I suck in air, turn around, and see a yellow-scarfed face and two eyes burning like a distant sun.

Junito springs up. His legs take flight, arms like wings, he throws the brick in his hand at homeboy, knocking the gun out of his hand. The sickening sounds of cracked noses and hard blows to the gut ring over and over. Junito bobs to the right, the dude weaves to the left. And there I sit, staring at the dude's gun a few feet away from me and Junito's neatly tucked in the wall. Hypnotized by the sounds and the fiery eyes in them both, an inner voice cries out: *Get the hell up, Beatriz. Grab a gun. Any gun.*


My wrist turns limp as I dig into the hole, wrap my fingers around the trigger, and rise up to finish him off.

Before I can do anything, homeboy gives me a swift punch to my right cheek, the gun tumbling out of my hand. The crunch of my jawbone is like a bomb going off inside of me. The whole universe spins, and I pull out the blade I keep hidden inside my left cheek.

Homeboy comes in for the double hit, his fist like heavy metal against my face.

My hand slips, and the blade slices through the guy's bandana not even a full inch. He screams as the bandana falls to the ground, revealing a thick goatee and a holy cross symbol tattooed on his neck. A single red drop of blood dances through his beard and lands on his shirt.

"Oh, you messed up now," he says, grasping a chunk of my hair in his oversized hands. Junito flies in for an uppercut, but instead catches a foot to the gut that sends him airborne. I punch and punch at the air, at this messed-up life, and at homeboy until I'm out of breath. But he just lifts me from the ground and throws me headfirst against the Dumpster. My back arches in slow motion until it crashes against the asphalt. I lie there, unmoving.



He stomps his foot against my jaw again, and my whole world goes black.

Behind closed eyes, I can hear the sound of my heart-beat pulsing through my head, feel the release of his foot. Hear the pounding, blow by blow, as Junito continues the fight.

He'll get to his gun, or even homeboy's, and finish the job. Three years as a Diabla and my body count is still zero. I've never even touched a gun until now. The small blade hidden in my mouth has always been my only weapon. And Junito wants to keep it that way.

Any second now and this will be all over. Junito and I will run home and put on the biggest show for the police.

*Officer: Where were you during the drive-by, young man?*

*Junito: Officer, my sister and I were taking a stroll in the neighborhood. We weren't even here.*

I'll get ready for my quinceañera, because turning fifteen is a big deal. Go with Mami to pick up Abuela from the airport. Let them both have their way with me. Do my hair, fluff my dress, all that proper "señorita" nonsense. That'll make Mami happy. I mean, the woman sold her other bodegas to pull off this expensive-behind, wannabe wedding.

A single shot rings out. The blast courses through my entire body, seems to echo all throughout Grafton and Broadway like an explosion thundering in the sky. I can't move. It's like someone presses pause on the entire city of Newark. The music, the sirens, the cars—they all disappear.

But when the darkness of my mind clears, and I open

my eyes, it's Junito who I see lying on the ground, shaking uncontrollably, hands pressed against his chest—blood erupting like a busted fire hydrant in the dead of July. I beg my legs to move, to get up and push me toward Junito, but homeboy's not done with me. He locks his rock-hard boot on my shoulder, points the gun at the space between my eyes. I lie there helpless, thunder moving through me as I watch Junito bleed and bleed.

"This is for Gaston. Got that, muchacha?" He leans down into my face and the heat of his breath finds its way to my skin.

Confusion floods in, wild and unforgiving. *Who the hell is Gaston?*


"Just hurry up and get it over with." He's going to shoot me too. Keep my eyes on the clouds. God's up there, waiting for me. Even though I'm pissed at him right now. I count down the seconds until I see the white light: *Five . . . four . . . three . . .*

Before I can reach *two*, homeboy leans down again and puts his lips close enough to brush against my earlobe. Drops of his blood fall on my shoulder. He whispers: "Nou pap janm bliye."

*What did he just say?*

I hear a car and turn my head. At the end of the alley, the silver Trans Am screeches to a halt, and the passenger door flies open.

He releases his foothold, grabs his bandana off the ground, and runs away, with his gun in his right hand and Junito's in his left. When he gets to the car, he does the strangest thing. He turns around, flails his arms out like wings, takes a bow, and yells out, "You talk? We'll be back."



I lock eyes with the person driving the car. Study the image from a distance. It's a girl. Dark sunglasses cover her eyes. Mounds and mounds of blonde dreadlocks spill out from her bandana. Another yellow bandana covers her mouth. She pulls it down, puckers her fire-red lips, and blows a kiss. Homeboy hops in, and they speed off under a sun-filled sky.

My legs finally give me permission to move. I roll over, grab my stomach, and vomit what feels like everything I've ever eaten for the past fifteen years.

"Get up, Junito!" It hurts to say each word. I wipe the blood from my mouth with the sleeve of my shirt and run toward my brother.

"¡Ayúdenlo!" I scream, but my jaw is locking.

The sirens grow louder, closer. I press a hand hard on Junito's chest, begging him to hold on just a little longer.

"They're coming. I hear them." More pain fires up in my jaw.

"I'll . . . be . . . okay. Don't . . . leave . . . Diablos . . ." I cover his lips before he can finish his sentence.

"Diabla for life!" I'm sobbing now. "Te lo juro."

Junito stops shaking, and I scream, "Don't leave me!" over and over again. Out of nowhere, the cops come running down the alley, guns drawn, mouths moving in slow motion.

My ears become soundproof. All I see is them gesturing for me to lie on the ground. Like a dog. Hands behind my head. Feet together. Don't move. Be still. But I move uncontrollably. One cop jumps on top of me. Then another. I can't breathe. Half my face is pressed into the grass. I wonder if Junito's gone already. If he sees the

white light, like I do, coming down from the sky. Then I feel more hands. Damn near fifty of them, exploring my body, searching for something, anything, to connect the dots. My lips position themselves to speak. One final crack in my jaw kills all of my words.

“We need to check the kid’s pulse!” someone yells.

*Yes, save him please! Hurry!* I plead inside my head.

Someone tosses me on a gurney. Places two fingers on my wrist and starts counting. Slaps a mask on my face. Rolls me toward a flashing swirl of red, white, and blue. Doors shut. Engine roars. Tires screech. Last thing I see out the back window is Junito lying in the field like some kind of science project.





## CONVERSATIONS WITH FIVE-O

"MY NAME IS DETECTIVE Osario and this is my partner, Detective Green. How are you feeling today?"

*Como mierda*, I curse in my head. What day is it? Where am I? All I see are white walls, white blinds, and Mami standing by a door too far for me to reach. There are two faces staring back at me, one in particular too close to my own. I close my eyes, wishing the moment away, but an image I'll never forget appears. Dark skin, sliced chin dripping with blood, yellow bandana curtseying its way to the asphalt. That crooked smile. And those words. . . . What were they again? New pop blay?

The memory sends electric bolts through every part of my body. The room tilts back and forth, side to side, until the dude's face and his words melt away, leaving behind Detective Osario speaking at a snail's pace.

"¿Cómo te sientes, Beatriz?"

What does this guy want from me? What's going on? I move my head frantically, searching for Junito, each twist

of my neck sending panic through my body. My hands are covered in tubes connected to machines that beep, beep, beep.

Mami stands at the door, hands pressed against tear-stained cheeks, whispering “Cálmate, mi amor. Inhala, exhala.”

The guy wants to know how I’m feeling? Certainly not calm, like Mami’s telling me to be. Beat down to the ground. That’s what I got going on inside. I start to say that until I realize that my teeth won’t separate.

“It’s okay,” the other guy, Detective Green, says. “You’re at Clara Maass Hospital. You sustained a pretty bad injury to your jaw, so the doctors had to wire your mouth shut.”

“We waited a few days, but the doctors say you should be able to speak by now, even with your jaw wired,” the first cop adds.

My breathing speeds up. I can feel my heart hitting my chest with a mean uppercut.

“Do you have any idea who did this to you . . . and your brother?” They’re both talking now. One starts, the other finishes.

My lips are dry. So very dry. Any second, they are gonna crack. Fall off. And I’ll become lipless. Lipless Beatriz.

“Where . . . is . . . Junito?” I don’t recognize my own voice, muffled behind sealed teeth and ready-to-fall-off lips.

The detectives look at each other a moment too long, before Detective Osario grabs a chair and pulls it to the bed I’m trapped in. Pain stabs me in the jaw the second I inhale a little too deep.

“One thing at a time, Beatriz. Can you give us a description of the car or perhaps the assailant who attacked you?” he asks.

My eyes close. The silver Trans Am appears, the sound of bullets overpowering the music, the fire in that dude’s eyes as he pounced on Junito, and then there was her. And the black smoke left behind as homegirl drove the car down the alley and up Broadway.

“Beatriz?”

My eyes fly open. I shake my head no, over and over again, until the pain causes a scream to explode from my gut. “I ain’t seen nothing!” I yell.

But I’m pretty sure it sounds more like *gabhhhhhhhh!*

Mami comes running to my bedside.

“That’s it! Now you heard her!” Each word crashes into the next. “Haven’t we been through enough? If you don’t mind, I need to go to the ICU and check on my son.”

*Wait. Junito’s here? Get these tubes off of me! I want to see my brother!*

My eyes start to roll backward. Just then I hear the sound of familiar footsteps. Loud, swishy, nerve-shattering. It’s been years since I’ve heard them, but I remember like it was yesterday.

“Ahora no es un buen momento.” That’s my abuela. She’s here and already kicking people out. Typical.

Everything is a blur. We were supposed to pick her up from the airport in the afternoon. But then . . . the music . . . and the shots . . . and the sirens.

“I understand, Señora Vento,” Detective Osario says, “but we do have reason to believe that this shooting is gang related.”

Abuela clutches her rosary. “No mi nietos, no, no. Son niños buenos.”

My stomach churns at the thought of Abuela believing we are those same good kids skipping rope and singing songs back in Aguadilla.

“We’d like to gather information from Beatriz about Junito and his alleged gang involvement so we can prosecute whoever did this,” Detective Green adds.

“My . . . son . . . is . . . not . . . some . . . gangbanger!” Mami raises her voice.

I just want to rip these tubes off of me. Hold Mami. Tell her I’m sorry. That Junito is too. And that this won’t happen again because Junito will take care of everything. He always does.


Abuela steps to Detective Osario. She’s so close, and he towers over all four foot eleven of her. “¿Y qué va pasar si vuelven? ¿Nos van a proteger?”

My grandmother, Liliana Vento, has always been the feistiest lady in Aguadilla. The one who not only talked with her mouth, but also with a chancleta in her hand. But here, in this moment, in front of these suited-up policemen, she turns into someone I don’t recognize. These pendejos don’t care about protecting us, nor about the other gang that put us up in here.

They just grab their things and walk past Abuela and that puppy-dog look on her face.

Detective Osario stops short at the door. “You know, Beatriz, someone is gonna go down for this. It’s unfortunate that you didn’t see anything.”

It’s hard to look tough when you’re covered in hospital tubes. That don’t stop me from trying though. I pucker



my lips, roll my eyes, and remember the code: *Never snitch*. I saw nothing. Don't want to talk about one piece of that day, especially homeboy's promise that he'd come back if I opened my mouth. Thinking about it is hard enough. Especially those other words he whispered: new pop blay. Soon as I bust outta this joint, I'll write them down. Junito and I will find out what the hell they mean. 'Cause somebody put a hit out on my brother and there ain't a damn thing those cops can do about it. But me and Junito will.

As the detectives leave the room, more footsteps find their way in. Three doctors. Arms folded. Lips sagging. Eyes looking like they ain't slept in days.

"May we have a word with you privately, Mrs. Mendez?"

## 14 arrested, 1 charged with murder

NEWARK, New Jersey

By: Keesha Lester

On Friday, April 13, alleged leader of the Latin Diablos gang, Juan "Junito" Mendez, was gunned down behind his storefront apartment in the Grafton Projects area of Newark. He died of his injuries just two days later at Clara Maass Hospital. Police have announced Clemenceau "Soukie" Mondesir, of the Macoute gang, as their prime suspect in Mendez's murder. Police believe that Mondesir may have had an accomplice, though no further arrests have been made.

After surveilling the Macoutes' activity for several weeks, Newark police raided an abandoned warehouse in the South Ward. At the scene, thirteen additional members of the Macoutes were found with a collection of firearms, marijuana, and two kilograms of heroin, which holds a street value of \$10 million. Further undiscovered evidence was discovered, linking Mondesir to the death of Mendez.

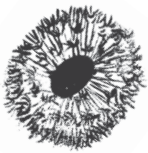
Essex County Sheriff David D'Alessio has confirmed an initial appearance in court scheduled for Monday, April 23. Two of the 14 people arrested, Clemenceau Mondesir included, are Elizabeth, New Jersey, residents and suppliers of narcotics. Police were unable to link Mendez to the drugs or the gang itself. The act of violence seems to have been unsolicited.

The Macoute gang appears to be a copycat of the Tonton Macoute, a military regime created by François Duvalier, former president of Haiti. Under Duvalier's control, the Tonton Macoute were notorious for violence, corruption, and human rights violations.

Authorities confirm that the local New Jersey gang is composed of young Haitian immigrants, operating mainly in Elizabeth, East Orange, and most recently, the South Ward of Newark.

During the initial appearance, the judge will announce the charges against the defendants: heroin and cocaine possession with intent to sell and distribute, which carries a sentence of up to 25 years, along with second degree felony possession of an unlicensed weapon, which carries a ten-year sentence. With an additional charge of murder, Mondesir also faces 25 to life.

Given the severity of the charges, it is likely that bail will be denied for all defendants. City police will continue to crack down on gang and drug activity.



## FAST FORWARD: SEPTEMBER THE FOURTH

I'VE GOTTEN REAL GOOD at communicating with Mami. It's her eyes that tell her story. Those dull, gray eyes used to be green. Funny how the color of sadness comes in different shades.

"You gonna miss me today?" I ask as I brush Mami's teeth for her.

She looks at me frantically, wordlessly, her spine curving into a deep C.


"Inhala, exhala, Mami."

Breathing deep, she settles on staring at the floor.

"School's starting back up. But don't worry, I'll be here as much as I can," I say to reassure her.

I run a hot bath for her and brush her salt-and-pepper hair. Once upon a time, Mami's hair was dark as midnight and so long it reached her elbows. Now the bristles of the brush pull all two inches of her hair straight, before it springs back to super-short curls again. Mami hacked it off not long





after they lowered Junito into the ground. That was the last day she found a pair of scissors in the house. Abuela made sure of it.

I dry Mami off, put a clean bata on her—a yellow house dress with blue flowers. I slip into the kitchen, away from Mami’s eyes. Place the tiny blade inside my cheek. *Protection, always.* Junito’s voice swirls inside my head, as fresh as the day he taught me to carry the blade when I was twelve.

I stuff my pockets, bra, and backpack with nickel bags of reefer. Sweat builds on the palms of my hands. *Time to start thinking 'bout getting back in the game, princesa.* Such an easy thing to say when you’re playing the hero. And that’s what DQ’s been doing, five months strong. Making runs, selling dope, holding meetings at his spot, while I block that day out, make peace that the Macoutes are in lockup, and wait for the storm to pass.

It never did.

DQ wasn’t in the empty lots. He didn’t see Junito’s begging eyes. Didn’t hear that dude’s threat. That was all for me.

I return to the living room to help Mami walk down the stairs to the bodega. Each step down is slow, like she’s not sure if she can make the next one. By the time we finally reach the first floor, Abuela yells, “¡Buenos días, Mirta!”

Mami doesn’t acknowledge her.

Eyes fixed on the door, Mami grabs her milk crate and zombie-walks straight toward the exit. There she’ll sit all day, eyes staring at the ground, the very last place she saw Junito standing. She hopes and prays for him to come back to her, I think.

My stomach starts rumbling louder than I care it to.

“Maybe I’ll skip school today?” I say aloud to no one in particular.

The cashier, Ms. Geraldine, makes a low moaning sound, like she wants to give her two cents. She stays quiet, which is good because one nosy grandmother is about all I can handle.

“¡Escúchame, Beatriz!” Abuela screams from the back of the bodega. She continues in Spanish. “You’re going and that’s it. It’s time to live again.”

The door to the bodega flies open. My girls Julicza and Maricela diva-stroll in like they’re ready to walk the runway.

“First day, nenas!” Maricela shouts her way through the candy aisle, while Julicza picks up a couple of boxes of Lemonheads and sticks them straight in her pocket without paying.

Some things never change.

“Yo, you want us to wait for you while you get ready?” Maricela smacks on a piece of gum.

“And, girl, when you gonna get a touch-up?” Julicza grabs a chunk of my hair. “I never seen you with roots this nappy.”

Flames shoot up and down my body. My crew is looking fresh to death. Meanwhile I’m rocking baggy overalls, a wrinkled-up T-shirt, and hair that’s begging me to hit it with a relaxer.

“I’ll just roll in, set everybody up, and book it before first period,” I say quietly so Ms. Geraldine and Abuela can’t hear me.

Maricela scrunches up her face like I must be crazy, stepping up on the first day of school looking homeless.

Usually all three of us go shopping together in downtown Newark a few weeks before school starts. Every year, we'd come home stacked—fresh Adidas, Guess jeans, T-shirts, and bamboo earrings with our name in them, at least two pairs. All that and then some, courtesy of that good ole Diablo cash flow. For the past few months, though, the cops had a crackdown on the whole city. DQ kept the operation going, but made sure the Diablos kept a low profile. Like clockwork, DQ hit me off with a cut, even though I did nothing to deserve one cent. Left me to grieve the first few months. Told me to come back when I'm ready.

Today's the day.

"You look just *fine*, nena." Maricela couldn't lie straight if somebody paid her.

"Word." Julicza tries to make it seem true, but I know better.

I scan the floor, searching for a different excuse. Like Mami's got a doctor's appointment or something, which would just add to the pack of lies because everybody in the 'hood knows that Mirta Mendez lost her shit on Friday the thirteenth and is way beyond repair.

My hair swells around my face. Maricela pulls a chunk of it back and sticks it behind my ear. It refuses and pops back into place.

"Your face is starting to look like it used to," she says.

This time I want to believe her. But deep down I know I am the opposite of what I looked like when I was the flyest girl in eighth grade. Ever since homeboy bashed my cheek in, I stopped hoping the day would come where I'd look like my old self. So I let my hair grow thicker, longer

than it's ever been before, in an effort to hide the ugliness that remains.

"Here, put these on." Julicza takes the gold bangles off her wrist. "They're only fourteen karat gold, but they'll do."

"Ooh, and how about this?" Maricela reaches in her backpack for a red bandana to pull half of my hair into a ponytail. The other half falls just where I need it to.

"There. Now you look fresh to death. I think we're ready to show Barringer High who's in charge!" Julicza squeals.

I muster up a weak smile.

"We saw your mami outside." Maricela grabs a grape soda and heads to Ms. Geraldine to actually pay for it.

"Did she say anything to you guys?" Hope swells in my chest for a split second.

"Nah. She didn't even look up at us when we talked to her."

And just like that, my spirit sinks. I swear I wanna stay home so bad, but then I hear Junito's voice in my head. *It's the first day of school. Showtime.*

After the big Macoutes drug bust, cops were all up in our face, looking for a reason to get us too. They never found a solid piece of evidence. DQ stepped up and handled that.

Abuela flicks on the radio, startling me out of my thoughts. The last thing I want to hear right now is music, especially salsa.

"Abuela, turn the radio off and just play your tele-novelas," I tell her.

But with the music booming and the empanada fryer bubbling so loudly, she can barely hear me.

“¿Qué dices, Beatriz?” Abuela yells over the trumpet.

I storm to the mini-kitchen located behind the register. “I said no music, por favor. Watch your telenovelas. They’re quieter, and you can keep an eye on Mami that way.”

Abuela brushes her hand on my cheek, smiles, and then gives me two good whacks upside the head.

“¡Ay! What was that for?” I rub my head.

Abuela turns down the radio. “Uno pa’ tu amiga. La cubana que nunca paga. Y otra porque tu la deja.”

She’s had enough of Julicza always “forgetting” to pay for her stuff, and me letting her get away with it.

“Vete a estudiar.” Abuela shoos me off to school.

Outside DQ is glued to the wall of the bodega, eyes fixed on Mami. Paco and Fredito are already cornered up nearby, on Broadway at Grafton and Halleck.

“Yo, Beatriz, you know what to do today, right?” DQ asks, as though I’ve already forgotten. Three years deep in the gang and even though Junito’s not here, I still remember everything he taught me. But to be sure, DQ and I met last night to go over the plan.

“Don’t you worry,” I tell him. “I’m ready.”

The sky turns a little cloudy just as the 25 bus pulls up and the doors screech open.

Maricela and Julicza walk on ahead of me.

“Yo, Beatriz!” DQ calls out just as I place my foot on the first step. “You packin’, right?”

I pat my left cheek to show him I’ll be just fine. I still haven’t stepped up to packing a Glock—Junito would’ve never approved anyway. For now, a blade tucked inside my cheek will be enough to use on anybody who tries to step. Doubt anyone will, though.

I give my student ticket to the bus driver. Maricela, Julicza, and I find some seats in the back of the bus. The ride to Barringer isn't that long, but it's definitely too far to walk. Next year when I turn sixteen, I'll be able to drive. I'll get a car—a Pontiac Sunbird, and anything older than 1984 won't do. Me and my girls will ride to school in style.

Someone is playing music in the front of the bus. Homeboy's got a boom box propped on his shoulder. "Jam on It" comes on, and the whole bus comes alive. Everybody's popping to the beat. Even the old abuela in the middle row is getting down.

"Come on, muchacha, you know this song is fly." Julicza grabs my hand and tries to get me to dance, but I don't budge.

"Aw, man, you used to go berserk on the dance floor, Beatriz. I miss that." Maricela starts doing the snake in her seat.

Key words: *used to*.

I used to feel rhythm in every move I made. But these days, I just beg for it to go away. To leave me alone. Because the last thing I remember is the music and dancing with my brother, followed by running and gunshots. So, no. There ain't gonna be no more dancing.

And no matter how fresh that beat is (because, ¡ay Dios mío!, it really is), it'll never bring Junito back.

We hop off the bus and start walking down Park Avenue toward Clifton Street. The Cathedral Basilica towers over the sea of students as we move toward the school.

Barringer High. Population: fifteen hundred students, eighty-four teachers, and six security guards.

Translation? A lot of potential customers.

The back of the school is located on a dead-end street, and the rest of it takes up at least three blocks. It's packed when we finally get there, and just as DQ schooled me, it's easy to figure out who's who. The freshmen are all huddled by the Barringer signs waaay down the block, like they're scared as hell to even look at any of the older kids. They're probably realizing that eighth grade is long behind them and that their big-dawg middle-school status is over. The sophomores are a little farther up, huddled by the blue auditorium doors, probably happy they're not the small fish in the big pond anymore.

The juniors and seniors are sort of together. Already looking like they're over it, and the bell ain't even ring yet.

Time to get busy.

I scan the crowd, looking for my runners. Junito made sure I knew who they all were last year when I was in eighth grade. The rules are always clear. Every grade needs a boy and a girl. They share the responsibility of making sure orders are taken and distributed. Me? Stay away from the product once it's transferred. Keep my nose and hands clean. Once the runners get the product, it's their job to sell it. All of it . . . or face the consequences. Fridays are meetings, held in an empty storage room beneath our bodega. Take attendance. Drop your load. Me and DQ take our cut. Divvy up the funds. Set up the next round of sales. Meeting adjourned.

Repeat.

Repeat.

David "Mooki" Sanchez is my top pick for the freshman class. He's been down with me since sixth grade.

Maricela was more than happy to volunteer to cover ninth grade with him. But I know that has more to do with getting David's attention than actually being of any help.

"What's up, Beatriz? Good to see you." David gives me the signature Diablo handshake, and I slip five nickel bags in his pocket. To some, it might look like I'm grabbing his junk. But me and him know the deal.

For the sophomore class, Nilda Perez and Juan Diaz keep their spots from last year. They notice me before I even see them. They walk over, give me a handshake, and the deal is done.

Two grades down. Two to go.

The junior class was supposed to have Victoriano Lopez and Damarys Novaro as the runners, but last year Victor took a hit for Junito and got locked up for the next four years. Never snitched. Never said a word about our operation. A real soldier. And Damarys got pregnant by Victor right before he went in. Every Diablo knows there's only three ways to get out of the gang: death, get a beatdown that leaves you barely able to walk, or, if you're a girl, get pregnant. Needless to say, I was gonna have to recruit two new runners for the junior class.

Tony Pedros is our top seller at Barringer. Has been since he first got here his freshman year. The thing about Tony is that if you look at him, you'd never know that he's a dealer. B-plus student. Captain of the football team. He's got this whole existence outside the Diablos. And because Junito always thought he had a chance to get drafted in the NFL, Tony's literally the only Diablo that got a pass—didn't have to put as much time in with the gang so he'd have room for sports.



Tony seeks me out in the crowd. Valerie Reyes follows behind him. She's keeping her spot alongside Tony as female runner this year for the senior class.

"Glad to see you're back in the game, princesa," Tony whispers in my ear as he hugs me close. He smells of soap and Airheads and hunger. But that hunger won't last for long. While I'm wrapped in his arms, I weasel my hand through my sweatshirt and up to my bra. Nice and smooth. No one even notices. I slip enough bags in his pocket for him to split with Valerie.

"How you feeling, girl?" Valerie asks, with real concern in her eyes.

I shrug my shoulders and look around at the crowd.

"I'm maintaining. Pero oye, no Junito talk. I'm good. Trust me." My words are a Band-Aid over a still-open wound.

Just as the bell rings, I can sense a pair of eyes hawking me from the direction of the auditorium doors. When I turn, I see some tall dude with dark brown skin and a curly black 'fro. He's dressed in khakis, a collared shirt, a bow tie, and the shiniest shoes ever. The look on his face screams, "I'm new here. Please be my friend."

*Seriously, who wears a bow tie to school?*

Swarms of students whiz by, but he stays standing there. And there I am, like an idiot, staring and standing too, when I should be moving. His gaze is a magnet. He smiles at me, and I shoot my eyes straight to the ground. Nosy Julicza notices immediately and just has to give her little two cents.

"Yo, who's that guy checking you out?" She tickles me in the ribs, and I hunch over to stop from laughing.

But when I straighten up to look at him again, he's already disappeared into the sea of students bum-rushing their way through the doors.