

MELISSA DE LA CRUZ

Something  
in  
Between

*seventeen* FICTION  
FROM HARLEQUIN TEEN



# *tiger cub*

Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you  
and I especially, are descended from immigrants and  
revolutionists.

—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT



# 1

The truth is, immigrants tend to be more American than  
people born here.

—CHUCK PALAHNIUK, *CHOKE*

FIRST YOU HAVE to hollow out. Suck your belly button back against your spine. Pull up toward your rib cage. Maintain eye contact. Remember to breathe. Feel your muscles tighten. Make yourself compact. Lift up. Fly. Attitude is everything. Believe you can do that stunt. Stay tight. Smile. Keep everything together as you're twisting through the air. Trust yourself. Trust your team. Let doubt creep in and you'll fall—plus, you'll let down the whole squad, and that's the worst thing you can do as cheer captain, other than bossing everyone around like an aggro queen bee.

There's no one more intense than a cheerleader—although according to every Hollywood movie ever made, we're a bunch of ditzy, boy-crazy backstabbers. *As if.*

Don't they get it? Cheerleaders are part of a team, and a good team trusts each other. Because the only thing stopping you from cracking your head open on the gym floor is your teammates.

Cheer makes you tough.

Loyal.

Strong.

“Hit. Hit. Hit. Pull!” Coach Davis shouts, her voice echoing against the gym walls. We jump three times in a row, extending our arms and legs into perfect toe touches, then tuck, flipping backward onto the mats.

Everyone sticks the tuck except for Kayla. She’s been struggling with her tumbling even though she used to be one of the best tumblers on the team. Her mind has been somewhere else for a while, worried about her parents, who aren’t getting along too well. I make a mental note to ask her how she’s doing after practice, maybe offer to help her brush up on some moves before she gets put on probation or kicked off the squad. She’s my best friend, but we haven’t hung out much since I’ve been studying for midterms and trying to get my college applications done.

“Keep your feet together, Santos,” Coach barks at me. “They’re wobbling on your landing.”

I nod even though I’m annoyed that she singled me out and didn’t say anything to Kayla. I know Coach is bringing me down a notch on purpose. She doesn’t want me to end up with an oversize ego. That’s why I got voted captain in the first place—I know you have to sacrifice yourself for the team, for the stunt, or else everything falls apart like a crumbling pyramid.

Sometimes the other girls tease me. *You’re so perfect, Jasmine. You do everything right. You were junior class president. Cheer captain. Honor Roll. Volunteering. Don’t you ever get tired?*

*Never*, I say with a smile. Except the truth is I’m *always* tired, but I can never admit it, not to my friends, especially not to my family.

“Let’s run through the routine until the end of practice,” Coach orders. She walks over to the sound system to start the music.

Most of the girls start taking their positions, but Emily crosses her arms. “I’m *exhausted*. I don’t know if I can do this anymore.” Her cheeks are flaming red on her Irish complexion.

“Don’t be a drama queen,” Deandra says, whipping her dark braids like the queen of the Nile. She looks like Halle Berry, but prettier with gorgeous naturally thick eyelashes. “You’re only tired because you stayed up texting Brandon all night.”

“He likes my texts.” Emily grins. She raises one eyebrow like she’s holding on to a juicy secret. “Creative emojis.”

I tell them to hush. It’s my senior year and last chance to win at Nationals. If we want to win this time, the whole team has to be serious about practice. We don’t have any time not to be on point.

“Positions!” I yell out.

Coach nods and I count down to begin the routine.

*“Five, six, seven, eight!”*

Music blasts from the speakers.

Our routine begins with high-intensity tumbling. We sprint across the mats, propelling our bodies through the air, hitting our handsprings, layouts, and tucks right on the beat. The girls are getting even more pumped as they move into formation for the flyer stunts. I step up onto my bases, let them propel me up into a barrel roll, and fall back into their cradle. The stunts are getting more and more complex and one of our flyers loses her balance during a dismount on a pyramid, smacking against her back spotter and sending her to the ground. The bases help the spotter back up.

Coach stops the mix. She’s frowning.

“We got this! Come on, ladies!” I shout. “Again from the beginning!”

We practice our routine over and over until all of the fly-

ers are hitting their stunts. Our muscles ache and our arms are slick with sweat, but the better we get, the more pumped we are, so by the end of practice everyone is cheering louder, staying tighter, and flying higher.

That's more like it.

We're about to go through our last run when Mrs. Garcia pushes through the swing doors and power walks toward us. Her scuffed pleather heels thump against the wood floors. Weird. What's the college counselor doing at cheer practice? Everyone else must have noticed her too, because they're all chatting and whispering instead of getting into their positions.

Coach catches her eye and turns to us. "Ladies! Listen up. I want you to pair up and practice your back walkovers, back tucks, then cool down with stretches and splits, holding each side for thirty seconds each. Spot for each other. Start slow. Keep them controlled."

As she joins Mrs. Garcia, I pair up with Kayla and help her slowly ease into a backbend. She tries to kick up with her foot, but can't catch the momentum, so I help guide her through the move.

Kayla Paredes is curvy, with a tiny waist, curly dark hair and a quick smile. Boys have been worshipping at her feet since we were twelve, but she tires of them easily. She's fifth-generation Mexican American, which means she learned Spanish in class just like I did.

"Movie night on Friday?" she asks. "My house?"

I'm about to say no, I have to study, but it's been ages and we need to catch up. "Perfect," I tell her. "I'll have to clear it with my mom, but it should be okay. Let's make chocolate-chip cookies."

"With extra chocolate chips." Kayla grins. After a couple

minutes, Coach calls out for me. “Santos! Mrs. Garcia needs a word with you.”

Me? Is something wrong? Uncertainty creeps into my stomach. It’s October and I’ve been trying to narrow down my list of colleges. Did I miss an early application deadline? I’ve been going to Mrs. Garcia’s office every couple of weeks since junior year to make sure I’m on track. Could she have forgotten to tell me something important?

I help Kayla up before walking over, trying not to look too worried. Coach winks at me as she passes by on her way back to the group, and I’m relieved. This can only mean something good.

“I have something special for you,” Mrs. Garcia says as she hands me an envelope. She folds her arms, a slight smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

My heart begins to beat when I see a fancy logo printed in official navy blue ink on the top right corner: *United States National Scholarship Program, Department of Education*. Somehow, I know I’m holding my future in my hands. The one I’ve worked so hard for. The one my parents have dreamed of ever since we moved here from the Philippines when I was only nine years old. Danny was a toddler and Isko was still a newborn. I remember holding Danny’s hand on the plane while my mom cradled Isko on her lap as the plane rushed down the runway, lifting off toward America.

I wrote about it in my application essay, how one of my earliest memories is of looking out the window in our first house in California, at the bright lights and the stark silhouettes of palm trees, and how different it was from the view of the green and wet mountains in our house in Antipolo, where it was always muggy and raining, and we often kept the mosquito screens closed. I’ve come to think of America

as an open window—open to new possibilities, to the new life promised to those who journey from far away to reach its shores.

The National Scholarship Award is one of the most prestigious in the nation, bestowed upon only the top high school students, the best of the best, who are chosen not only on their grades and scores but on their personal essays and teacher recommendations. It's a bit like applying to college, I guess, but it's even harder than getting into the Ivy League. I worked so hard on my application and I wanted it so badly. Now that it's here, I'm shaking.

Mrs. Garcia puts her hand on my shoulder, startling me back to the present. "I'm so proud of you," she says like I'm her own daughter.

I tear the envelope open, nearly ripping the letter apart.

As I unfold the letter, my eyes drift to the signature at the bottom. It's actually *signed*—not printed—by the president of the United States. I return to the top and begin reading the body of the letter:

*Dear Ms. de los Santos,*

*I am pleased to offer you a National Scholarship Award in recognition of your outstanding academic achievement. The award includes a financial grant covering four years of tuition to the college of your choice. Only three hundred students out of thousands of highly qualified applicants are chosen each year, making the award one of the most competitive in the nation.*

*You are among a select group of astonishing young people, people who by the ages of sixteen and seventeen have not only succeeded academically but have conducted innovative medical research, played with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, competed in the Olympics, launched companies, volunteered for interna-*

*tional social service organizations, and more. National Scholars go on to attend our nation's top universities and use their gifts to improve both our country and the world.*

*It is my distinct pleasure to invite you to attend the National Scholarship Recognition Program to celebrate your achievement and meet with government officials, educators, musicians, scientists, business leaders, and past scholars. You will also have the opportunity to visit historic museums and monuments, as well as attend recitals, receptions and official ceremonies as guests of the Department of Education. Please complete and return the form included with this letter. Additional details about the trip to Washington, D.C., will be sent within the following weeks. Congratulations! I'm looking forward to seeing what you'll do to make a brighter future for our country.*

*Yours,*

*The President of the United States*

I can't even breathe. This is the happiest day of my life. Everything I've given up—the hours of sleep, the driver's license (because my parents wouldn't allow me to learn), all the parties I never attended, all the fun I never had, all the boys I never kissed...

Nothing compares to this scholarship.

Mrs. Garcia shuffles against the gym floor, leaving small smudges on the wood. "This is a huge deal, Jasmine. There hasn't been a National Scholar from our town as long as I've been here. It's the highest honor a student can be awarded."

*A full ride to any college of my choice.* My parents won't have to worry about not being able to afford tuition. It almost takes my breath away. I can see it so clearly. My future.

College. Graduate school. I don't know yet what I want to do, but I do know that winning at the meritocracy is my

American dream. A successful career and a handsome husband. A family. I'm old-fashioned that way, maybe because I'm Filipino, but ever since I was a kid I've wanted a family of my own and a marriage like the one my parents share. Corny, I know, but hey, I'm an American girl, and I want it all.

I worked hard for this, gave up *everything*. Some of my friends tease that I'm seventeen going on thirty-five. It doesn't matter now. What's certain is that I'm not going to be stuck with my parents' limited options. My mom graduated top of her class in the Philippines, but in America she cleans up vomit in a hospital, and my dad, the smartest man I know, drives a bus for a living. But they always believed if their children became American like I am now, the sky's the limit.

And here it is. The sky is on fire.

This is it. My year. *My shot* (thanks, *Hamilton*).

The exhilaration is almost as good—if not better—as sticking a killer landing at Nationals.

# 2

It was my father who taught us that an immigrant must work twice as hard as anybody else, that he must never give up.

—ZINEDINE ZIDANE

“WHAT WAS THAT all about?” Kayla asks when Mrs. Garcia leaves. She raises her eyebrows and waits expectantly.

I can’t hide my elation, but I want to tell my parents first. The news is too precious, too hard-earned to share with even my best friend right now. It’s not that she won’t be happy for me; she’ll be ecstatic. But Mom and Dad deserve to be the first ones to hear.

“Just some good news about college apps,” I tell her. “She thinks I’m eligible for a Regent’s at the UC schools.” The Regent’s Scholarships are California’s answer to the National Scholarship Program. They cover thousands of dollars of tuition a year for the top percentage of applicants, and I’d known I’ve been eligible for a while as UC applications are due at the end of November.

“Well, duh, I could have told you that,” she says, as I pull the scholarship letter out of my sports bra and slip it into the front pocket of my backpack.

When practice is over, we run into Lorraine Schiana leaning against her car with a couple of boys in the parking lot.

She's twisting her dark red hair around one of her fingers. Lo is drop-dead gorgeous but never looks as if she's trying. You know the type. Glamorous. Bohemian. Like a rock star's famous girlfriend. She's a total scene queen, always dating a different hot musician at least a year or two older, and dyeing her hair these *amazing* unnatural colors—pink, blue, lavender, and silver. Right now she's wearing her hair au naturel, as she told me all that dye was drying out the ends too much. We've been friends since junior high, but Lo started running in different groups once we got to high school and my class load meant I didn't have as much free time as I'd like. Even though we're not as close anymore, I still love her. Her world always seems so much bigger than mine. She knows so many people and has so many fun things going on that it makes me feel a little jealous sometimes.

As I pass by, I give her a little wave, not wanting to interrupt her conversation.

Kayla leans over and whispers, "Who are those guys? Dibs on the one in the Bob Marley shirt."

It's like the boys can sense she's talking about them because they train their eyes on us, which makes Lorraine look over too. "Hey, Jas," she says. "What up, girl? Haven't seen you in a long time."

"The usual," I say, smiling back. "What's up with you?"

"Hanging out with these losers." Lorraine gestures to the guys at her side. "This is my boyfriend, Julian. That's Dylan. They play in a band together," she says.

Julian is African American, incredibly good-looking, with cappuccino-colored skin and dreadlocks. He's wearing a red beanie and has tattoos all over his forearms. Kayla smiles at Dylan, the surfer-type boy with messy blond hair wearing mirrored aviator sunglasses and a T-shirt with Bob Marley's

face on the front. I can tell she's already developed a massive crush on him.

"Cheerleaders, huh?" Dylan asks.

I sigh a little. "Good guess. How can you tell?"

It's not like we're wearing our uniforms or anything, and I don't like the way he said *cheerleaders*, as if we're just chicks who shake their pom-poms. Our squad won Regionals last year. We're just as much athletes as the guys in helmets we supposedly "cheer" for. (They lose every year. Our squad has a better winning percentage. Burn.)

Dylan smirks. "Dorky white tennis shoes are pretty much a dead giveaway."

"Leave her alone, Dylan. She's a friend of mine," Lo says.

"My older sister was a cheerleader," he says somewhat apologetically.

"It's okay," says Kayla, who's practically drooling over him even though she's trying to appear disinterested. "Where do you guys go to school?"

"We graduated last year. Dylan's at Valley College. I'm taking some time off and focusing on music," Julian says. "I might go back to become a sound engineer. I'm still figuring things out."

Lo tosses her hair over her shoulder. "Want to come over on Friday?" she asks. "I'm having a few people over for a kick back. It'll be chill. My parents are out of town."

"I don't know," I say, hesitating to commit, even as I feel Kayla's intense stare on me. "Midterms are coming up and you know what my parents are like. And Kayla and I already have plans that night." To sit at home and bake chocolate-chip cookies, but I don't mention that.

"We can change them!" Kayla chirps.

“Yeah, come on, Jas,” Lorraine says. “It’ll be fun. Hang out for a change.”

“Fine. Maybe. Message me the details?” I hate letting people down and I do miss Lo.

“Will do,” Lorraine says. “See you guys then. Bye, Jas. Bye, Kayla.”

Kayla seems shocked Lorraine even knows her name but recovers quickly. “Cool, thanks, Lo.” She looks at the boys. “Are you guys going to be there?”

Julian seems amused. He exchanges glances with Dylan. I’m not sure what they’re trying to say to each other. Boys. I can never read them.

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” says Julian, and Dylan nods.

“Excellent,” says Kayla.

Kayla and I walk to her brand-new pearly-white Dodge Charger, which her parents bought her for her seventeenth birthday. We throw our backpacks onto the backseat and plop into the front seats, overheated and exhausted, although I can tell Kayla’s in a good mood from the party invitation and meeting those guys.

I’m catching a ride to the hospital where my mom works. I don’t know how to drive yet, and it’s kind of embarrassing, especially since I live in LA (okay, Chatsworth, but no one ever wants to admit they live in the Valley).

Daddy always promises to teach me how to drive, but there hasn’t been any time in either of our schedules, especially since I’ve been training so hard at cheer. Right now I don’t really have time to go anywhere besides school and practice, so I don’t mind too much.

Kayla turns on the ignition and rolls the windows down. “He was cute, right? Did he seem into me? Dylan?”

“Who can tell behind those aviator shades?” I say, teasing her on her “bad boy” taste. As she drives out of the lot and down the highway next to the school, I change the subject. Once Kayla gets going on boy-talk, she’ll never stop, and I want to bring up something more important. “Hey, your tumbling is looking really good,” I say.

Kayla rolls her eyes. “Thanks, but I don’t need false compliments.”

I search Kayla’s face for a hint of sarcasm, but I don’t see any. “I wasn’t being fake with you,” I say.

“It’s not about whether I can do the movements,” she says.

“Of course not. You’ve always been one of the best on the team.”

Idling at a stoplight, Kayla turns to me. “I don’t need you to make me feel better about myself, Jas. You could just ask what’s been going on with me. I feel like you barely exist outside of practice anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, and I really am. I know Kayla’s needed me and I’ve neglected her. “I’m a terrible friend.”

“You’re not. I know how important being the best is for you, so I understand that you need to work so hard. But don’t forget that I’m here for you too.”

I lean my head on Kayla’s shoulder. “Thanks, K. So what’s been going on with you? Are you still going out with that guy? What was his name? Jason?”

“Girl, we really do need to catch up. I only went on, like, two dates with him. If you can even count them as dates... On the last one, he took me to an arcade, then expected me to *watch* him play video games. I said I was going to the bathroom and ditched him to play mini golf next door with one of the guys who works at the arcade.”

We both start laughing at her story, and I know that Kayla

has forgiven me for being so absent lately. “I know you’ve noticed that I’ve been missing my marks more than normal,” she continues. “But it’s not because of boys.”

I stay silent. I know Kayla well enough to understand that she’s not going to quit talking until she’s said everything she needs to get out. Talking is her way of processing things, while I tend to keep things bottled up inside until something’s bothering me so bad that I finally explode in tears.

“My parents are separating. Dad moved out last week. He’s living in his own apartment in Simi Valley.” She takes a deep breath and her upper lip quivers.

“Oh my God. What happened?” I ask, feeling the bottom drop out of my stomach. I knew things were bad at home, but not this bad. No matter how old you are, your parents getting divorced is still every kid’s nightmare. I feel awful for her.

Kayla shakes her head. “I don’t know. I think Dad had an affair, but they’re not saying anything. I guess Mom doesn’t want Brian and me to hate him for forever.” Her little brother is Danny’s age.

“Of course not. But that’s terrible.” I lean over and give Kayla as much of a hug as I can while she’s driving. “I’m so sorry, K. I don’t know what to say.” I feel my eyes watering.

Kayla gives me a little side hug back and wipes her eyes too. “It’s okay. I’m glad I told you.”

“Do you want to have movie night at my house instead? You can get away from your place for a while,” I suggest.

“You mean on Friday? I thought we were hitting Lo’s party after the game...”

“Ugh, I don’t know,” I say. “It’s not a party anyway. It’s a *kick back*.”

“You know a kick back is just a code name for a total rager. Right? I can’t go without you.”

“Yes, you can,” I say. “You don’t need me.”

“We’re going to that party,” she says determinedly. “It’s senior year, Jas. It’s about time you had a little fun.”

Dylan has no idea what’s coming at him. What Kayla wants, Kayla gets. Especially when it comes to boys. Then she drops them like flies and they leave sad comments online, asking why she never texts them back. I wish I had her confidence in that arena. It’s not that I’m shy around guys, but with my parents being so strict along with my tough academic slate and all my extracurriculars, I’ve never really had the time or opportunity to have a boyfriend.

Kayla whips around the corner into the parking lot of the hospital. “You *have* to come. I need you to be my wing-woman. Just tell your parents you’re staying at my house. It’ll be the truth. I’ll drive us back after the party.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “You know them. My mom will call while we’re supposed to be at your house, asking to talk to your mom, trying to pretend that she’s not checking up on me.”

I want to go to Lo’s. I do. But I also don’t want to lie to my parents, no matter how much we disagree. I know everyone thinks I’m one of the good girls, but I can’t afford to mess up like other kids. I’m an immigrant in this country. My dad always told me we have to work *twice* as hard as anyone else just to get to the same place, which is why I work four times as hard—because I want to succeed.

“What’s Lo going to say?” Kayla asks. “You told her you’d be there.”

I stare out the window at the palm trees lining the edge of the parking lot. Why do I feel guilty for just *thinking* about doing things most teenagers do? “No, I said *maybe*.”

“Why do I even bother?” Kayla says, clearly annoyed. “Your *maybe* always means *no*.”

Fair enough, but if I didn’t always say no to things, I might not be getting the biggest yes of my life now—the golden ticket in my backpack. The one that will bring me straight to the top of the heap, where I belong.

# 3

The land flourished because it was fed from so many sources—because it was nourished by so many cultures and traditions and peoples.

—LYNDON B. JOHNSON

I SAY BYE to Kayla and hope she's not too irritated with me, and promise I'll think about going to Lo's party, then I head into the hospital. My mom has been working there for a few years now. She's what they call an environmental service worker, which basically means she's a glorified janitor. She has to do everything from mopping the hallways to washing dirty sheets. I feel bad for her, especially this year. Her job is already hard, but the hospital administration changed a few months ago and they started laying off some of Mom's co-workers, which means she's doing double the work she used to do. I know she's worried about losing her job too.

I started volunteering at the hospital in the gift shop when I was a freshman, then I assisted the nurses, but a year ago I started interviewing patients for a storytelling project. It's part of a research study to see how connections and being heard can affect the healing process, especially for elderly patients. Apparently patients need personal interactions, especially during recovery, and these moments can even alleviate physical symptoms. Hearing my mom talk about how sad it was that

so many of the people at the hospital never had anyone visit made me excited to help out. I wrote about my experiences for my essay for the National Scholarship too. Patients need to know that people care about them, that someone is listening to what they have to say. For many of them, that someone is me.

Trying to shake off disappointing Kayla, I head through the doors to the ER lobby. Gladys, an older woman with curly white hair that she wears in ringlets close to her scalp, sits behind the counter where new patients fill out their paperwork. She's talking to an older gentleman wearing a fancy navy blue suit standing next to a tall boy who looks like he's around my age. They look like father and son, except the son has dark, chestnut-colored hair and his dad's is more wheat-colored.

While the boy listens to his father, I sneak a peek at him. He's tan, although maybe not so much tan as a natural golden-brown color. He must be mixed. Caucasian dad, Latina mom maybe? I can tell because I'm pretty mixed myself. Filipinos are a little of everything. (I'm Filipino Chinese Hawaiian French.) This guy has deep brown eyes and cut-glass cheekbones, and he's wearing a navy suit with a green tie and brown dress shoes. Although his clothes are perfectly put together, his hair looks like he's been running his hands through it too much. When he smiles at something his father says, I notice a dimple on one cheek. He glances over and catches me staring, and I blush, because he's really cute. My heart rate immediately goes up and I'm lucky I'm not hooked up to a machine right now.

His father shakes Gladys's hand. "Thank you, Mrs. Robertson. I appreciate your help." He walks toward the elevator but the son lingers behind. "Go ahead, Dad. I forgot something."

I say hi to Gladys and she hands me the folder with the list

of today's patients who've signed up to be part of the project. The boy is still standing next to me. When Gladys gets up from her chair, she raises an eyebrow in my direction, then makes herself look busy at the filing cabinet.

I can feel him looking at me, but he doesn't say anything, so I finally do. "What did you forget?" I blurt.

"I forgot to get your number," he says, his voice low and rich.

My blush deepens, and when our eyes meet, I feel a spark inside, like I'm all lit up from within. He smiles at me from under his long, floppy bangs. It makes me want to run my own hands through his hair, which looks so thick and glossy and inviting. I've never felt so attracted to anyone before, and I'm a little shocked at how much I want to touch him—a shoulder, an elbow.

Somehow I find myself digging for my phone. I don't know why, but I can't remember my number, let alone my name right now.

Gladys yells from the window. "Jazzy baby!" she calls. "I've got another patient for you!"

I'm mortified, but the boy's smile grows wider. He takes my phone from my hand. I didn't even realize I was holding it.

"Tell you what. Why don't you text me? That way it's up to you. I can tell your mother taught you never to talk to strangers." He punches in his number, takes a quick, goofy selfie to go with his contact info and hands it back to me. His fingers are warm, but dry. My hand feels electric.

I pocket my phone, trying to look as cool as he does. I shrug, as if I could care less.

When he's gone, Gladys comes back to the window with an amused expression and a slip of paper with another name for me. "What did he want? Although I can guess," she teases.

“Who is he?” I ask, ignoring the teasing.

“Congressman Blakely’s son. His dad represents our district. They were here visiting a relative.”

I take a surreptitious look at my phone, at the mug shot he just took. He’s smiling like a doofus. A very handsome doofus who does things like take a girl’s phone on a whim. **ROYCE BLAKELY**, it reads. Royce? What kind of ridiculous name is Royce?

Gladys smirks. “Cute, isn’t he?”

I roll my eyes. “He’d be even cuter if he didn’t wear a suit. Who wears a suit in LA?”

“Be careful what you say,” Gladys says, tapping the counter with a pen. “When you’re older, you’ll want your man to dress better. Some can get pretty lazy. After enough years together, you could find yourself begging him not to wear sweatpants to the Christmas party. Like I know I’ll have to do with Bob again this year.”

I laugh and say goodbye to her, then take the elevator up to the floor where they keep the people who have chronic illnesses or have to stay at the hospital for long periods of time. Mom makes friends with a lot of these patients, since she cleans their rooms every day. When she comes home quieter than normal, I know she’s lost one of them.

Most of our family still lives in the Philippines, so I understand what it’s like to be away from people you love. But at least I know they’re still alive. I can’t even imagine what I would do if I knew I would never be able to visit them again. It’s been a few years since we were back in Manila, and I miss it. I miss my grandparents’ huge house in the province, where at any time of day you can find neighbors, friends and relatives gathered at the courtyard tables playing mah-jongg or

cards. Their house is like the community center for the village, always open and welcome to all.

I look down at my phone again. His name is Royce. Seriously? Am I supposed to call him that? *Why don't you text me? That way it's up to you*, he said. He's not a stranger. He's a congressman's son. I mean, you're supposed to know your congressman, right? I can be a good citizen.

**jasmindls:** Hey it's me, I send.

I get a text back immediately.

**royceb:** jazzy baby?

**jasmindls:** The one and the same, Rolls Royce.

**royceb:** original. 😞

**jasmindls:** Is that your real name or did your parents just really want a car?

**royceb:** if you must know, I'm named after my uncle who died.

**jasmindls:** Oh god! Sorry. My bad.

**royceb:** no, it's mine. my uncle's alive. 😺

**jasmindls:** 😡 You're evil!!!

**royceb:** actually he just got in a car accident, that's why we were at the hospital.

**royceb:** so you have a problem with my name huh?

**jasmindls:** I dunno I kind of like fancy cars.

**royceb:** cool. 😺 so should I call you Jazzy for short?

**royceb:** or do you prefer Baby?

**jasmindls:** It's Jasmine, thank you very much.

**royceb:** nice to meet you Jasmine.

**jasmindls:** U too GTG TTYL, I type as I reach my floor.

**royceb:** 🙌

The nurses are chatting around their workstation as an employee pushes a food cart down the hall past me for the early bird dinners. Usually, I try to snag a Jell-O cup for myself. I'd never admit it, but I actually *like* the hospital food. But this time, I leave it. I was starving earlier, yet for some reason, I'm not hungry anymore. I'm excited and queasy-feeling, and I suspect it may have something to do with the boy who's texting me.

I see my mother rounding the corner in her dark blue scrubs, dragging a bucket full of water and a mop behind her tiny frame.

"Mommy!" I say, skipping toward her. I never call her that except when I want to make her happy. It's sort of a Filipino thing, and right now I'm bursting with news about the scholarship. "Guess what!"

But before I can say anything else she sets down the mop and leans against the handle. "Are you busy?" she asks. "I need you."

I shake my head, disappointed not to have her full attention, and my good mood dampens a bit. She seems stressed. "What's up?" I ask.

"Can you come help me with a mess? You don't have to touch anything. I just need you to make sure no one walks on it."

I nod and follow her. When the pressure becomes too much sometimes, when I feel like I'm about to burst with anxiety over my grades or get mad that I've never had a social life, I think about my mom and what she's sacrificed for us so that

we can have a better life. I'm so grateful to her and my dad for everything.

She leads me down the hallway into a large room. There's a nurse bustling about the bed, giving a small, frail woman with white hair a sponge bath. I look down to give her privacy, but the woman complains loudly, "Nothing special to see here, honey. When you're this old, there's no such thing as dignity. Your body falls apart like a junky car, but you still have to have the mechanic take a look at the insides. Funny how young people are so modest when they have no reason to be. If you've got it, flaunt it, I say."

I raise my eyebrow at my mom, who suppresses a smile. This patient is a feisty one, that's for sure.

The nurse quiets her down while my mother begins mopping up urine from the floor. Since I'm not allowed to touch anything hazardous, I squeeze the water out of the mop for her. Even though I've been volunteering at the hospital for a few years, I still don't know how Mom does her job. There's no way I could clean up after people like this all day long. I have mad respect for her. She's stronger than anyone I've ever known. Deep down, I think she knows that about herself too. Mom doesn't suffer fools and she was always the one who told me I could work my way up to the top. She's always believed in me, that I could do anything, be anyone I wanted to be.

By the time we're done, the nurse has left the room and the old lady is starting to talk again, something about meeting Frank Sinatra. She's staring out the window at the tall buildings across the street, so I can't tell whether she's speaking to us or just to herself.

Mom nudges me with her shoulder. "Why don't you interview her for your project?"

I check to see if the hospital room is on the approved list

first, and notice that this patient was the last-minute addition that Gladys just handed to me.

Pushing the mop bucket out the doorway, Mom says, “Meet me at the parking lot at the end of my shift.”

I nod and pull up a seat next to the bed. The stories this old lady could tell sound like they’d be interesting, especially as she was describing to the nurse how she met Frank Sinatra backstage and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Hi, I’m Jasmine de los Santos,” I say. “I’m here to interview you for the study you signed up for? I’m hoping to compile the stories into a book as well, and plan to share it with everyone at the end of the year.”

She gazes intensely at me, and I notice for the first time that her eyes are a milky blue, like the sky behind clouds. “I suppose you want to know my name?” She has a slight accent that’s hard to place.

I nod. “That would be helpful to start.”

“My full name is Amelia Florence Marsh,” she says, in the tone of voice as if she’s the queen of England.

“Mrs. Marsh...”

“Ms. Marsh, actually, though I suppose that’s confusing since Marsh is my married name. I’m a widow.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, backpedaling.

“No need to be sorry. What do you have people call you when you never divorced but you’re also not married anymore? Anyway, I go by Millie with my friends. And we’re going to be friends, aren’t we? I can always tell.”

I smile. “Millie, I couldn’t help but overhear your story about meeting Frank Sinatra. Do you want to start there?”

Millie arches one perfectly plucked gray eyebrow. “Sure. I was a young girl then—around fifteen probably.”

“So what did he say to you?”

She purses her lips as she looks up to the ceiling like a little kid who's been keeping a big secret for a long time and just can't wait to tell someone, even though she also doesn't want to be in trouble. "He told me I'd be just his type if I was just a little older," she says with a throaty laugh. "Oh, that Frank."

I laugh with her. "Did you meet other famous people?"

"Of course. We lived in Beverly Hills, and it was only natural in my husband's line of work. But I'm not some kind of vulgar name-dropper, if that's what you're thinking, missy. The memory just reminded me of being young again, of having a body that worked for me instead of against me. Being old's terrible."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you," I say, although I like that she's a pistol.

Millie wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. "No, I'm sorry, darling. I'm an awful wretch when I'm sick. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I just don't feel well. At my age, everything stops working. They're supposed to tell me if I have something wrong with my heart, but I think the only thing wrong with it is that it's old."

"I should let you get some rest." I begin to stand, but Millie reaches out and grabs my forearm, pulling me back down.

"Please stay. It would be nice to talk a little more."

I smile at her. She reminds me of my auntie Girlie—scrapy yet gentle. I feel slightly homesick for the Philippines. Even though I wouldn't want to move back there to live, I miss my big family. My grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles—all of them coming and going through the big house—all that noise and laughter and light.

"So you live in Beverly Hills?" I ask, wondering if maybe Royce is from there too. With a name like that...

Millie adjusts a pillow behind her back, sitting up and settling in for the long haul. “That’s right. Should I start there?”

I nod, and Millie begins to unravel her tale. I listen patiently, giving her my full attention, even as I’m eager for the day to end so that I can get home and tell my parents my good news already. They’re going to die when they find out about the National Scholarship. I can’t wait.

# 4

I had always hoped that this land might become a safe and agreeable asylum to the virtuous and persecuted part of mankind, to whatever nation they might belong.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

ON THE WAY back home from the hospital, Mom is quiet and tired. I want to tell her my news, but decide to wait until she and Dad are together. That way it'll be more dramatic and special. So instead of talking about that, I tell her about Millie.

"I'm so glad she signed up for my project," I say. "She was a cool old lady. Did you know she founded her own construction company? She was a building engineer."

Mom nods approvingly. "See, I told you, girls can do anything."

When we get home, I dawdle behind her as she walks up the driveway. Shockingly pink bougainvillea flowers spiral around the trellises and lean against the outside of the house. My mother loves bright flowers. They make her feel more at home in America. She plants them every year: hibiscus, ylang-ylang, azalea, birds of paradise, verbena, scarlet larkspur, night-blooming jasmine. Our house may be small, but Mom makes sure we always have the neighborhood's best garden. It's her pride in life besides her three children.

I walk through the door and kick off my sneakers, ex-

changing them for a pair of light blue *tsinelas*, comfy slippers to wear around the house. Mom is already in the kitchen talking loudly to Lola Cherry on the phone as she cuts up yellow jackfruit and bananas to make *turon* for dessert. Lola Cherry isn't my grandmother. She's my mother's cousin's aunt, but we call her Lola—grandma—anyway. She's as close to a grandmother as I have in the States. We haven't seen my real Lola since I was thirteen and my brothers were seven and five years old. My brothers don't even remember her that well anymore—they don't remember much about our native country. Danny and Isko can only speak English, and my Tagalog is so atrocious, my mother scolds me for "losing my culture." I hate when she says that kind of thing. As if she wasn't the one who decided to move to America in the first place. I'm not complaining though. If my parents had stayed home, I would never have earned this scholarship. And getting to meet the president? The leader of the free world? Forget it.

I weave around Mom and grab a piece of jackfruit, then bite into its sticky flesh, letting the sweet juice linger on my tongue. She shoos me away from the kitchen, pretending she's annoyed at me. I can't wait to tell everyone my big announcement but decide to hold off until dinner is over so I have everyone's full attention. I want my brothers to hear too. I love them almost like they're my kids and not just my brothers. It's funny. When they were really little, when we first moved to America, my mother's *pinay*—and closest—girlfriends would call me *maliit na ina*—little mother—because I was so protective of the boys.

My brothers and I are very different though. Not only because I'm a girl. It goes deeper. Since I'm the oldest, I've always felt more pressure to be successful. I have to show them the way. And I also have to act like a bridge between them

and my parents. Danny and Isko are pretty much 100 percent American. It's as if my parents are first-generation immigrants and they're second generation. But I'm stuck somewhere between both of them, trying to figure out how to help them understand each other.

The sounds of my brothers playing video games in the back of the house float down the hallway. Dad is watching the local news. I kiss him hello on the cheek and sit on the couch to watch with him. The anchor introduces a video clip of a politician from Los Angeles slamming an immigration reform bill that's just been introduced in the Senate.

Suddenly, I recognize the man on-screen from the hospital.

It's Congressman Blakely. Royce's father. He's talking about how a path to citizenship shouldn't be granted to undocumented immigrants at all. If they entered the country illegally, he says, then they don't deserve to be Americans. Oh great, he's one of those politicians who think illegal aliens are as good as criminals, and deserve punishment rather than mercy. I shift in my seat, thinking of Royce, and wonder if he agrees with his father. I sort of hope not.

My family got their green cards when we moved to America, but none of us are American citizens yet. I don't think I can apply to become a citizen until I turn eighteen next year. But the minute I do, you can bet I'm taking the oath. I can't wait to vote.

Dad shakes his head and starts pontificating to the air. "If that congressman had to grow up in a different country, he would understand better why people come here. These politicians know nothing of true hardship."

"Easy *lang*, Dad," I say, meaning *take it easy*. "Don't get too riled up. It's bad for your heart."

He looks up at me and clicks his tongue. “*O-o na*. Have you done your homework yet?”

“I just got home! You know I do my homework after dinner.” My parents. I swear, school is all they care about. They never ask about Kayla, or cheer, or my hospital project. It’s always, how did you do on your test, did you get an A, did you get all your work done?

Dad turns off the television. “As long as you know your job. You’re lucky to not have to get up at five in the morning to do chores, then walk three miles to school or swim half a mile in the monsoon season like I did when I was a boy.” This is my Filipino dad’s version of the classic American dad tale of “walking home for miles in the snow uphill.”

Before I can tease him for repeating the same story over and over again, Mom yells at me, “*Neneng!* Take your shower and tell your brothers to set the table. The adobo’s almost ready.”

I walk down to my room, toss my backpack onto the ground, and flop onto the bedspread. It’s fluffy and off-white with textured fabric in the shapes of flowers. It looks like a bed for a princess without the fussiness. Mom and Dad let me redecorate my room for my birthday present one year. I researched what I wanted for months. Dad complained about how long I took to choose everything, but I think Mom enjoyed the redecorating. She never had her own room in Manila, so I didn’t mind letting her give me her opinion on just about everything. Even though there were times when she drove me completely crazy.

*No, Mom, I know it’s hard to believe, but I don’t want yellow bamboo floor mats to go on top of the carpet.*

Anything we couldn’t afford to buy, Mom either made herself or got help from her crafty girlfriends. I decided on a creamy light pink and off-white color scheme with black ac-

cents. I hung pictures of my family's last vacation to the Philippines, and shadow boxes with pretty colored-glass bottles inside them on the walls. I keep my sand and rock collection inside the bottles. They're filled with little pieces of places I've been since I was a young girl. There are red lava rocks from Taal Volcano near Manila, where Dad and I fished for giant *maliputo*. In a light pink bottle, there's a clump of regular everyday dirt, the first soil I stepped on in California. The newest one, a turquoise green bottle, holds white sand from Boracay Island.

Dad didn't want to spend the money to go to the fancy beach, one of the most popular in the Philippines, but Mom insisted that all of us go for a few days the last time we were there. I remember her making a big deal about the trip, almost like she thought we would never get the chance to go again.

Then I have a pin board where I write down inspirational quotes I've discovered in books or online. My favorite is the one from President Roosevelt about how we're all descended from immigrants and revolutionaries.

But the most important thing in my room, the thing I could never travel anywhere without, my secret good-luck charm, my talisman, is a small piece of amber-colored glass my grandmother found inside a big balete tree when she was a young girl. She gave me the glass for good luck before I left for America. It was a secret between us, because Mom doesn't like her mother's superstitions. I love the story Dad tells about how Lola Baby demanded that Mom and her entire family travel to Dad's village a whole month before their wedding because she was convinced that couples who are about to get married are prone to accidents, so they shouldn't travel before the wedding.

I hear my brothers shouting, barely muffled by the thin

walls. Rolling off my bed, I get up and walk into the hallway. They're still yelling as I open the door to the room next to mine, which they've shared ever since we moved to California. They're playing *Call of Duty*. The bullets are ripping through the television speakers. It's so loud I can barely hear myself think.

"Danny! Isko!"

They can't hear me, or are pretending not to.

I quietly sneak up behind Isko and pinch his neck.

"Ack! *Ate!*" Isko complains. They both call me "big sister." Mom and Dad do too—it's another Filipino thing.

Not wanting to take his hands off the controller, Isko twists his neck to try to get me to stop while Danny laughs at him. On the screen, I watch Danny shoot Isko—his side of the screen turns red with blood. Isko throws down his controller, whining, "You made him kill me. He always wins anyway."

Isko's only nine years old. He's the baby and the one who takes after Dad. He's skinny and has little chicken arms and legs. Danny and I tease him sometimes, calling him our little runt, but Isko isn't just short. He's short even for a little *pinoy* boy. What he doesn't have in height, Isko definitely makes up for in personality. If he enters or exits a room, you'll always know. He's louder and more dramatic than anybody else, which really means something when you come from a Filipino family.

"Thanks, *Ate!*" Danny grabs the controller from Isko. "You should do that more often."

I smile at them with fake sweetness. "You guys need to help Mommy set the table. Dinner is ready."

"I thought it was your turn." Isko pouts.

"I still need a shower. Get going. She's about to start calling for you."

Danny switches off the television and both boys sulk down the hallway, pinching and punching each other, as they head to the kitchen.

Danny's the classic middle child. I know he feels like he can't live up to the same expectations my parents have for me. He's smart, but Dad gets down on him because Danny's always drawing and doodling instead of doing schoolwork. He's really good though. Way better than you would expect. You'd never believe he's only eleven years old by looking at his drawings.

"*Ate!* Go take your shower. I don't want to wait for you to eat my dinner," Dad shouts from down the hallway.

"All right! I'm going, Daddy!"

Heading toward the bathroom, I think about the day our family moved to California. We boarded a big jet plane at the Manila airport. Daddy was worried sick about our belongings not showing up in Los Angeles. It's crazy how much our lives have changed since that day. I don't remember much about life there now, mostly that we were hot all the time, and sweaty, since the Philippines is near the equator. I take my shower, washing off all the sweat from practice, letting the water fall over my face and shoulders, warming my skin, relaxing my muscles. The shower is my sanctuary, the one place I can be alone and think without interruptions.

I think about the National Scholarship, how it means I can most likely go to any college now—and the reception will be the first time I'm away from home and on my own. I've traveled with the cheer team, but we're always together. I imagine Washington, D.C., and the fancy reception and all the people who will be there—diplomats, activists, congressmen and women, scientists, artists, the president and the first lady. I'll be around people who actually run the country, people

who influence history and who have the power to make other people's lives better. I hope I'll be one of them someday. I don't really know what I want to do yet—something to do with medicine or law, but I'm still unsure.

I decide I'll tell my parents my good news by showing them the letter and letting it speak for itself. Then I'll ask them to fill out the acceptance form with me tonight, so that I can send my information back as soon as possible.

As I'm brushing my hair, my phone buzzes. It's a text from Royce.

**royceb: hey good-looking.**

So cheesy! But I'm charmed anyway. I can't help but grin as I text back. I forget about seeing his dad rail against illegal immigrants on TV.

**jasmindls: Hey yourself.**

**royceb: are you around this weekend?**

**royceb: wanna hang out?**

**jasmindls: Maybe.**

It's not that I'm playing hard to get—I do have a lot of studying to do, and Kayla wants to go to Lo's party, so that doesn't really leave me with a lot of free time. I feel a flutter in my heart at the thought of seeing him again. Weekends are difficult, but maybe there's another way.

**royceb: maybe?**

**royceb: did you google me or something?**

**royceb: i swear that wasn't me in the angry bird costume scaring the children. 😊**

**jasmindls: LOL are you sure?**

**royceb:** Okay, okay, that was me. The pigs made me do it. 😊

He's funny, I think as I type back.

**jasmindls:** Weekend's tough but I volunteer at the hospital on Mondays and Wednesdays.

**royceb:** okayyyy. Not quite what I was hoping.

**royceb:** But I do hear the hospital cafeteria is delightful. 😊

That makes me giggle out loud.

**jasmindls:** 😊

Glowing, I head to the kitchen. Everyone is gathered around the stove, spooning rice and adobo into their bowls. I slip the scholarship letter under a book on the counter and grab a bowl of adobo for myself.

Mom notices I filled the bowl only a little. "What? You don't like my cooking?"

Isko perks up. "Don't you know, Ma? Jasmine is on a *diet*," he says. "So she won't get *taba* like you."

"How can such a *little* boy have such a *big* personality?" Mom says, pretending to be annoyed that he called her fat, even if it's an endearment. Filipinos don't think being fat is the worst thing in the world, probably because it's a Third World country where many people are starving.

I pat Isko on the head, which I know he hates more than anything. Isn't that a big sister's job? To drive her little brothers crazy?

Danny doesn't say anything to back me up. He's at the table sketching some kind of magical beast. Dad doesn't even look up from his bowl.

"Mommy, I told you, I have to watch what I eat during

the season. Otherwise they won't be able to throw me up in the air."

"I don't understand you girls and your diets. In the Philippines, I never had to watch what I ate and I stayed skinny as a stick. I guess you think our kind of food will make you fat, but look at the Filipinos you know. We're skinnier than Americans!"

Danny sighs. "*In the Philippines...*"

Mom ignores him. "When I was growing up, all of the children played outside all the time. We made up outside games and ran around our compound and climbed trees. At least Jasmine dances," she says to the boys. "You're always glued to the television."

She always calls cheer "dancing" even though she knows better. I don't think she ever got over the fact that I stopped doing the traditional Filipino dance classes in junior high. But I had to drop something to be able to keep my other extracurricular activities and still get all my homework done.

She walks over to Danny and grabs his sketch pad. "*Tsk*. And *you*. No drawing at the table during dinner. You're as bad as your sister with her phone."

I self-consciously check my pocket, to see if Royce has sent a new text, but he hasn't. The thought of seeing him at the hospital next Monday gives me serious butterflies. I've had crushes before, and I can already tell this is the worst one yet. I'm really into him and I've only known him for, like, five seconds.

Isko stuffs a pork chunk into his mouth. "I like hearing about the Philippines," he says, nudging Dad with his elbow. "Tell us the story about how you and Tito Boy used to fight spiders!"

Dad puts down his empty bowl and leans back in his chair.

He loves telling this story. Tito Boy died a few years ago at his construction job in Manila, so I think talking about him helps Daddy remember his brother.

“Tito Boy and I would stay up all night before spider-hunting season opened. As soon as the first light came up, we hunted for El Tigre spiders in the jungle. They’re the best ones. We’d keep them in little boxes, any kind of small container, and let them out to crawl on our hands. Then we’d put them on long sticks, watch them crawl toward each other, knock each other off or fight to the death. We’d yell and scream for our favorite. Mine had only seven legs from a fight it survived. But let me tell you, that spider beat a hundred other spiders before I released it into a tree, retired to a new life. If only we could all escape this life with so few scars.”

By the time Dad is done with the story, Mom has brought over the turon for dessert. Danny and Isko swarm over the plate, grabbing two for each of them. Despite the warm sweet smell of burned caramel, I’m too excited about the scholarship to eat any dessert. I can’t wait any longer.

“Mommy, Daddy, I want to show you something,” I say, standing up and walking over to the book on the counter. I slip the envelope from underneath and hand the letter to my father. I’m grinning ear to ear. I’m so proud of myself, of my parents, of my entire family right now.

I can’t wait to hear them cry and scream and cheer when they read it.

*I did it! I want to shout. I did it! I’m a National Scholar! And I couldn’t have done it without you!*

# 5

I take issue with many people's description of people being illegal immigrants. There aren't any illegal human beings as far as I'm concerned.

—DENNIS KUCINICH

DAD OPENS THE envelope slowly. Mom leans over his shoulder. They are completely silent as they read the letter. I expected my father to jump up from the table and hug me, and my mother to scream and start calling all my aunties to brag about me. But neither of them say anything.

In fact, they look like they just received the worst kind of news instead of the best news ever.

*Okay.*

Maybe they're so happy they're shocked into silence?

"Isn't it amazing?" I reach over and pull the acceptance form from the envelope. "Don't worry, I can fill everything else out myself, but I need a copy of my green card. Mrs. Garcia will let me use the copier at school, but I have to get it done soon so they know I'm accepting the scholarship and going to D.C. for the reception."

They look at each other with concern. I'm so confused by their silence. Isn't this the moment they've been waiting for my whole life?

What's going on?

“Danny, Isko. Out! We need to talk to Jasmine alone,” Mom says. “Take the *turon* with you.”

I feel a chill down the back of my neck. Something must really be wrong. Mom never allows the boys to eat in their room, let alone play games after dinner before their homework is done. I suddenly feel outnumbered. I want to call them back to stay with me.

What is it? Are they worried about the plane fare to D.C.? But the letter says the program will cover all hotel and transportation costs for the weekend trip. Oh, maybe they don’t want to allow me to go to D.C. alone? Is that it?

Mom pushes the dishes to the side of the table, not meeting my gaze. “We have something to tell you, *neneng*, and you have to believe us when we say we’ve always wanted the best for you,” she says. “We’ve tried to do everything right.”

Dad just keeps staring at the letter like the words don’t make any sense. I thought he would be the proudest of me, of what I’ve done for our family. With this opportunity, I’ll be able to take care of my parents someday. I’ll be able to give them the lives they wanted to give me.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“We should have told you sooner, but we didn’t know how,” she says.

I sense a glimmer of what my mom is trying to tell me, and I feel a cold shock all over my body. This isn’t just about letting me go to another city on my own.

“What are you saying?” I ask. “What do you mean *tried*?”

“I don’t like your tone, young lady,” Mom says.

“Sorry, Mom, I just don’t know what’s going on. Aren’t you happy for me?” I don’t understand why she’s reacting this way. Almost as if she’s annoyed that I won this scholarship.

She's the one who pushed me so hard—they both did—but the way they're reacting isn't making any sense.

"Are you mad that I didn't make the top-ten list?" The accompanying paperwork mentioned that the top ten scholars were invited to spend the summer interning at the White House. Maybe Mom is disappointed I wasn't one of them? "Nothing will ever be good enough for you," I say, almost on the verge of tears. "It's not fair!"

"You don't know what fair is!" she retorts.

Dad doesn't want any of this. "Stop fighting! Right now." His eyes have tears in them. "Jasmine, it's not about you not making the top ten. This is an amazing achievement. We're incredibly proud of you. You know that."

"Okay," I say.

"But there are things that are out of our control that we haven't told you about, and it's time we were honest with you," he says. His face is grave, and so sad that I can't bear it.

I run through the reasons they might be acting so strangely. Did Dad lose his job? Is he sick? "You're scaring me, Daddy."

"It's not what you think. I'm not sick and neither is your mom."

He knows me so well. "So what's going on, then?" I ask, my breath catching in my throat. Whatever it is, it's bad.

"You can't accept this scholarship. I'm so sorry," he says, putting his hand over mine to comfort me. Mom is about to say something but he hushes her.

"But why not?" I ask, stunned.

"Because you don't have a green card, Jasmine. None of us do. And that means you're not eligible for this award."

"I don't have a green card? I don't understand. Of course I do. We all do, don't we?" It's like my dad is talking nonsense.

He puffs out his cheeks. "When we first moved here, we

had work visas that allowed Mom and me to work for Tito Sonny's export business, remember that?"

I nod. We called him Uncle—*Tito*—even though we're not related. Tito Sonny is a friend of the family who gave my parents jobs working in his discount store, stocking shelves and keeping inventory. He imported Chinese and Filipino items and sold them to the expat community. The items were cheap knickknacks—velvet paintings of Jesus, cheesy 3-D paintings of waterfalls, ceramic Buddhas, that sort of thing.

"But that store closed years ago and Tito Sonny went back to the Philippines," I say, remembering now.

"Exactly. When the store closed, our work visas expired. Tito Sonny thought he would be able to sponsor us for green cards, but he couldn't even sustain the business. We thought it would be easy to find other jobs and new visas, but that hasn't been the case."

I vaguely remember a few years ago when my parents were always tense, right after the store closed. There were a few months when neither of them worked. I thought we were just worried about money back then. I didn't know they were also worried about being able to stay here legally.

"So what does that mean?" I ask, still stunned. "We really don't have green cards?" The news is starting to sink in.

"We never did, just temporary work visas. Right now we don't have any proof of legal residency. That's why we stopped visiting the Philippines. We didn't want to get trapped there. Not after building a new life here. We couldn't take away your home. We didn't think you would have to prove legal status for a college scholarship. We were hoping..."

"So wait. What are you saying? I'm not legal? We're not in America legally? Oh my God."

Dad nods and looks like he's about to cry, which makes me want to cry too.

"But if I'm not legal, how could I go to school all these years? How can any of us go to school?"

"Ma and I didn't choose California only for the palm trees and sunshine. We came here because it's easier on immigrants generally. Schools can't report undocumented students, and they don't do a lot of workplace raids."

"But how do you guys work?"

"We have fake papers. The hospital and the bus company don't sponsor work visas, not for the kind of jobs we do." Unskilled jobs, they mean. Menial jobs.

"What..." I feel tears welling in my eyes. Why didn't they tell me earlier? Did they not trust me? "Please tell me you're joking." I just can't accept this. This can't be the truth.

"No, we're not joking, Jasmine," Dad says. "We thought a college scholarship would solve everything for you, for our kids. We didn't know most of the grants and loans are for citizens or green-card holders."

So that's why the two of them had been sort of muted lately when I kept blabbing on about college and financial aid forms. I'd tried not to think about it too much, assuming they were just busy.

"We never wanted this for you. We're so sorry. But you're a smart girl," Mom says, trying to touch my hand. "You'll find a way, *neneng*."

I pull away. I know they tried their best, but their best isn't enough in this case. This is my future, what I've worked so hard for, and I'm furious. "No! I can't! There isn't any other way if I don't have a green card. Getting this scholarship *was* my way!"

"Stop!" Dad isn't crying anymore. He slams his open hand

against the table. “You should consider yourself lucky. If someone finds out our papers are fake, our entire family could be deported. Your mother’s already struggling with her supervisor asking questions at the hospital. If all of us aren’t careful, our luck will run out.”

Deported? Oh my God. I didn’t even think of that. It’s not just about not being able to go to college. We might lose our entire life here. The cold that’s settled around my body turns to ice. There’s no way I can go back to live in the Philippines. I can barely speak Tagalog. My life is here. In America.

I grab the letter away from them and scan the application. “But why can’t I accept the scholarship money? We have papers, you said. I’ll just use the fake ones. I don’t care.”

“No, absolutely not,” Dad says. “You’d be lying to the government. To the president of the United States.”

“I seriously doubt the president will *personally* be looking at my application...”

“It doesn’t matter, Jas. We have to be careful. If you get caught, are you going to go back to Manila by yourself?”

“So what was the point of me studying so hard, then? If I’m not eligible for loans or a grant, I won’t even be able to go to college. Everything I’ve worked for is totally wasted.” I’ve given up so much to be the best, to be number one. I’ve never had any fun outside of school. Sweet sixteen and never been kissed? I’m seventeen now.

Mom looks down at her lap. Her frustration has been replaced by a pained expression. It’s a face that I’ve rarely seen on her. “We were hoping something would come through—the latest immigration reform bill maybe.” She puts her head in her hands. “Or maybe you can go to school in the Philippines.”

Anger keeps working up inside me until I can’t stop the

rush of words coming from my mouth. “No! No way! I don’t want to go to the Philippines! It’s *your* home. Not mine. You’re always talking about taking advantage of opportunities here. But haven’t you heard? There aren’t any for illegal immigrants.”

Rage radiates from my chest near where I’d held the letter so close to my heart. I’m shaking. How could my parents hide this from me for so long? How could they bury their heads and just expect everything to turn out for the best? If they had told me earlier, I could have gotten help. I could have done *something*.

I’m *American*. We’re *resourceful*, aren’t we?

Mom has started weeping quietly. Dad seems shocked at my yelling. I know I’ve pushed it too far, but I can’t help the words ripping from my tongue.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I yell. “I can’t believe you guys kept this from us for so long!” My knees are locked too tight. I feel dizzy. I just talked back to my parents.

“Jasmine!” Dad stands from his chair and reaches to steady me.

It feels like there’s no ground beneath me, like everything I’ve ever done has been a lie. Like Los Angeles has never really been my home. I’m breaking apart, shattering. Who am I? Where do I belong?

I’m not American. I’m not a legal resident. I don’t even have a green card.

I’m nothing. Nobody.

Illegal.

ISBN-13: 978-0-373-21238-5  
ISBN-13: 978-0-373-21250-7 (Target signed edition)

Something in Between

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