

# 1

A gutted pumpkin glowed from across the street. The streetlight closest to the house got shot out almost one whole year ago so I could barely see nothing. Nothing but that glowing orange head without a body.

I sat on the porch swing hoping to stay outta Mama's way. She was in one of those moods again where she cursed the saints she'd be praying to later. Being Mexican and Catholic requires a lotta prayers. Even if they never seem to be answered you're still supposed to make 'em. But I'd quit that after all the glass.

The latch on the gate banged shut only I couldn't see nothing but a shape, a moving shadow with footsteps. Footsteps that made the porch stairs cry and moan. It walked right past me sitting on the swing and knocked on the screen door. I sat there all quiet but the swing squeaked. The Shape turned toward me. I didn't know what it was but it was big. Really, really, really all kinds of big.

The porch light flicked on and the Shape winced and fell back a step. Like when you go out into the sun after being somewhere really dark.

Mama opened the screen door saying "Hector" over her shoulder to my father.

Mama and I kinda stared. I couldn't believe that was the man my father believed was our family's gold.

The wheels of Pape's chair grinded against our wood floor. "Come in, come in," Pape said from inside the doorway.

Mama held the door open and took the Dark One's suitcase as he slipped inside.

"Chula," Mama said. "Get off the swing and get in here."

I started shaking my head.

“Andale,” she said. “I’m not telling you again.”

I pushed off the swing and went to the door.

“What did you say to him?” she asked me.

“I didn’t say him nothing.”

“Listen. Like it or not, that is all we have. God help us,” Mama said. “So don’t do anything to upset him. ¿Bueno?”

I stood there not saying nothing.

“What? I don’t have all night,” said Mama.

“Get in here.”

I ducked under her arm and followed her into the kitchen.

“Get the iced tea,” said Mama.

“Hello, Abuela,” I said to my grandmother.

Abuela leaned back in a chair at the kitchen table. Smiling, with her hands crossed in her lap. Her eyes half-open, half-closed like cats when they go to sleeping. Only she wasn’t sleeping. Not really.

“The tray, Chula,” said Mama. “Come on.”

Mama poured a bag of Tostitos into our sort of fancy lime-colored plastic bowl. She stepped around me and grabbed the homemade picante sauce out of the fridge.

“It’s staying with Tío Tony, right?” I asked her.

“He. His name is El Jefe and that is what you and your brother are to call him,” said Mama.

“Or he might do worse than kill us,” my dumb older brother Richie said, strutting into the kitchen all tough-like. “He might box our ears off so we can’t hear nothing.”

“Shut up,” I said.

Richie grinned, chomping into a chip.

“No sir,” Mama said, pulling the bowl away. “This is for El Jefe.”

“Pues, you see the size of that guy?” Richie asked Mama. “He’s like the Mexican Hulk.”

Richie stuck his hand back in the bowl and she slapped it.

“¿Qué pasó?” asked Richie.

“No jokes. No nothing,” said Mama. “This man has come a long way to help this family.” Then she looked at me. “And he’s staying here.”

I looked at her like she’d just lost her mind.

“Cool,” Richie said.

Mama walked over to Abuela and squeezed her hands. Abuela didn’t do nothing. Not even blink. If her chest wasn’t moving up and down, I would’ve thought she done died. Done died right there in South Texas dreaming of Mexico.

Mama turned on the radio. We only had one in the house and it played only for Abuela. Sometimes she'd get to looking too distant from us and closer to God, and Pape didn't like seeing his mama like that. The music seemed to return part of her to us, even if it was only for a while. But one thing I learned about *a while* in my family, it was never very long but it was longer than never and you always have to aim for that. Never means nada and nada means nothing and we want more than that, Mama always says. You must always want more than your history.

Mama weighted me down with the tray of cups and iced tea. Richie scooped up the bowl and salsa and we followed behind her.

Pape was smiling and happier than I'd seen him in like forever when we came into the living room. Mama stacked the magazines and free TV guide from the neighbor's Sunday newspaper under the coffee table so she'd have a place to put tea and chips.

"I'm sorry," said Mama to the Dark One. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow morning."

He nodded but didn't take his eyes off the floor. Really his eye 'cause he only had one. The

other was under a dusty patch with clawlike scars that went up all high on his head and spread outta the bottom like crooked fingers. I wondered if they hurt as much as the one on the side of my head.

Mama took the tray and chips from me and Richie and I stood there still looking at the creature out of the corner of our eyes. No way could it be true that Pape useta stick up for El Jefe when he was little. How could that Cyclops ever be that small?

Mama leaned in and said to me and Richie, “Sit down on the couch *now*.”

Richie walked around the coffee table and sat down at the far end, leaving only the space in between for me. Sit next to that? Uh-uh.

I followed Richie and tried to force my butt between him and the arm but only got halfway 'cause Richie was shoving.

“There ain’t no room, pendeja,” said Richie. “Go sit in the middle.”

Mama gave Richie a look and after a little more pushing he finally moved over some to let me in. Soon as she had her back turned, Richie shoved me into the couch arm, digging it so deep in my ribs I could barely breathe.

While Mama poured the tea, Abuela sang with the radio in the kitchen. Sang loud and beautiful and in Spanish. I wished I could've understood it. But Spanish came all hard to me.

"My mother's not well," Pape said to El Jefe. "The music fills us all with a little hope that she will come back to us."

Hope. That's why he came to help us, the Dark One, or as they chant in Mexico City, El Jefe de Diablo, the Boss of the Devil. Pape said the people in Mexico City splashed El Jefe with prayers and holy water, chanting his name when he walked down the street. Even the priest sat with the crowds in the most famous arena in Mexico, Diablo de Ojo, with a betting ticket in one palm, the rosary in the other. Some of the people in the Circle say El Jefe killed three men in Diablo for no more than the cost of a cup of coffee. Say he did it for the crowd . . . them chanting, "Silencio, silencio, Diablo."

Mama handed the cup of iced tea to El Jefe. His arms, thick pipes popped with veins, made the smudged tattoo of a cobra coiled down his arm seem almost alive in his skin. Every time the Dark One's fist moved, the snake crushed the skull and crossbones in its mouth over and over.

Richie elbowed me to check it out like I somehow missed it and I shoved him back, making him spill his iced tea onto El Jefe's gigantic black boots.

"Richie," Mama said.

"Ay, it was Chula," he said. "Why don't you tell her something?"

"Go get your things out of your room, so you don't bother El Jefe in the morning," said Mama.

"Why not her room?" Richie asked, looking at me.

"'Cause she said yours," said Pape.

Richie put his cup on the table. "I'm not doing it for you," said Richie to Pape.

"Hey, no more," said Mama to him. "And Chula, get ready for bed."

Richie yanked me off the couch and shoved me forward and just as I shoved back Mama stood up. Richie grinned real big and stepped back with his hands up. Then broke for the bathroom to shave, again. Even though he ain't got nothing but little fuzzy like a kitten on his face. Like nothing that girls are really into.

Richie had been in the bathroom for forever and a dozen years when I banged on the door.



“Enough already. Let me in, pendejo.”

He cracked the door, his face all foamy. “The more you shave the more it grow,” he said. “That’s why the hair on your legs is so long.”

He laughed and slammed the door in my face.

“I don’t shave, cabrón.”

“Then you’re really in trouble,” he said.

My brother’s kinda stupid. Though some say it might not be true take my word on it. He was. Even though he was fourteen and useta make straight As, he flunked the eighth grade, and I let him know it every chance I got ’cause we were both in junior high at the same time and he hated that. Only I was in seventh in *accelerated classes* which meant I was supposed to be smart only it was really hard ’cause I couldn’t just sit and think of other cool stuff. Like the world.

I heard the heavy footsteps of El Jefe coming from the living room and ran to my room. El Jefe’s shadow clawed the hall wall before his way big body. They both slipped by my door like smoke. I stuck my head out just as he shut my brother’s bedroom door at the end of the hall.

“Chula,” Mama said.

I almost jumped right outta my skin.

“Why aren’t you ready for bed?” she asked,

her rosary in one hand and a cup of hot Lipton tea in the other.

“Why do you think?” I asked.

“Just knock on the door,” she said.

The bathroom was right next to Richie’s room. No way was I going to stand there all alone with El Jefe only a few feet and a wooden door away.

“Ay,” Mama said, grabbing my elbow. “You’re being silly.” She stopped outside the bathroom door. “Richie.”

“What?” he asked with the water running.

“Hurry up. Your sister needs to get in there.”

He opened the door. “I done say to her I was almost done.”

She shook her head and went to her room. “No more trouble,” she said. “I already have too many prayers to make.”

Soon as she was gone he grinned and shut the door in my face.

Before I could even think to tell Richie something, a noise came from Richie’s room. A dragging-scratching-squealing noise. Like fingernails across wood across something else spooky. Whatever El Jefe could be doing in the darkness

of Richie's room sent my heart beating in my throat. I tried to swallow it down but it was too big.

I beat on the bathroom door. "Come on, Richie."

"Ay, I'm almost done . . . in an hour." He laughed.

There were footsteps. Deep creaking the wood floor footsteps. How could a thing that killed for no more than the cost of a cup of coffee sleep only two doors down from me? What if he came roaring out the door right then and—

I beat on the door again.

"Please, Richie," I said.

"In a minute, pest," Richie said behind the door.

I closed my eyes, trying not to think about El Jefe. It stayed quiet inside Richie's room, so I slowly opened one eye, turning my head at the same time. A light came through the crack my brother put in the door when he got mad at Pape and slammed his metal baseball bat at it. I was in the kitchen when Richie did it and heard the smash-ba-ziNG . . . bounce all over the house. But right then, there wasn't a single sound. Nothing

but the glow of light from the crack in the door. What was the beast doing in there?

I walked real careful up to the door and put my eye to the broken place. A new prayer candle glowed on the nightstand. El Jefe sat with his legs crossed Indian style, looking out the window. His hands on his knees. He'd moved Richie's bed so he could be closer to the window. I never seen anyone look like that, not up at the sky.

"What are you doing?" Richie asked.

I jumped real high 'cause the pendejo snuck up on me. I slug-bugged him in the arm.

"Ouch, puta," he said, punching me back.

Mama asked from her room, "What's going on?"

I ran to the bathroom, shut the door and locked it.

"Get to bed," she said to Richie.

I opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out my toothpaste and three bottles of pills. I shook the bottles real hard and imagined them maracas not medicine. I imagined them anything but what kept me from falling down.