

the book of
broken hearts



SARAH OCKLER

AUTHOR OF *TWENTY BOY SUMMER* AND *BITTERSWEET*

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SARAH OCKLER

Simon Pulse

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For Zoe Strickland,
my favorite bookworm ever*

Chapter 1

The law of probability dictates that with three older sisters, a girl shall inherit at least one pair of cut-off denim shorts that actually fit. Agreed?

Bzzz! Thank you for playing! Please try again.

If these things could talk, they'd be all, *Hi! We're Araceli's old cutoffs!* And I'd go, *Congrats on fulfilling your destiny, because you totally cut off circulation to the vital female organs! High fives!*

Actually, they were so tight up in there that if they could talk, it would sound more like, *Umph mphh mpph mpph hrrmm.*

What?

Exactly.

"Ready to do this?" I killed the engine and smiled at Papi across the front seat. He didn't say one word or the other, just squinted as I leaned over to do my lip gloss in the rearview.

"You look old, *mi querida.*"

"Says the guy who microwaves his socks?"

"They were cold." He shrugged. Seriously. Like *I* was the crazy one in this operation.

"Lucky you didn't start a fire." I hopped out of the truck and hooked the leash on Pancake, our golden retriever, who was suddenly doing this shake-rattle-and-roll dance with his dog booty—pretty adorable.

I de-wedged my sister's ex-denim and turned back to Papi. "Ever hear of dressing the part? If they take us seriously, maybe we won't get screwed."

He appraised Araceli's shorts and the strategically ripped Van Halen tee I'd pilfered from Lourdes' castaways. "Jude Catherine Hernandez. I'd like to see *anyone* ride a motorcycle in that outfit."

I stifled an eye roll. *Viejito* hadn't ridden a bike in thirty years. I, on the other hand, was totally up on this stuff. I'd bookmarked practically every Sturgis video diary ever posted, and thanks to a few Red Bull-and-Oreo-fueled YouTube all-nighters, I was approaching expert status in the vast and shadowy realm of motorcycle culture.

Leather, chains, and flagrant bralessness? Bring it.

Papi squinted at me again. "You look like—"

"Your favorite daughter? Tell me about it." I slipped an arm around his waist. Aside from my unequivocally pro-undergarment stance, I felt at least 87 percent biker-babe legit as I navigated Fifth Street, shoulders tucked neatly under the arm of a man old enough to be my father.

Okay, in all fairness, he *was* my father, but still. Manufactured authenticity? Phrase of the day for people!

"Duchess Custom Cycles." Papi read the sign just as I caught our mismatched reflection in the glass. He'd insisted on wearing an insulated flannel shirt and his complimentary THANKS FOR SUBSCRIBING TO THE WESTERN CHANNEL, PARDNER cowboy hat, despite the fact that it was five hundred degrees outside and I would've gotten more coverage from a skein of yarn and some duct tape.

Sweet Jeremiah Johnson, what a pair!

Papi opened the door, and I hobbled in with Pancake, still trying to coax out those unforgiving

shorts. People probably thought I had some kind of medical issue, which was ironic considering the whole reason I'd gotten myself into this rollicking high-plains adventure in the first place.

Despite its royal moniker, Duchess met my research-supported expectations. Dusty. Grimy. Wallpapered with scantily clad women draped over motorcycles. I *so* blended in, but once the door shut behind us, my nose was assaulted by the tang of motor oil and sweat, and my mind flashed through all the things I *should've* been doing the summer after graduation: dorm-supply shopping. Summer theater at Upstart Crow. Sipping frozen Java Potions at Witch's Brew and flirting with the East Coast kayakers who flooded Blackfeather, Colorado, every June.

Papi's warm hand on my shoulder tugged me back to reality. We'd reached the service counter. A glass door behind it offered a view of the garage, a wide concrete space scattered with bike parts and rags and grease-smudged mechanics.

The guy who emerged through the door had a small mouth hidden behind a dried blond shrub of a goatee that made me think of the tumbleweeds that cruised Old Town all summer. He wiped his hands on a dingy cloth as he greeted us, eyes lingering judgmentally on my shirt.

Jeez. I guess Pancake was just being nice when he gave my outfit the patented three-bark approval this morning.

"We need some info on restoring a vintage panhead," I said. "And a mechanic who can work at our place. Blackfeather Harley thought you could give my dad a better deal."

The guy's smile warmed when I said "dad," and I relaxed. But only a little, since my shorts were still trying to ride off into the sunset via Butt Cheek Pass and it was a challenge to stand still.

"We can sure try, darlin'." He spoke around a gnawed-up toothpick that had probably been in his mouth since the seventies. "Name's Duke. Whatcha got?"

"Sixty-one Duo-Glide. Bought her in Buenos Aires from the original owner in seventy-eight." Papi rattled off the specs, right down to the odometer reading and the customizations he'd done before he biked through the homeland when he was seventeen.

The story was a sock rocker for sure—I hadn't even heard it all yet—and Duke's face lit up at the telling.

Adventurous.

Daring.

Totally badass.

This was the Bear Hernandez everyone knew and loved. Not the guy cooking his socks or forgetting the way home from work. Papi's eyes shone as he spoke, and my heart thumped hard behind Eddie Van Halen's face.

The old man was still in there somewhere—I knew it.

The bike would bring him back. We just had to get her running again. A few replacement parts and a paint job, good as new.

I handed over my cell to show Duke the picture.

"Wow," Duke said. "You had her in storage all this time?"

"*Sí.* She's been idle since . . ." Papi squinted at Pancake as if the answer were written in those big brown dog eyes. "Pretty sure Reagan was in office last time I rode. She won't turn over. Brake lines were going too, if I remember right."

"The tires are all soggy," I said helpfully, "and some of the pipe things on the side are loose." I tugged my shirt down over the strip of belly that showed whenever I took a deep breath. *Pipe things. Soggy tires.* Apparently my extensive research didn't cover the technical terms.

Duke inspected the photo. The paint was fading, she was caked in rust and dirt, but it wasn't hard to

imagine her glory days. Baby blue and cream, chrome that must've gleamed like white light. She was probably strong once, really tore up those Argentine mountain roads.

And then my parents got married. Moved to the States. Had Lourdes. Araceli. Mariposa. And eight years after that, me.

Surprise!

Out in the garage, an engine growled and the mechanics cheered. Pancake whimpered and curled up at my feet.

Harleys. It was hard to picture Papi riding one of those things, but I guess he was pretty hard core back in the day. He had a posse and everything: Las Arañas Blancas. The White Spiders.

"*Queridita.*" Papi grinned when the rumbling stopped. "That's the sound of happiness, yeah?"

Actually my idea of happiness involved less machinery and testosterone than your average Harley offered up, but I returned his smile. Despite my wardrobe malfunction and the general dangers of hanging out with Papi in public these days, we'd already enjoyed a fine breakfast at Ruby Mountainside Café and managed to walk all the way from the truck to Duchess without Papi trying to steal a car or kiss another man's wife.

Real bang-up day so far.

"Good news and bad news." Duke returned my phone. "Good? She's a real beauty, and we can definitely fix 'er up."

Papi was suddenly looking out the front door like he needed to know the exits, needed a quick walk out, and I held my breath, hoping that whatever came out of Duke's mouth next didn't spark one of Papi's meltdowns and send him running into the street.

Mom would kill me if I lost him again. She'd seriously crush up my bones and throw me down the side of a mountain, and the Holy Trinity of my all-knowing sisters would stand there shaking my ashes from their hair and rolling their eyes about how even postmortem I couldn't follow directions.

Keep him close to home, Jude. Keep him calm and focused.

But they weren't there when I found the bike in the storage barn last week, when I cast off boxes of Christmas decorations and old report cards and peeled back the dusty blue tarps and asked Papi to tell me all about it.

They didn't see the light in his eyes, flickering on after months of darkness.

And other than a little dignity and the ability to walk normally for a few hours on account of the shorts, I wasn't planning to lose anything today.

"The bad news?" I asked.

"Time and money, honey." Duke swished the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. "Repairs, paint, accessories . . . that's a helluva restore. I'm not sure we can beat the big boys much on price. Hate to say this, but you'd probably get a better deal tradin' up, gettin' the old man something newer."

Heat flooded my face. "He's not old."

"It's she. And a sixty-one's goin' on more than fifty years, darlin'. Not a lot of miles left, if you catch my drift."

I catch your drift, all right.

I looped my arm through Papi's and leaned on his shoulder. Pancake let out a soft whine.

"We aren't trading up." I'd already been through all that with Blackfeather Harley. "Look, I'll be honest with you here, Mr. Duchess—"

"Duke."

"Duke. We don't have a ton of cash. What if we use rebuilt parts?" I met his gaze and held it, hoping

this wouldn't require any waterworks. Calling up a few tears was an option, but the biker-babe mascara made the prospect less appealing.

He stroked his goatee, hopefully considering our predicament. At least, how our predicament looked from the outside: Sticker shock. A girl trying to help her daddy with just enough babysitting money to cover the basics.

"Problem isn't just parts." He was still going to town on that toothpick, which seemed like some kind of motorcycle guy code; I'd seen it in the videos. "It's labor. Only got one guy experienced on vintage bikes, and he ain't that cheap. Ain't that available, either—he's booked till fall. When you lookin' to get 'er done?"

"I'm going on a road trip in August," I said. Fingers crossed Zoe and Christina hadn't finalized plans without me. "So, before then?"

Duke sucked in a breath. "Gonna be tight. For an off-site gig, at my lowest rates, I could only spare my junior mechanic. He's not completely certified yet."

I peered into the garage. Guys were stationed at different motorcycles and dirt bikes, most of them dressed in jeans and raggedy T-shirts, bare arms coated in grime. The conversation was muffled by the glass, but their easy banter was unmistakable.

Duke thumbed through the glass at a dark-blue bike, most of which had been stripped to its steel bones. A guy knelt before it—a little younger than the rest, maybe, but equally sure of himself. One arm was deep inside the bike, the floor around him littered with tools and rags.

"That's him in the bandanna," Duke said. "Good kid, knows his stuff. But like I said, barely got his training wheels off."

"Doesn't look like a kid to me." I subtly shifted my hips. Damn. These cutoffs were on a *mission*; my ability to concentrate was becoming seriously compromised. "Besides, we don't care how old he is. Just that he can do the work for cheap."

Papi nodded, but his eyes were still far away.

Duke tapped on the glass and waved the young mechanic forward.

The guy got to his feet, wiped his hands on a rag that hung from his back pocket. His head dipped low as he opened the door and I couldn't see his eyes. Just stubble. Dimples. Scar across the bottom of his chin. His arms were etched with jagged white scars too.

Dangerous stuff, this biker gig.

"How long you been working on these bikes?" Duke asked him.

"Eh . . . forever?"

"*Here*, smart-ass. For me."

"Like, two or three months, I guess. Why?" All his attention was on the boss, but my skin tingled like I was being watched. Not in a creepy way—a familiar one. Like maybe I'd seen this guy before, but with the bandanna and the grime, I couldn't place him. Definitely not from school or summer theater. Someone's cousin, maybe?

"Not ready, junior." Duke was totally baiting the poor guy. "Not for a sixty-one hog."

"You *kidding* me? A sixty-one?" He finally turned to face me, a grin stretching across his face. His dimples were kind of disarming full-on, but I stood my ground as he looked me over.

My skin heated under the scrutiny. I really wished Zoe had helped me prepare this morning. I didn't even like Van Halen, and she would've smartly pointed that out.

Dressing the part? Really, Jude. Someday your theatrics will be your undoing.

"Sixty-one panhead," I finally said.

His eyebrows jumped in either surprise or appreciation. Maybe both. "You *ride*?"

“No. It’s—”

“She’s mine,” Papi said, his mind returning from its little side trip. “And as far as I’m concerned, if you want the job, it’s yours.”

The mechanic started yammering at his boss in Spanish, deep and low. Puerto Rican, the accent was, faster and less meandering than the Argie stuff I’d grown up with. He was trying to convince Duke that he could do the job. Needed the *dinero* for some big bike trip this summer.

“Gentlemen,” I said. The mechanic looked up at me again, but I kept my eyes on Duke. “We’re not asking for a museum piece. We just need to get this thing rebuilt. So if he can help—”

“I can help.” He turned back to Duke, his scarred forearms flexing as he gripped the counter. “I rebuilt my own hog last year.”

“That’s an eighty-seven, kid. Sportster besides.”

He shrugged. “Aside from the kickstart, mechanics ain’t changed much.”

“Duke, please,” I said. “We *have* to get this thing running.”

Without permission, those on-call waterworks pricked my eyes. Maybe it was ridiculous to put much hope in restoring the bike, in believing it could really fix Papi. But it was our last shot—the one thing the doctors had overlooked, the faint glimmer of *maybe* that the medical research and case studies had somehow missed.

I cleared my throat and tried again. “What I mean is . . . it’s imperative that we complete the restoration as planned.”

Papi shook his head, his smile finally returning. “My daughter . . . she has a way with words.”

Duke eyed me skeptically, but he was clearly under the spell of our father-daughter charms. Even the toothpick stopped shuffling. “Okay, what the customer wants, the customer gets. Even if it’s the kid.”

“It’s the kid,” Papi confirmed. He was beaming again, totally back in the moment. “You’re hired.”

“You won’t be sorry.” The boy shook Papi’s hand and then reached for mine. I pressed my palm to his automatically, but as my skin warmed at his touch, something clicked inside, something familiar and dangerous, and I jerked my hand away and stared at it as if I’d been stung.

Freak show!

My cheeks flamed, but before anyone could question my bizarro reaction, Duke grabbed the boy’s shoulder. “You’d better be ready for this, Emilio.”

Emilio?

My head snapped up, jolted by a flash of recognition. “What’s your name again?”

“Emilio.” His lips formed the word, each syllable sliding into my ears with a rush of memory and white-hot guilt. Those caramel-brown eyes. Black hair curled up around the edge of that smudged bandanna. He wasn’t smiling now, but the dimples were still there, lurking below the surface like a dare.

I’d been warned that those dimples would be my undoing. Trained to avoid them most of my teenage life, a feat made easier when he’d bailed inexplicably out of Blackfeather High two years ago, a month before he was supposed to graduate.

Yet there he was. More grown up, scruffy along the jawline, filling out his T-shirt in all the ways he hadn’t before. Practically almost *ogling* me.

That real bang-up day I was having?

Crash. And. Burn.

The only guy in all of Blackfeather who could help—the guy we had just so desperately hired—was the only guy in all of Blackfeather I was bound by blood, honor, and threat of dismemberment from.

every female in the Hernandez family to unilaterally ignore.

~~I'm not kidding about the blood part. There was an oath and everything, carefully scrawled into a~~
infamous black book that once held all my sisters' secrets.

I almost laughed.

Of *course* it was him.

Emilio fucking Vargas.

Chapter 2

I, Jude Hernandez, vow to never, ever, under any circumstances within or outside of my control, even if the fate of humanity is at stake, even if my own life is threatened, get involved with a Vargas. . . .

Back in the blissfully boy-free zone of our kitchen, I stabbed a tomato until its guts leaked out. It had been five years and I was the only Hernandez sister left in the house, but the ancient oath echoed clearly as a hawk in the canyon.

“Rotten,” I whispered.

“Oh, they’re just a little soft.” Mom shook a saucepan of peppers and mushrooms into a sizzle behind me. *¡CALIENTE! ¡CUIDADO! OVEN AND STOVE FOR COOKING ONLY. DO NOT USE ALONE.* The index card on the range hood curled in the steam. “How was Papi today? Did you guys fish?”

Ugh. Fishing and board games—Mom’s idea of summer fun. It was only June, and Papi, Pancake, and I had already fished every living thing out of the Animas. And *Viejito* totally cheats at Scrabble. You should see the words he makes up for triple-letter scores. *Hola* and hello, *amigos*. Some of that stuff isn’t in the English or the Spanish dictionary.

“We went into town for breakfast,” I said. “Walked around Fifth, checked out some of the stores.”

Mom’s pepper mix sizzled a bit louder. “See anything cute?”

And the award for the understatement of the year goes to . . .

“No one. Nothing.” I turned on the faucet, *RIGHT FOR COLD/FRÍO. LEFT FOR HOT/CALIENTE.* “We ended up at that motorcycle garage. Papi hired a guy, this kid who works there.”

Once Papi and Duke had agreed on an hourly rate for Emilio and signed the paperwork, I rushed out of Duchess, and Papi hadn’t said another word. When we got home, I changed into my normal clothes and he parked himself on the couch for a cowboy movie marathon. Now I needed to get Mom’s stamp of approval on the motorcycle plans without actually naming names. I was pretty sure Vargas was still a four-letter word in our house.

For those of us who remembered what it meant, anyway.

“*Mi amor.*” Mom’s accent got stronger when she was worried or upset, and I turned to watch her lips, just in case. “Maybe you shouldn’t plant seeds in his head about fixing that old junker. It’s expensive, and Papi . . . It isn’t good to have strangers at the house all the time.”

Recently she’d started discouraging visitors—mostly well-meaning neighbors and Papi’s former office buddies—telling them Papi was tired, busy, unavailable. Now she mentioned “strangers at the house” again like I’d been nonstop ragin’ it every day since graduation. Sure, those Scrabble matches got intense sometimes. And one day, Pancake knocked his food right out of the bowl, spilling it all over the floor. *Cray-cray!*

“Don’t worry,” I said at the sink, *PRESS DOWN TO TURN OFF WHEN DONE.* The whole thing tied my stomach in knots too, just not for the same reasons. Still, this wasn’t about strangers and it wasn’t about some oath and an evil boy. It was about taking care of Papi. “I’ll keep an eye on things. And Papi’s really excited to work on it—something to do this summer besides fishing.”

Mom sighed and lifted the pan, flipping the veggies perfectly. With everything still steaming, she spooned the mix into circles of dough and folded each expertly, sealing the edges with the tines of

fork. I hated that she worked so many hours only to come home and cook, but that was her thing, she insisted. Her anchor to normal. Papi used to say that he fell in love with her cooking first, her son second, and maybe that's why she still did it. I'd pinned my hopes on the motorcycle, but maybe Mom thought the empanadas would help him remember, that the half-moon sight of them would bring him back.

"Hmm. We should ask your sisters about the mechanic, *queridita*. No?"

"No! I mean . . . They're, like, *super* busy, and we don't need to stress them out over my summer plans with Papi. I can totally handle this, Mom."

Mom finally nodded and I returned to my mushy tomatoes. They reminded me of hearts, and I blinked at the hazy memory of Lourdes's prom corsage crushed in the garbage. And then, seven years later, Araceli's face, streaked with tears.

That whole family is cursed, Mari had said on Araceli's night. Dark hearts, every one.

Thou shalt never, ever, get involved with a Vargas? It was one of those things we were supposed to accept without question from that night forward, like the way Mom pressed a fork into her empanada because that's how Abuelita taught her. It didn't matter if there was a better way, something new to try. It was just how it'd been handed down, as much a part of the family history as our olive skin and long brown tresses.

Well, Mari chopped her tresses and went bombshell blond, but not every tradition could be overturned with scissors and a box of Nice 'n Easy number 104.

The oven door creaked open, heat washing over my bare legs as Mom slid in the empanadas.

"Twenty minutes," she said. "How's the watercress coming?"

I layered red onion rings over the tomatoes. "Done."

"Looks perfect." She winked over my *ensalada de berros* as if she'd known it would be perfect all along.



If our house was ever attacked by zombie bunnies, Pancake would totally sound the alarm, but for now the coast was clear, and he lounged on the floor with his nose against the screen door and eavesdropped on our dinner conversation.

Papi was saying something for the third time about the blueberry pancakes we'd eaten at Ruby's, and the poor dog kept snapping his head back and forth between Papi and the door, Papi and the door. Pancake-*bunnies*-pancake-*bunnies*-pancake-*bunnies*.

When Papi got to the part about Duchess, I gave him the hush-hush symbol before he could name Emilio, and he stuck out his tongue and tugged his ear like we were umping a baseball game.

"Are you okay?" Mom asked him.

"¿*Que?*"

"Okay?" she said louder. "Something wrong with your ear?"

He waved her off and dug into the watercress with his silverware.

"*Dios mío*, use the tongs." She abandoned her chair and dished out his salad, poured the oil and vinegar too.

Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to fly away, as far as I could, like Lourdes and Celi had done, first chance they got. Not just Denver, where I was supposed to go this fall for college.

Away away.

"*Ay*, Rita. Not so much dressing." Papi dumped the excess onto her plate. He smacked her butt and she shooed him off, but she was totally smiling.

"You never make empanadas anymore." Papi manhandled a few more onto his plate.

"Por favor," Mom said. "We had them last week."

He wagged his finger. "You're trying to trick me, woman."

Spain. That's where I'll go. Or maybe South America, look up Papi's old biker buddies, follow the trail he
blazed all those years ago.

"We did," Mom said. "Juju, tell him."

"I don't remember," I said.

"That's because we didn't have them." Papi reached for another empanada. Now that calories had
been demoted on the list of Things Likely to Kill You When You Least Expect It, he could eat a few
more. "When I die, bury me with a plate of these."

Mom laughed. "I would not let perfectly good food go to waste in the ground. Speaking of wasting
money, what were you saying about this Duchess boy?"

"Seems like a good kid," Papi said through a mouthful of food. "His name was . . . what was it, Juju?"

"Finish chewing," Mom said.

"Something . . . simple." I scooted my chair closer to Papi. "Oh, Eddie. That was it. Eddie." Mom
might not remember the name of every last Vargas, but no sense taking chances.

"How much does this simple Eddie charge?" Mom asked.

"He's cheap," Papi said.

"What if you do it yourselves?" Mom scooped another empanada onto my plate. "Maybe you could
order the parts from this Eddie, and read the manuals—"

"Don't be silly. Juju and me, rebuild a bike from scratch? Oh, *mi amor*, you're too much."

Papi was right. If either one of us tried to fix the Harley alone, we'd end up with the world's most
expensive toaster.

"I'm telling you, it's a great deal. And it'll feel good to work on her again." Papi knocked on his head.

"I remember everything about that bike. We'll show El Demonio who's boss, eh, Juju?"

That's what he called it—the Demon. The evil thing eating its way through his mind, devouring his
memories. I pictured it that way too, some hell-bound red dragon, shadow and fire, carving a path of
utter ruin.

The doctors had another name for it: early onset Alzheimer's.

I watched him closely, and I wondered if he saw anything, if the words and images turned to smoke
as he looked on, helpless. Or if it was more like trying to open a deleted file on the computer—
something you thought was there last time but couldn't be certain, and all you got was that annoying
message, over and over.

File not found.

I waited for him to finally ask why we'd left Duchess in such a hurry, or to say something about
Eddie-slash-Emilio, how he'd seen the family resemblance and changed his mind.

But Papi kept on chewing and smiling. He had no idea who Emilio was.

. . . never, ever, under any circumstances . . .

Dios mío, the oath was a silly thing. The candles. The knife. The burnt hair. The black book. Mar
was such a drama queen. Plus, my sisters would've said anything to make Celi laugh that night. Plus,
I was twelve years old—pretty sure no court would uphold a contract signed by a kid under duress. Plus,
if anyone wanted to get technical, hiring a Vargas to rebuild Papi's bike was certainly not the same as
"getting involved" with one, which I would never do in a million years, oath or not. I stood by my pro
undergarment stance 100 percent—definitely not compatible with the Vargas lifestyle.

"So you like this boy, Juju?" Mom asked.

“What? No! Why would you think that?”

She squinted at me over the rim of her wineglass. “I don’t understand. Why hire him if you don’t like him?”

“I *like* him. I just don’t *like* him, like him. Like a boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Mom set down her glass. “Juju, what on earth are you talking about?”

I grabbed my water glass and chugged. For, like, ten minutes. Then I set it on the table and waved off her confusion. “Bad boyfriend. Good mechanic. Since we need a mechanic, and not a boyfriend, we’re in luck.”

“Juju . . .” Her brow was furrowed, eyes darting from Papi to me. “Do you trust this boy to work on the bike? *No estoy seguro*. . . . Is he a good idea?”

No. Under no circumstances, in Spanish or in English, is Emilio Vargas a good idea.

But across the table, Papi’s face was untroubled, his eyes full of excitement and possibility, and I knew we’d done the right thing today. Papi’s soul was tied up in the Harley, his very essence. Emilio Vargas’s name set my teeth on edge, but we needed him. He was our *last* good idea. Our only hope.

My only hope was that the youngest in the family of notorious heartbreakers had no recollection of one time, in a galaxy far, far away, we were *this* close to becoming family.

“Sí,” I said, and Papi was totally glowing. “It’s a great idea.”

Chapter 3

The storage barn was one teetering pile away from an episode of *Hoarders*, but there was an oil workbench and tables that Papi had set up back when he was still allowed to use power tools. He and I had spent the morning clearing out space, and now the Harley rested on its kickstand beneath a dingy blue tarp right in the middle of everything.

“This is your girl, huh?” Emilio beamed at us over the bike, and I felt completely exposed, like I was wearing an even skimpier outfit than yesterday.

Does he know who I am?

Not possible. He hadn’t seen me in two years, and even when we went to the same school, we never hung out. I was glued to Zoe, and he’d spent his BHS days surrounded by an impenetrable wall of girls who buzzed around him like spazzy little electrons.

And before that? We never had the chance to meet on official family business. His brother John had seen to that.

I squared my shoulders and shook off the cloud of nerves and guilt. We weren’t here to reminisce about how I never got to wear my junior bridesmaid dress, which was the color of lilacs and was still hanging somewhere in the storage barn, clean and pressed.

“Do the honors,” I said.

Emilio peeled back the tarp until the bike stood naked before us. She was dull and banged up, but her beauty still shone beneath all those miles, all that time. Emilio ran his hand along the length of her, his feather-light touch lingering at the curves. His forehead creased with intensity as if he were communicating with her very soul.

“Do motorcycles have souls?” I asked.

“Better believe it.” Papi was at the workbench rifling through old tools, his hands covered in dust, eyes alert. The barn seemed to have a clarifying effect on him. Maybe it was the faint smell of oil and gas, the remembered clang of tools on metal. Or maybe he just liked being away from the note cards Mom had tacked onto every potentially dangerous object in the house. The barn was a label-free zone.

“They have their own magic,” Papi continued. “Especially Valentina—she’s something else.”

“Valentina?” I asked.

“That’s her name. She’s been with me a long time, lots of places. Did I ever tell you about Paraguay? We outran a jaguar together. That beast chased us down the road for I don’t know how long.” Papi wiped his eyes. “If you don’t believe in God? That’s the day you find religion.”

I rolled my eyes. A jaguar? Honestly.

Emilio didn’t say anything, just squinted at Valentina, tapping and rubbing, watching and listening. I’d seen people treat horses that way, but not motorcycles. Papi didn’t seem bothered by it though. Maybe it was normal biker-guy stuff, like the toothpick thing.

I pulled the cell from my pocket and snapped a picture. Emilio looked up.

“It’s for my father,” I said.

“Lots of girls want my picture.”

Papi laughed.

“Actually, I wanted a picture of the bike, but your giant head got in front of it.” I turned back to Papi. “You be quiet. I was taking it for you.”

“Talk to me, Valentina.” Emilio knelt on the ground and pressed his ear to the gas tank.

What a show-off!

“She saying anything?” I asked, hopping up on the workbench.

Emilio glanced up at me, then back to the bike. “I can’t hear her.”

“That’s weird,” I said. “You must be easily distracted. It’s pretty quiet here most of the time. Except when Pancake spots a rabbit and goes nuts. Or when it rains. Then it’s like someone dropped a bunch of quarters on the roof, and you can’t hear yourself think, because—”

“Juju?” Behind me, Papi dusted his hands together. “Let the man work.”

My cheeks went hot and I clamped my mouth shut.

Fine. I could observe in silence. No problema. None whatsoever. This is me, being quiet. Letting the man work.

On the dirt-dusty floor, Pancake yawned and stretched out on his belly. Together we waited, stealth mode, until Emilio finally waved Papi over for a conference. The two of them huddled near the engine, speaking a foreign language. Like, a not-Spanish one.

I hopped off the workbench. Apparently I wasn’t very helpful in the motorcycle restoration department, but it felt weird just sitting around looking pretty, as they say. Plus, my butt was asleep.

Emilio stopped speaking and looked up as if I might try to sneak in a few words, but I didn’t. He and Papi needed quiet Jude, so quiet Jude they got.

“Sodas,” I mouthed, pantomiming the act of drinking one with my right hand while I pointed toward the house with my left.

Yes, my friends, this is what six years of advanced drama looks like!



When I got back to the barn, Emilio was on the floor examining some parts he must’ve taken off the bike. Papi watched intently, but he’d gone still, his face drawn and pale.

“Come outside and take a break,” I said to them. Out loud this time, no more interpretive dancing.

We headed over to the picnic table, where I’d set out Cokes, a cold spread of leftover empanada and a bowl of Doritos.

Papi slumped in his chair and reached for a chip. He turned it in his fingers and crushed it, but when the crumbs hit the table, he stared openmouthed as if he’d expected some other outcome.

“Hope they’re not stale,” I said. “Have some Coke, Papi.”

Across from us, Emilio crunched loudly, and I prayed he was too engrossed in Blazin’ Buffalo and Ranch-ness to notice Papi fading out.

“Are these bad?” Papi mashed his thumb into the mess on the table.

“They’re not exactly healthy.” Emilio grabbed another handful. “But they’re awesome.”

Papi crammed a few chips in his mouth. “I’m not really a morning person,” he said, lips dotted with crumbs. “I like camping.”

My neck went hot and prickly. One minute Papi was talking about jaguars and chrome pistol covers, which he hadn’t thought about in decades, and the next he was in outer space. He was like GPS in the mountains, alternately navigating impossible roads with ease and then losing the satellites.

“We should all go sometime. Lourdes, do you still have that old tent?”

Searching for signal . . . searching for signal . . . searching for signal . . .

“It’s Jude, Papi. I don’t know where the tent is. Probably in the barn.”

I tensed and waited for Emilio to bolt, to come up with some urgent need that would take him anywhere but here. ~~Maybe Mom was onto something, trying to keep Papi tucked away from the world.~~ Not because we should be embarrassed of him. But because everyone else would be embarrassed *for* us, and watching them squirm was worse than enduring the uncomfortable squirming ourselves.

“Love camping.” Emilio reached for an empanada. “Only in the summer though. Anything below fifty degrees and I wimp out.”

“Remember when we camped at Rocky Mountain, Lourdes?” Papi asked.

I stared at my hands, twisted together so tightly my fingertips turned white. “It’s *Jude*, Papi.”

“Jude wasn’t born yet. Mom was pregnant with her. Don’t you remember? Mom couldn’t go on the big hikes, and you and Mari wanted to stay in the tent with her while Celi and I climbed Twin Sister. What a beautiful view—we saw bighorn sheep. Celi almost gave me a heart attack, she got so close with her camera!”

I smiled. It seemed like a good memory; I would’ve loved to have been there.

But I wasn’t.

Lourdes lived in Mendoza now—she’d been out of the country for twelve years already. I barely remembered the times she’d lived here, sharing a room with Mari, who moved to Denver six years ago. Celi was the last to go, and she’d been in Manhattan four years already. They’d all gone off to live productive lives—winemaker, literary agent, executive assistant—and I’d been alone with my parents ever since.

I looked around at our once-crowded picnic table, and suddenly I felt the absence of my sisters like pressure on my heart. I closed my eyes and tried to remember them exactly as I’d seen them at this table last—two years ago, huddled around Papi as he made wishes over fifty candles. Lourdes couldn’t come in person, but she’d attended via Mari’s laptop on Skype, and she cheered louder than anyone when Papi blew out the candles, all but one extinguished.

“Jude?” Emilio’s voice brought me back. When I opened my eyes, my sisters vanished. All that remained in my memory was that single flame, burning bright beneath the smoke of the others.

“Jude?” Papi repeated. He smiled with his mouth full, and my heart sank.

Please bring Papi lots of happy birthday luck and good health. The end.

“I’m beat.” I faked a yawn. “Should we head inside?”

Papi stared at me so long I could almost see the wheels turning behind his eyes, the pieces slipping and out of the puzzle that never quite clicked into place anymore. “Okay, *querida*.”



Emilio was in the barn when I got back, checking out Valentina’s speedometer and scribbling notes onto a yellow pad.

“You’re still here?” The question was out before I could stop it, words thick with surprise and unexpected relief.

“You think I’m gonna eat and run? We got a job to do here, you and me.” He smiled and set the notepad on the workbench, wiped his hands on his jeans. Everything he did was so confident and determined, and when he met my eyes again, my heart gave an involuntary shudder. “Everything okay with your pops?”

“He’s . . . It’s fine.”

Emilio nodded. “I knew it. You needed an excuse to get me alone. Next time just say so, *princesa*. I’ll take you somewhere nice and quiet.”

The skin around his eyes crinkled when he laughed, and my stomach tried to react with a little zing.

but I shut *that* nonsense down with a quickness. Just by talking to this boy and sharing the same air, was breaking some serious sister code.

Um, Universe? If I'm betraying my sisters, please cause a power outage or freak rainstorm or some other natural disaster. Preferably a super obvious one that leaves no room for interpretation. Anything? Anything at all?

"You and your pops were smart to hire me. I'm really good." Emilio raised his eyebrows in a hopeful arc, making him look about five years younger but doing nothing to diminish his charm. He knew it to—wore that flirty little grin like a badge. "Can't wait to get my hands inside this baby."

"I'm *sure*." I matched his smile, and then deadpanned, flipping open my phone calendar. There was a text invite from Zoe—coffee tomorrow at Witch's Brew with Christina—but I ignored it. I couldn't think about friends right now. Papi's mini-meltdown was an alarm bell, a reminder of how little time we had to get the bike restored, to reconnect Papi with his old memories before he lost any more. "You're done congratulating yourself, I need to know how much time we're talking. We don't have a whole summer."

He pulled back almost imperceptibly, but I noticed the change. *Good*. Now that he knew he wasn't dealing with some softhearted little damsel, we could get down to business.

"Time?" I said again, finger poised over the touchscreen.

Emilio rested his hands gently on the bike. "I won't know how much work she needs until I get a good look inside, then we'll need to order parts. I know this great place for rebuilt stuff online, and—"

"Look, Emilio. That's your name, right?" By now I was in full-on actress mode, channeling every heartbreaking babe I'd ever played onstage. "Can you get this thing running by August or not?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Then we'll see you here tomorrow at—what time did you say?"

"I didn't." Emilio was laughing again, shaking his head. "I'm at Duchess tomorrow. Think you can wait a whole 'nother day to see me?"

"No. I mean yes. I mean—for your information, I have plans tomorrow." I hastily accepted Zoe's invite and continued scrolling through my calendar as if there were more invitations to consider. *Busy, busy!* "I'm just trying to get your schedule straight for my father. I'm a partner in this restore, and I intend to manage your work *very* closely. Got it?"

Emilio took a step toward me, his smirk widening. "Whatever you say, *princesa*. But if you're gonna work *very* closely with me, you better stop dressing like that." His eyes trailed down my pink lace can and white capri pants, his stupid dimples like a warning beacon. "Things are gonna get dirty up in here this summer."

Chapter 4

Christina's big summer plans involved cramming in shifts at Witch's Brew and checking out the rock climbers who cruised through before their trek up the East Animas cliffs. She'd claimed all that careful observation would enhance her sociology studies at UC Berkeley.

Zoe and I were supposed to be her research assistants. In quotes.

So far, it looked like Zoe had been holding up her end of the deal—after I got to the café the morning, it took five minutes to snag her attention from the pack of boys at the counter.

I'd been trying to put in enough time with the girls to hold my place, to let them know I still wanted in, still thought of them. But things were getting tougher with Papi, and ever since he stopped working, Mom had been taking more shifts at the NICU up in Willow Brush, which meant long hours for all of us. I hadn't seen my besties in weeks.

I'd accepted the invite yesterday to prove something to Emilio—what, I didn't know—but I was glad I had.

"I missed you guys," I said. And that was the truth of it.

"I missed you too!" Zoe said, and Christina nodded, all sun-kissed and adorable in her purple Witch's Brew apron. There was a little emblem on the front beside her name tag, a black witch riding a broom against an all-white moon.

"I wanted to call you, but I didn't know . . ." Christina's eyes darted over to Papi, parked at his own table in his leather Arañas jacket, recently unearthed. Her smile had faltered when he walked in behind me earlier, but she pulled it together fast, bringing him a free blueberry Scrying Scone and a cup of Dark Moon roast. When he'd asked about her summer plans, she pretended she didn't hear and scooted back behind the counter to help a caffeine-jonesing rock climber.

I set my frosty Java Potion and a bag of salted caramels on the table. "What's up with the Dunes? Did we settle on dates yet?"

Zoe smiled so big and bright, all ten million of her freckles lit up, and her red curls seemed to bounce in place. "Yay! I *told* you she wouldn't bail!"

She'd meant it for Christina, but our coffee witch was busy watching Papi, holding her breath like her hair might wig out again.

Not that I blamed her. Last time she'd seen Papi, he was accusing her of trying to poison him at the BHS family picnic.

A turkey sandwich. That's how it all started.

One of the volunteers had mislabeled it as roast beef, and Christina gladly passed it to Papi as such.

That little error changed everything.

The Turkey Sandwich Incident (TSI), Mom and I later called it. Everyone was there to see it. All the graduating seniors. Parents. Siblings. Teachers. The principal.

And here go my friends: Shock. Confusion. Fear. And then the worst one: pity. I hadn't even told them about the diagnosis yet—Mom wanted to keep it in the family as long as possible—and in the span of five minutes, all the things that made me *me* got erased. I'd gone from Jude Hernandez, best friend, play person, bookworm, bad drawer, salty-snack connoisseur, to Jude Hernandez, Daughter of

Crazy Pants.

~~He wasn't crazy. He had Alzheimer's. And he didn't like turkey. Really didn't like it.~~

Neither did I, anymore.

"Wouldn't miss it," I said with a hefty dose of enthusiasm. "When do we leave?"

"August twentieth," Zoe said, "give or take."

That gave us more than two months to get the bike running.

"Perfect," I said.

Zoe beamed. "Should we hit up Target tomorrow? Stock up on road-trip reinforcements?"

"I work a double tomorrow," Christina said. "Friday?"

"You guys have to stock up without me." I gave them the highlights version of the bike project, skipping over the name of our mechanic. Emilio and his brothers had been a topic of more Jude-and-Zoe middle-school gabfests than the Cullens, the Lightwoods, or any of the other mysterious yet fictional bad boys we dreamed about back then, and she'd freak if she knew he'd resurfaced. At my house. For the entire summer.

"I need to stick close to home," I said. "Keep an eye on things for my dad."

"For the whole summer?" Christina said.

I popped a few caramels and shrugged. "The guy promised it would be done before our trip."

"But it's our last summer." Zoe's freckles dimmed. "What about the play?"

Upstart Crow was doing *Alice in Wonderland* this summer, starring Zoe as the Queen of Hearts. Six months ago, she and I had grand plans: She'd be the Queen, I'd be Alice, and we'd spend weeks rehearsing to get it absolutely perfect. A real curtain call on our last summer.

When I backed out of auditions, I promised I'd still help backstage, rehearsals, costumes, whatever I could do at the theater. Now even that would be impossible.

"I can't," I said.

"Okay. I get that you have to help out at home," Zoe said, "but you just graduated. And after that we'll be at college, and then we'll have real jobs and a mortgage and all that sucky stuff. This is our last chance for a normal teenage summer."

I chewed on my straw. *Normal teenage summer? What does that even mean?*

"At least she's coming to the Dunes," Christina said.

"She better." Zoe bumped my knee with hers, and I swallowed the lump in my throat, waited for it to lodge back in my chest where it had settled after Papi's diagnosis in January. I'd told Zoe and Christina soon after the TSI, but they didn't really get how someone as young as Papi could have a disease associated with grandparents, with frail old bodies bent and bleached by time. Even I didn't get it. Papi still had the wavy black hair and tanned skin of his youth; he was broad shouldered and strong, and every time I looked at him, some part of me still believed that one day he'd decide enough was enough and shake it off.

Apparently, today was not that day.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Papi beelining for the door. He hadn't finished his scones, though when I got up close, I noticed he was wearing a good bit of it on his shirt.

"Papi, you okay?"

"Eh?"

"Can we hang out a few more minutes?"

He watched me a moment, then finally returned to his table by the window.

"Sorry," I said when I got back to the girls. They exchanged a nervous glance, and I fumbled for something to rekindle the conversation. "Any more ideas about the trip?"

Zoe leaned back in her chair. “We’re thinking of renting a car so we don’t have to worry about breaking down.”

“Good idea. What else?” I slurped up my Java Potion, waiting for her to continue.

“There’s some cool stuff to see on the way there, like—”

“Jude?” Christina’s face was tight and pale. “Your dad’s . . . digging in the trash.”

I followed her eyes across the coffee shop. Sure enough, Papi had both hands in the trash can, elbows deep.

“I need something.” He glared at me as if it should be obvious. “It’s not here. I think . . . I have to go now.”

The sun was deceptively cheerful, and as soon as we got outside, he stopped and basked in the light. Behind us, one of the other coffee witches swept a family of tumbleweeds off the sidewalk. Papi watched them catch the air current and mosey on down the road.

“This way.” He crossed the street to Grant’s Pharmacy and ushered me inside. He grabbed a shopping cart and the warning bell in my head gave a faint tinkle, but before I could ask any more questions, Mari called.

Mari was not the kind of sister you casually forwarded into voice mail.

“Ready for Mari’s Internet Dating Fiascoes, take seventeen?”

She launched into the story without waiting for a response, talking fast while I trailed Papi through the store—he cruised past the coolers, through the foot-care aisle, past the vitamins and fish-oil capsules, right to baby central.

“So not only was he missing a tooth,” Mari was saying when we reached the diapers, “but he was totally married.”

“*Eww.*” It was the only word I’d managed so far, and Mari giggled.

“I know, right? Like he couldn’t get a crown or something?”

“I meant the married part. Hang on.” I covered the mouthpiece and turned to Papi. “Almost done?”

“Ah!” He smiled and pointed to his head. “Wrong aisle. This way.”

“. . . the last guy at least had all his teeth.” Mari chattered on, oblivious. “But he lived in his mother’s basement in Capitol Hill, so obviously *that* was going nowhere.”

“Papi, what are you looking for?”

“Papi’s there?” Mari said. “Let me say hi.”

“We’re . . . shopping.” I left out the part about us standing in the feminine-products aisle, scanning pink boxes as if they revealed a secret code while some poor kid stocking pregnancy tests tried not to stare.

“What else are you guys doing today?” she asked.

“Coffee with the girls. Maybe . . . fishing? I don’t know. What about the basement guy?”

Papi grabbed a box of tampons off the shelf. “Four girls,” he told the stock boy. He waved the pink and-white box like a flag.

“Who’s he talking to?” Mari asked.

I switched the phone to my other ear and reached into the cart to retrieve the tampons. “Just the stock guy.”

“We need those, Juju.” Papi took the box from my hand and dropped it back into the cart, then added a few more. The store kid smiled awkwardly. Thankfully, I didn’t recognize him from school.

“Anyway,” Mari said as if we weren’t approaching code-red in the tampon aisle, “I’m deleting my Match profile.”

I tried to steer the cart away, but Papi wouldn’t budge.

“Do yourself a favor, son.” His voice rose as he swiped boxes of feminine-hygiene products into the cart faster than I could put them back.

“Juju?” Mari asked. “What’s going on?”

My throat tightened as I held off a sob. I couldn’t do this without her, without Celi or Lourdes. Mom was working so much and Papi was getting worse and everything was falling apart. . . .

“Papi’s upset,” I said. “He’s freaking out and—”

“Where are you?” Her tone went high alert. “Can you call Mom?”

“She’s at work. What do I do?”

“What about Zoe, Juju? Jude!” Mari was frantic. “Do I need to call the police?”

Police? The word sent a jolt through my heart, shook me out of my panic. Cops would make things more embarrassing for Papi—for all of us. I had to handle it. We could buy the tampons if we had to—stock up for the next decade if it would get us out of here quickly.

I took a deep breath. “No. I got it covered. Sorry . . . false alarm. But you’re breaking up. Call your mom later!” I clicked the phone off and slipped it into my pocket, reaching for Papi with my other hand.

“If you ever have girls,” he told the stock boy, “buy shares in this company. By the time you’re my age, you’ll own Tampax, Kotex, and any whatever-ex out there.”

“Okay, Papi,” I said. “Good advice. Let’s get home for lunch.”

“Lourdes, your sisters will kill me if I go home without this stuff.” His voice was getting louder with every word.

“We’ll come back later,” I said. “I don’t know what kind they like.” The phone buzzed against my hip bone. Mari.

“It’s this kind. I’m sure.” He dropped a different box into the cart—a pregnancy test.

“They definitely don’t need that.” I tried to put it back on the shelf, but he grabbed my arm.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“It’s a pregnancy test, Papi. I thought we were getting tampons?”

And that wraps up the top-ten things a girl should never have to say to her father. . . .

Papi snatched the test from my hands, chucked it back into the cart. “Young lady, I think I know what kind of shoes my own daughters wear.”

The lump was back in my throat, threatening to choke off the air. My phone buzzed and buzzed and the overhead lights hummed and I gave Papi’s hand a gentle squeeze and leaned in close to whisper in his ear. “Please, Papi. I’m starving. Can we go?”

“I’m not hungry.” He slipped out of my grasp and spiked a package of yellow-wrapped pads into the cart.

“Jude?”

I turned toward the voice at the end of the aisle: Zoe, hands on hips, red-gold curls lit by the fluorescent overheads. “What’s—”

“Oh, good! Mariposa is here. Is this the kind you like, *querida*?” Papi reached for her as she approached, holding up another package of pads so she could see.

“Papi,” I said gently, “this is Zoe. Mariposa isn’t here.”

“Zoe?” He looked at her as if she were a stranger, as if she hadn’t spent most of her childhood camping out in our backyard and sneaking ice cream sandwiches from our freezer. I nodded slowly, praying that Zoe wouldn’t say anything to further scramble the circuitry between his ears.

His face filled with recognition. “Do you . . . do you girls need a ride to school? Or . . . no. First I have to get some things for Araceli, then . . . are we at Burger Barn?” He drifted off, his eyes suddenly red and watery.

I wanted Zoe to leave. To turn around without saying another word, to forget she'd come here. Because if anything was worse than seeing a grown man lose it in the tampon aisle, it was seeing a grown man cry because he didn't remember how he'd gotten to the tampon aisle in the first place.

Zoe didn't move, and Papi turned his head from side to side as if that would help him get his bearings. The stock boy returned to his arranging, but he was straightening the same boxes over and over, his neck and ears bright red.

Papi continued to look around, baffled and humiliated, and I closed my eyes, silently repeating the mantra the social worker doled out after we got the news: *It's not my father, it's the disease. It's not my father, it's the disease. . . .*

"We're at the pharmacy," I told him. "We had Burger Barn the other day, so let's try the Cantina. I've been craving their chips and guacamole."

I touched Papi's elbow, and his eyes cleared. He looked from me to Zoe with renewed focus, sharp and determined.

"My daughters asked me to pick this stuff up for them, can you believe that? But I do it. Because we do what we can, right?"

Zoe forced a smile. "Jude, um, let's get coffee another day. I'll tell Christina . . . um . . . call me when you get home, okay?"

Her eyes were glassy and frantic, and she zoomed toward the door as if the place were on fire, and a woman behind us whispered to her companion, "I think that's her father, poor thing."

"Let's go eat." I tugged on Papi's shirtsleeve, but he shook me off immediately.

"Jude Hernandez, you will settle down and behave yourself in public."

I was five years old again, wilting in the Colorado heat, whining to go home after a long day of errands. People were watching us; the burn of their collective stare scorched my skin. My phone kept buzzing in my pocket, and my tongue was fat and stupid and useless. "Papi—"

"¡*Cállate!*" His command was short and firm, and I did as he ordered: Shut up. He dropped another box into the cart and I stared at a crack in the floor, wishing it would expand and swallow me down into the deep red earth with the dinosaur bones. But it didn't, and people kept passing by and jostling me, and Papi was loading up the cart and—

"It's my favorite Hernandezes." Emilio clomped down the aisle, arms loaded with enough candy and chips to feed the whole garage. When he noticed the disheveled pyramid of boxes in our cart, his eyes went wide.

I didn't have time to worry about my own mortification. Papi was three minutes from a full-scale nuclear meltdown. We needed to vacate. *Rápido.*

"We're leaving," I said. "Just had to get some things . . . for my mother. And my aunts. And all my cousins." *Even though they live in Argentina, where they grow their own tampons.* "Ready, Papi?"

Papi turned to Emilio, his fingers closing on another pregnancy test. "Do you have kids, *júnior?*"

Emilio looked at me with raised eyebrows, but I didn't have answers. Was there a right one? A wrong one? Anything could snap him back to reality or send him into the abyss.

"No, sir," Emilio said. "No wife yet either."

Papi clucked his tongue. "Good-looking guy like you? I don't believe it."

"I know, right?" Emilio loosened up, his smile genuine. "Glad I ran into you guys. I found this vintage Harley blog and—"

"Harley? I used to ride. Sixty-one Duo-Glide," Papi said.

Emilio's eyebrows drew together, but I shook my head, like, *Don't ask, just play along*, and he pressed on. "Yeah, I heard."

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