

TWO

THE GIRL FROM SOMEWHERE

I knocked on Chico's apartment door. I heard a shrieky laugh and then his shout, "Come in."

What did I see when I walked into the dining area but this teenager planted on his lap. Maybe that's not so bad, but she was real developed for her age, with a chest to be proud of. She was wearing one of those leotard things, a white one so that her dark nipples showed clearly and her big ass was spread out like the Pillsbury Doughboy's in tight white shorts.

Chico shifted a little in the chair under her weight. He got all round-eyed and tight-lipped and arched an eyebrow at me.

"Doña Fina, this is Hilesca. She's . . . my daughter." Winking and blinking. "My daughter."

The only one who was down with this lie, or seemed to be, was the girl herself. She flashed a gleaming smile.

My head hitched back and forth like a pigeon's. "You're kidding! I thought you said . . ."

Then his eyebrows jumped, and he pointed his chin at the girl. She turned around to look at his face, and her forehead smashed into his jaw. He cried out "*¡Ayayay!*" and flew up from his chair, dumping her ass on the floor at his feet.

The girl sprang to her feet, and Chico rubbed his jaw, blinked a few times and sat back down on the dinette chair.

"Hilesca, this is Doña Fina, she's a good friend."

The girl tried to sit on his lap again, but he pushed her away like a cat and she ended up sitting on another dinette chair, glaring at me.

Even if he hadn't just the other day told me that Hilesca was dead, I wouldn't have believed she was his kid. Girl didn't look like him at all. With her Ivory-soap skin, eyes like melted black wax, werewolf eyebrows and little rosebud mouth, she was an ugly version of Betty Boop. And she was sitting there wide and shameless in those shiny white shorts.

"I'm a spirit worker," I said, swinging my beaded extensions over my shoulders. "So don't be bad." I reached over and gave her hair a little friendly tug. "You must take after your mami."

"*Umy*," she said, swatting my hand away, "don't you put a *fufú* on me."

I didn't answer that, just whumped my hips against the kitchen table, and let her fret all she wanted about *fufús* and whatnot.

"Don't worry, *nená*," Chico said. "Fina only does the good work." I nodded all innocent-like, repeating the habitual response in my mind: You can't do the good work, after all, unless there's a bad spirit to work with.

The girl pushed out her bottom lip, and shot me die-evil-bitch-die looks.

Chico looked pained, but also distracted, like all of a sudden he wanted to be wherever the music in his brain was calling him.

I didn't know what the fuck else to say. "You ain't his daughter unless you're a frigging ghost" did come to mind. So, I said I had eyes of newt and toes of frog downstairs on the burner and needed to get back.

"Eyes of what?" said the girl.

I smiled—real happy she seemed kind of stupid. Or maybe she was just playing at stupid. If that was the case, she was magnificent.

Chico got up quickly, and by the time I was on the threshold, he was next to me. He closed the apartment door behind him. "I know you think this is strange, but I gotta play along. She saw me in the paper from when the women attacked me.

Claims she's Hilesca de León. I gotta figure out what's going on with her."

I squinted. "Why the hell? You ain't sure whether your kid really died, that it?" I had a thought that wasn't pretty. "Or is it that you think she may be some other kid of yours you didn't know about?"

I was getting ready to let fly a big backhanded Judgment-Day-slap, when Chico said real quick, "My girl is dead for real, Fina, but this kid knows a lot of stuff about her. I just don't know how she knows." He licked his lips. "Somehow, I don't think telling her I'm on to her is going to help me figure out what she's up to."

"Little heifer shows up telling you she's your dead kid, and you don't slap her silly? Next thing you know she'll be asking you for child support back pay."

Chico laughed. "She's out of luck on that one. My riches are in my talent." Chico puckered his lips so they looked even meatier. "I'm not gonna confront her just yet. One thing's for sure. Whatever she wants from me, she wants bad enough to put on the show of her life." He shrugged. "In principal, I'm not against that."

"What does she say she knows?"

He grabbed my arm. "She knows little shit. Stuff that on its own anybody could know." He breathed out and shook his head. "Problem is: she knows a helluva lot of little shit. She knows that the name 'Hilesca' is made up of the first syllables of the names of my dead family: my ma Hilda, my pop Esteban and my brother Carlos."

I folded my arms across my chest. He went on. The girl knew that Chico's ex's name was Aurora, and that Aurora's sister was named Jahaira. She knew that Jahaira had a gold tooth and was tall with almost night-black skin, rare for Puerto Rico.

"She could know Jahaira from anywhere, and Jahaira could have told her the . . . little shit," I suggested.

He nodded quickly. "Sure. Question is why?"

Chico's voice got squeakier, and he started waving his hands around a lot. The girl had described the raw-boarded wooden *casita* in Loíza Aldea, which belonged to Aurora's family.

"She says she remembers that it was built on stilts. And that it was close to where the river meets the sea. That's exactly where it was! Exactly!" He touched both my shoulders with both his hands, and his nostrils flared. "She remembers seeing it when she was a baby."

"So she saw it when she was a baby. Again, this Jahaira could have taken her there, or just told her about it. Maybe she's Jahaira's daughter. Or, you know, she met Jahaira somehow."

He took his hands off my shoulders. "She told me something I never heard, but which doesn't surprise me at all. She says Jahaira told her Aurora walked off into the sunset sixteen years ago, and nobody knows what happened to her."

"What happened?" And how could Chico not know? But I didn't want to make him pissy by asking too many questions. Didn't his telling me all this shit mean that he liked me? I let him talk.

The day after Chico fled the Ferrera mansion, he found a safe place to stay with another musician who lived in the Llorens Torres projects. He called Aurora at the private hospital, but the nurse who answered the phone told him that mother and child had been discharged. After calling over and over again for the next twenty-four hours, he finally got Aurora on the phone at their little house close to Toro Negro.

"Aurorita, I need to see you and the *nena*. But I'm in trouble, so I can't be there until tomorrow."

Through the static on the lousy phone, he heard Aurora's voice echo, "We have nothing, nothing, nothing. To talk talk talk about."

The thought hit him that she knew about the affair, and his knees buckled. "But I need to see my little girl."

"You piece of shit *cabrón!* Fucking around with a married woman. Well, you know what? Miss *Putá's* husband canceled all the checks for the hospital! You fucked another woman

while our daughter was dying. Dying, *hijo de puta!* And dead. You hear me, *canto de cabrón*. She's dead, and it's your fault."

"Dead? How?"

"The *carro público* stopped, and I got out, and she was fucking dead in my arms." Then it was Aurora's jagged sobs he heard, and static and a refrain of "my arms, my arms, my arms."

Aurora's breath crackled in his ears. "You motherfucking *hijo de puta chocha*-lipped *culo*-headed, *cabrón*. I hope that Senator Ferrera and his thugs catch you and feed you to the sharks off Piñones!"

"That's nothing compared to what I feel should happen to me."

"You deserve to feel that way," she sobbed.

He went back to Toro Negro. First, he visited the baby's grave in the barrio cemetery, and then he called Aurora from a pay phone and told her he was coming home. "You can take a knife and stab me," he said.

He heard laughter through the static. "You think you deserve the energy it would take me to stab you?"

When he got to their zinc-roofed house, Aurora was waiting for him next to the almond tree. The fuzzy husks of almond fruit lay rotting on the clay dirt, and their smell of bitter roses filled the air. She had shorn her hair into a brown helmet with a slight gold sheen. She moved to the doorway, and barred his entrance, her hand closed in a fist over her heart, her eyes staring past him. She was wearing a loose white shift. She didn't say anything. Instead, she opened her hand and held it out. The little gold baby shoe charm sparkled on her palm. Chico had bought it when Hilesca was born and put it on a gold chain around the baby's neck.

He took the charm, and Aurora turned her back to him, opened the door of the shack and closed it softly behind her. He breathed in the smell of bitter roses.

His clothes were in San Juan, and now he realized there wasn't much in the shack that he still had any claim to. Except her.

He knocked. "*Mi amor . . .*"

Silence. Like there was nobody inside. He stood on the dirt path at the front door of the shack for a while, letting music play in his head. Took a piss against the almond tree and looked at his watch. Forty minutes had passed. He went back to the door and called out again.

"The silence inside the shack was terrible, Fina. She wouldn't talk to me. I couldn't even hear her moving around. It was like she wasn't there. Like she had walked out the back door. But the shack didn't have one."

After that, Aurora never spoke to him again.

That silence that marked the end of one phase in his life crept inside of him. "It was like somebody turned a light or something on in my brain, and I had to see myself, but there wasn't a soundtrack like I was used to."

He went back to San Juan, but when the AMA bus drew up to the entrance at Llorens, he saw a parked sedan with tinted windows. He thought these might be Ferrera's famous thugs and decided not to get off the bus.

"I kept moving around, but you can't put off destiny. Ferrera's thugs weren't no myth. They picked me up at a *piragua* stand in the old city. They took me to the Playa del Perro at night, broke my ribs. They were about to shoot me when I ran and threw myself into the water. And I don't know how the hell I survived, really. A fisherman picked me up. He was one of those squatters in shacks on stilts under the Dos Hermanos bridge. There was a *curandero* there who healed me with poultices and shit."

One of his new squatter friends got him a fake ID, and he moved to New York, where he got gigs right away.

The silence faded for the most part.

"I knew she was dead, but once in a while I had this real strong sense that maybe she was alive somewhere. If not my baby girl herself, then her energy. Alive somewhere in the world, in something, in someone else."

Whenever I saw the girl near Chico, she was always being, well, so physical. Always accidentally bumping her melons up against him, taking the slightest opportunity to reach across him for the salt, sitting right up next to him on the bus stop bench. And she couldn't tell a story without putting her hands on his thigh, his neck, his face. Poor old Chico, trying to flick off those caresses like harmless insects while trying to get her to spill the beans. Or for all I knew, maybe after spilling his beans into her night after night.

The Friday of the first week after she arrived, I felt called upon to do just a little *fufú*: I put Hilesca's name on paper in a dish, smeared it with a potent mixture of gunpowder, monkey shit and that stinky grease *brujos* call "hate oil." I put the dish outside the back door downstairs, where I had seen the heifer copping smokes unbeknownst to Chico, or so I thought.

Another week passed, but homegirl didn't budge. I was beginning to think that Chico didn't mind having a minor sit on his lap, or push her titties under his nose. I thought that the inevitable would happen, but the strange thing is that nothing really happened beyond all that rubbing and touching. Or so Chico told me one morning.

I had heard his cases bumping along the stairway, so I arranged my extensions, opened the door and sort of pranced up to him doing one of my irresistible "hellowhatupthere" routines.

I turned and went back inside, hoping he'd follow. He stepped inside, but wouldn't sit down.

"This kid!" He flicked at his nose with a finger. "Weird shit."

He'd had a lot of sets at the Copa and the Latin Bistro in the last few weeks. They all started late and ended late, and he came home bone tired. He would stumble into his bedroom, pull off his clothes and throw himself naked on the bed and fall asleep like that.

He didn't know how long the girl who called herself Hilesca had been watching him, but one night he woke up, his

eyes still half-closed, and saw her. She stood there for such a long time that he fell into a dream he had forgotten. He saw the zinc-roofed house in Puerto Rico where he had lived with Aurora. Aurora turned her back on him, went into the house and closed the door behind her. He kept on knocking on the door. Then the silence was such that he realized Aurora wasn't in the house anymore. The silence penetrated him. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

He opened his eyes and saw the girl still staring at him, her eyes shadowy sockets, her own silence like the silence in his dream.

From then on, he knew she was coming into his bedroom almost every night because he lay awake until she did. Sometimes he had an erection, especially if he'd done a few lines of *perico*. Sometimes he got it while she was there. And sometimes he was so tired, he fell asleep right away. Of course, there was a progression. One night she walked in, watched him for a while and just as he was falling asleep, she lay down on the bed next to him. He could smell the cheap drugstore perfume on her, and worse, he could feel the heat of those parts of her body that rose like bread through her shorts and tight T-shirt.

That silence from so long ago ballooned inside of him, to the extent that he felt he had left his real self behind at the club. His body was on its own, his *pinga* standing up like a toy soldier so that he had to pretend to flip over in his sleep. His attempt to control his body must have annoyed her because she leapt off the bed and stood there for what seemed like half an hour. He didn't turn his head or widen his eyes because that would have given away the game. He was afraid that she would touch him.

He paused, and looked down at my scuffed up hardwood floor. "But I wanted it, too."

"You wanted it?"

"Sure. Let's be honest. I wanted it. But I didn't act on it. There's a difference, you know."

Why the fuck did he want it? Unfortunately for me, the only way to ask this question was by knockout, so I grunted instead.

“I gotta go,” he said suddenly. “I’m waiting on a call. There’s a producer who wants to do my first song.” A rare smile lit up his normally distracted features. He chuckled. “Well, really, my only song so far.”

“Good luck.” I only said it grudgingly because I didn’t want him to go.

Chico came by the next morning wearing a purple short-sleeved shirt, and beige linen pants with gold flecks in the cloth. He hugged me, and gave me a kiss on one cheek, then the other. Even after we sat down at my kitchen table, I could still feel the wetness on my face.

“The studio wants to hear different versions of the song. They want me to line up different types of singers for it.”

“Wow!”

He drank down the hot coffee like water. “And you aren’t going to believe what else happened last night.”

Sure enough, the girl had come to him. This time, she wasn’t wearing any clothes.

Through his half-closed eyes he saw her naked for the first time. Not only could she not be his daughter, he didn’t think she could be his ex-sister-in-law’s kid either. Jahaira, his ex-wife’s sister, was a woman with such intensely blue-black skin, sometimes it was hard to see her at night.

Hair hung from under Hilesca’s arms and over her sex, tangled like Spanish moss, dark against the skin of a body that glowed white like those starry ceilings parents put up in kids’ rooms.

That was the last time this grown Hilesca came into Chico’s room, and he became completely still and quiet. His *pinga* saluted her as if it belonged to someone else. He watched her watch him. Casually, she poked a finger into her luxuriant bush.

He'd kept his eyes narrowed all those times, only open enough to catch important movements but not enough for it to be obvious he was awake.

His eyes opened wide now and he stared right at her. One of them couldn't stand the charade any longer. She stalked over to the bed and batted his erect penis.

Chico, brain fuzzy with pain and surprise, rocked back and forth, holding himself there until the stinging ebbed.

Then he sat up straight against the wall and yelled at her. "What are you doing?" He hadn't expected such an artless betrayal of the little ritual they'd set up.

The girl stood there with eyes like onyx. There was a thick silence. They just stared at each other, her nipples like light-houses on the dunes of her chest, and his *pinga* like a chastised puppy.

"I have a question," she said.

"Naked? You swat me and then want to ask me questions when I'm naked and trying to recover?"

"I didn't want you to say no."

Then like an afterthought, she said, "Papi." The thin straight hair, so much not the hair of anyone that could have been his daughter, slid over her face like a curtain.

"I want to sing. I can sing, Papi. I want to be your lead singer."

He got up from the bed, grabbed her by the shoulders and shook that pale hairy Betty Boop until she pushed him away, her breasts brushing against his arm, like soft little pillows he wanted to punch.

She pointed at the moss at her crotch and then bounced a hand off her breasts. "I'll call the cops on you, Papi. I'll go to the door naked and let them come to their own conclusions. They'll take you away for bothering me."

"You little bitch!"

"You bothering me now, yeah?"

He had fantasized about simply watching her play him, letting her take it as far as she could, to see if at some point

something changed between them. Maybe that was as much intimacy as he could take.

He said through his teeth, "I'd have to tell them I'm not your papi. My only daughter died when she was just a baby."

The girl got quiet and even paler, like something squirming under a rock or in a cave, and he was thinking maybe she was the dead Hilesca come for him, Hilesca all grown up in death, and white from death, come to ask him why he hadn't paid for her hospital bills.

Her silence reminded him of Aurora. His ex could get quiet like that when she was angry, like she did when he'd shown up for the last time at their zinc-roofed house out on the island. She handed him the gold charm, then turned her back on him, quiet as if her rage was a cherished secret.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

There was a pause, as if she was considering her response.

Homeboy hated himself at that moment for begging for a reaction from her. Who the hell was she to be mad at him because he'd called her bluff? But it was true, her gestures, her silence, reminded him of Aurora.

Finally, she turned around and said, "So why did you go along with it then? You let me call you 'Papi.' You told the *bruja* downstairs I was your daughter. What's up with that?"

"I want to know why you're pretending to be my daughter."

The girl's eyes looked like black rubber balls. "Cause I want to find out about my mami and my papi. Titi Jahaira said you probably were my papi. Plus, I saw you in the papers. Before that, I didn't know you were such hot shit. And you know what? I can sing."

Chico laughed. "You and every other Puerto Rican." He grabbed the crumpled sheet and covered his whole body with it, from chest to legs. "How do you know Jahaira?"

"I told you. She's my aunt. She took me when I was a baby. We came to New York. She raised me."

The girl put her arm over her breasts and with her other hand plucked at the bottom sheet on Chico's bed so that

homeboy had to move his ass. She wrapped the sheet around her body. “My mami left. Or maybe she died. Nobody knows. She named me Hilesca, but she called me Alba. Alba Hilesca, to remind her of her first kid. That’s what Titi Jahaira said.”

Aurora, the mother he thought she was lying about, was a shade or two darker than Chico himself, the color of wet sand in the setting sun, a woman with no hair anywhere on her body except the soft gold kinked storm cloud on her head.

“I don’t know if you’re Aurora’s second daughter. What I do know is that you sure as hell ain’t nothing of mine. Tomorrow, you better clear out.”

“Please, Chico man, just let me sing for you first!”

“You gotta be kidding.”

But she started singing “*Noche de ronda*.” That’s a song that most Latinos love—those with a foot here and a foot back there, I mean. He let her finish it.

As it turned out, Hilesca, whose name was really Alba Sánchez, courtesy of Coop City, the Bronx, could belt out songs ranging from squeaky *merengues* to the best classic salsa. But what she could sing most soulfully were jazz ballads.

And Chico ended up liking the way Alba sang the song the record company wanted to produce. It was a song he had been working on for a long time, a song about the love that one day decides it can’t love you back, the migrating love that doesn’t stay the same, the love that might come back. Some shape, some form, some day.

But now love migrates; hey, hey, love migrates.

He said that if she really was Aurora’s daughter, he couldn’t send her packing just yet. I couldn’t help but think he was attracted to the girl because she reminded him of his first love.

Love migrates so that new love can come your way.