



Chapter One

May 1961

FOR MY ELEVENTH BIRTHDAY, PAPI MADE *PIRAGUAS*. He left balloons of water in the freezer until they were solid, then peeled the plastic off like bright banana skins. On the veranda, he used his machete to shave the globes into ice chips. Hard bits of cold spit out where the ball and blade met, landing on my arms and legs, cheeks and nose. Papi said it was a Puerto Rican snowfall, and laughed long and deep. Mamá and I did, too. She sat beside me under Papi's snow until we shivered and held each other close to warm back up.

After the balls were chiseled into a pile of white, we poured passionfruit syrup over it and ate right from the bowl. The sweet flakes made my mouth cold and itchy, and I had to suck my lips to warm my tongue. We couldn't

eat it all, though; it turned to a puddle under the sun. Papi said snow did that, changed into everyday water. I'd never been in a snowfall before. I didn't know.

That night, the first heat wave of the season swept over the island and nobody could sleep. I lay in bed, the outside fever making my underwear dig into my skin and itch.

"Papi, tell me a story," I said. Miserable, I wanted the everyday to shift to dreams.

"You're too old for stories now. Why don't I read about Jacob and Isaac?" Mamá liked it best when he read from the Bible at bedtime. She believed it would help me dream good things. Papi took a seat in my bamboo chair. The ceiling fan clicked around around. "Or maybe Daniel in the lion's den?" He winked at me.

When I was little, I had a crush on the brave and mighty Daniel who played with lions. Mamá disapproved. She said that it wasn't right for someone to have romantic feelings for a dead man, never mind a dead holy man. Papi said it was better Daniel of the Bible than Roberto Con-fresi, the pirate.

"Can't I hear the story of my name?" I asked.

In Puerto Rico, everybody had two names. One was printed on a birth certificate. Another was the one you were called, the name you answered to, and that name always came with a story. Mamá's birth certificate said "Monaique." Papi's said "Juan." But nobody called them that because those names had no story.

They called Papi *Faro*, "Lighthouse," because as a child

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he loved to watch the flashing light on Aguadilla Beach. My *abuela*, Mamá Juanita, said they often went to Aguadilla to visit her brother's family. On one particular visit, the family stayed up late listening to troubadour songs, and just before bed, Mamá Juanita noticed that Papi wasn't with the group. Everyone searched the house, but he was gone. Then, from the kitchen window, she saw a small, soft hump sitting outside on the beach rock. It was Papi. He stared out toward the sea, watching the lighthouse beam slice the black again and again. When she asked what he was doing, he said, "Keeping watch." Mamá Juanita called him Little Faro, and the nickname stuck.

They called my mamá Venusa because as a girl she nearly drowned while surfing the northwest coast of Puerto Rico. Papi told me how a wave rolled over and pulled her down to the coral bottom. The Ocean King saw her there, her black hair streaking the blue, and thought her so lovely that he decided to change her into a mermaid. The seaweed wrapped her legs and the coral caged her. Mamá prayed for a miracle—to return to our island. Then, just when she thought her skin would change to scales, a rush of water pushed her from the King's prison, up through the blue-green, until her eyes saw the sun and her skin sparkled pink. She'd been gone so long that everyone believed her dead, lost to the ocean world. But she was reborn, like the goddess Venus.

Those were the stories we lived by. Who my parents were, who I was. My birth certificate said "Maria Flores

Ortiz-Santiago,” but they called me Verdita. Papi kept all our certificates on the shelf in his study beside three dead roosters with black marble eyes. The names were as lifeless as the cocks with their sawdust guts. Only our nicknames were alive. Papi told my story best.

He leaned back in the chair. “Venusa, Verdita wants to hear her story again.”

From the kitchen where Mamá scrubbed the scales off codfish, she laughed. “She’s like you. Head in the clouds.” But I was glad to be like Papi. Mamá wasn’t a good storyteller. She forgot parts or added things from the priest’s sermons. Papi always remembered it right and always began the same way.

He closed the Bible. “Your story started long before you left your mamá’s body, before you took your first breath. Your soul spoke to me from heaven.”

I curled up my toes and closed my eyes, concentrating on Papi’s words.

In a dream, Papi stood alone on a strange and colorful beach, unlike any in Puerto Rico. The ocean was unusually calm, and the air was silent except for the lull of the breeze through the coconut palms. No lick of seaweed or burrow of crayfish—the sand sparkled in rainbow pebbles. In the distance was Mamá, her wavy hair caught in the breeze, black against the light. Papi went to her.

I imagined the beach like the photograph I kept in the crack of my mirror. In it, Mamá stood between bright umbrellas and candy-colored towels, a beach carnival. Her

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head was thrown back, her mouth open, and I could hear laughter through the glossy paper. On the back was written *Visit to Orlando and Lita Virginia Beach, 1950*. It was taken just before she got pregnant with me, just before Papi had his dream.

He leaned forward in the chair. “And just as I reached her, I heard a burst of water. A sea spout lifted some fifty feet in the air. So high that I had to shield my eyes against the brightness of the sky and the white surf. I was afraid it was the Ocean King come for Venusa at last. But she turned and smiled. She knew what I didn’t. From the top of the spout, a parrot with emerald feathers and two gleaming green eyes flew from the watery perch and landed on my shoulder.”

I took a deep breath and held it.

“That was your spirit,” Papi continued. “I have never seen such a beautiful bird on earth.”

Papi leaned in and kissed my forehead. I could smell the soap and the little bit of Old Spice aftershave that he used so long ago, when the day was first born. I breathed him in.

In my story, Mamá had a handful of sesame seeds, and she fed them to the parrot until it was full. Then it took flight, spreading its emerald wings in the coconut breeze, up, up into the cloudless blue. It left behind a single green feather. Papi tucked it in the front of his shirt for safekeeping, but when he woke from the dream, it was gone.

“And I was searching the bed looking everywhere for

the feather when your mamá came into the room with a cup of *café con leche*. She asked me what I was doing, and I told her that I had lost something important. That's when she told me she was going to have a baby. You were inside her. And I knew the parrot in my dream was you."

At this point in my story, I always got sleepy. My sheets hugged my body; my pillow cupped my head. I closed my eyes but listened still.

"I told your mamá about the dream and she agreed. God must have put me on the shore of heaven so you could come to us."

I buried my face deeper into the darkness.

"The day you were born, I walked outside our house and noticed the whoosh of the breeze through the palms, just like in my dream. Mamá's water broke. She was in labor. We thought you were a boy at first—all the troubles she had. I had to take her to the hospital in San Juan because the *barrio* midwife was busy delivering two other children, and I knew she could not deliver alone.

"I sat outside of the operating room, waiting and watching for the doctor. Those were dark hours. But then a nurse came and took me to you. When I held you that first time, you opened your eyes and looked into mine. Big green eyes. *Verde*. Just like the parrot. And I knew we had met before. My Verdita."

Sleep washed over me like one of the waves on Papi's dream beach, soft and soundless.

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I WOKE LATER to the slow hum of our radio singing out a *plena* song of a lovesick *jíbaro*. Papi was gone. It was still night, but a pink-yellow light glowed outside my bedroom like the candlelit halo of the Madonna at church. Pushing myself out of bed, my arms and legs moved slowly, as if I were still swimming in sleepy waters. I made my way from the darkness to the doorway, reaching out to touch the speckles of light, trying to cup the glow in my hands. It trickled through my fingers. I followed the lamplight to the living room. There, on the couch, were Papi and Mamá. I barely recognized them. He was shirtless. She wore only the bottom portion of her slip, her back brown and bare. Papi clasped her one hand against his chest. With his other, he rubbed the small of her back, round and round, to the music's pulse. They seemed to be dancing, but lying down and slower than I had ever seen before. It reminded me of how the priests looked when they prayed the graces necessary for salvation. These went on so long that old Señora Juarez always fell asleep, dropped her fan, and drooled. Mamá said they were praying themselves into heaven and if I closed my eyes and did as they did, I might be able to do the same. Mamá and Papi's bodies were there, but their spirits had risen to a place I could not see.

Their hips swayed back and forth to the voice of the *jíbaro* that lost his love, and to the twang of the guitar

strings. Papi's face was lost beneath the dark waves of Mamá's mermaid hair. She had stolen him, swept him under her ocean. Their spirits swam to some depth that I could not reach, and I couldn't speak to bring them back, couldn't close my eyes to join them; my stare burned in the lamplight. I tried to walk away, but my legs grew roots. I stood silent, alone, and terrified, and I wondered if that was how hell felt.

A thick lock of Mamá's hair swung from her shoulder. I could see Papi's eyes, closed at first and then open. He saw me. "Verdita," he said to Mamá.

She turned, her cheeks pink and shiny with sweat. "Go!" she yelled, and covered her chest. "Leave!"

I ripped my legs from their roots and ran to bed, covered my head with the sheets, and said Hail Marys over and over. It was the only prayer I could remember. But even the Virgin Mary couldn't stop the music from humming. So I tried to think of something else—something good.

Under the sheets, I stared at the pink polka-dot buds on the cotton. The print reminded me of the dress Mamá just finished sewing. I'd picked out the exact pattern I wanted—a Simplicity with a blond girl on the cover wearing a small, blue-flower print dress. Bluebonnets, Mamá said. I'd never seen bluebonnets before. I searched the fabric store for hours looking for the same material, but Mamá said they only sold it in the States, and besides, she thought those flowers were ugly. Not like any of our island flowers. She liked the coral blooms best, young *magas* on the stem,

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and bought the whole bolt to sew matching dresses, though hers had simple pleats around the waist and mine was belled for a crinoline slip. When Papi saw us in them, side by side, for the first time, he put his hand to his forehead: “*Ay! Muy bonita!* I have the two most beautiful girls on the island!” It had felt good to be seen that way—beautiful, like Mamá. But not now. The memory made me sick.

I pulled the sheet off my head to breathe. The dress hung in the closet. I shut my eyes to keep from seeing it. I never wanted to wear it. Never. I wanted something else—bluebonnets like the girls in the United States. When I grew up, I swore I’d go there and leave all this behind.

IN THE MORNING, my voice was back, my legs unstuck. So I decided to bounce my lime-colored ball on the bedroom tiles, counting each as loudly as possible, snapping the silence with each throw.

“One!” The ball bounced. “Two!” It bounced again. “Three! Four! Five!” I counted. The sound of the rubber springing against the floor vibrated the walls of our pink house. I wanted Mamá and Papi to know I was awake—wanted them to wake up too. Their bedroom door was closed. So I took my bouncy ball out onto the tiles of the living room, walking past the couch, being sure not to look at it. I flicked on the radio. A fast *bomba* played, and I bounced to its rhythm. I didn’t hear the front door swing open.

Mamá entered, fully dressed, her hair pinned up in a knot, carrying a bowl of brown eggs. She'd been up for hours already, or maybe she'd never slept at all. She didn't say anything, just turned the radio down as she passed on her way to the stove. I didn't really want to talk to *her*, but I wanted to talk. So I asked, "Where's Papi?" without looking at her or breaking the steady beat of rebounding rubber.

"*Allí*," she said and motioned with her nose toward the veranda.

Outside, Papi swung his machete, splitting coconuts; a stack of five or six lay at his feet.

"Coconut milk, again? I bet Omar gets to have real milk in Washington, D.C. Wish I was with him. Not here on this stupid *finca*, this stupid island," I said, and immediately wondered where the words came from.

Omar was my cousin. Tío Orlando and Titi Lita moved to the States when he was still cutting his teeth on sugar cane. In the summers they sent him back to visit because they said he was forgetting Puerto Rico. It was true.

The summer before, he'd asked me during breakfast if we had any cereal. "*Sí*, we have *con-flei*," I'd said, and pointed with my nose to the cabinet.

"Huh? What's that?"

Everybody knew what that was. I shook my head and motioned again with my lips for added emphasis, the way Mamá did. He stared back at me without moving.

"*Ay bendito!*" I opened the cabinet. "*Con-flei* is sugar

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flakes and Lucky Charms.” I said it slowly and in perfect English so he’d understand. I didn’t tell him that the same box of Lucky Charms had been there since the *Navidad*. A line of dots marched to and from it even now. Sugar ants. It was a wonder they hadn’t nibbled all the bits inside.

Mamá didn’t move in the kitchen. It must have been a shock for her to hear me talk that way. I’d never done it in the past. Her back was to me, so I couldn’t see her face. She cracked an egg into the bowl. It crumbled in her fist. Without speaking, she picked the shells out of the yolk, and I noticed how pale the skin on the back of her neck looked, hidden beneath so much dark hair. I wondered if I was hidden from the light for long enough, if my skin would turn white like that, like the girl on the cover of the Simplicity pattern. Colorless, like the jelly of an egg. I loved and hated that foreign skin; it didn’t match mine.

Papi came in when the eggs were fried. He set the jug of fresh coconut milk on the breakfast table, and I wished I could take back what I’d said about it. His forehead was beaded with sweat from cracking the thick shells and straining the juice.

“*Buenos días, Verdita.*” He kissed the top of my head and then Mamá’s cheek. The same cheek that had been flushed and slick the night before. Now it was dry and smeared with rouge. She ran her thin fingers over his hand, and I thought they looked like spiders crawling over the dead.

“Verdita isn’t really my name,” I said. Papi turned from Mamá to face me. “If I lived in the States, they’d make you call me what it says on my birth certificate. Maria Flores. They’d make you.”

Mamá turned too. They looked at me, and Papi scrunched the skin on his forehead so that the sweat beads ran together down the middle arch between his eyebrows. He thumbed the trickle away.

I wished I could take back all my words from that day. Verdita was my name. I had *my* story, and I loved coconut milk.

Suddenly I felt nauseated. The eggs on the table smelled of pork grease and butchered chicks. I thought I was going to throw up.

“Verdita.” Papi took a firm seat at the table; the silverware tinkled with his weight. “Sit down and eat your breakfast.”

I sat. Mamá sat next to me, and we all bowed our heads to thank God for the food. I prayed that whatever they prayed wouldn’t pray them into heaven and leave me there alone. And then I prayed as hard as I could, squinting until my eyes ached, that I could turn back into an emerald parrot and fly to heaven or find the Ocean King and become his mermaid—I’d take either. When I opened my eyes, they were still sitting there, and I hadn’t sprouted wings or a fishtail. I tried to swallow the slippery fried egg, but it nearly came back up.

After breakfast, Papi asked if I wanted to walk down

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the road to buy sesame seed bars while he talked to his friends about the local news. I knew what he was trying to do: trick me into trusting him again—into forgetting the night before. I wouldn't fall for it.

"I got schoolwork," I said, even though I didn't. "A paper."

"A paper? School's almost finished for summer, *verdad?*" Papi asked.

"It's the last one. I have to write about—about myself," I lied.

"What about yourself?"

"Just who I am. Teachers always want us to write stories about who we are."

I tried not to look him in the eyes. I'd never lied to him before, and I knew I wasn't good at it. I grabbed a pencil and notebook and went out on the veranda.

Odio. Odio. Odio. I hate. I hate. I hate. I wrote in Spanish and English, just to keep my pencil moving fast. Then I switched it up. *Maria Flores Ortiz-Santiago.* I wrote my official name again and again until it became strange to look at, the letters nothing more than lines and dots. *Maria Flores.* To be able to live with Juan and Monaique, maybe that's who I needed to be.

Papi walked out the back door and down the driveway, then turned to me. "I'll see you later."

I nodded, like I was too busy to say anything. But I liked that Papi was trying. So maybe I wouldn't hate him as much. I'd just hate Mamá. In my mind, I saw her over

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and over—barebacked, flushed and slick against Papi; her voice still echoed. “Go. Leave.” My stomach turned.

V-e-r-d-i-t-a. I wrote slowly across the top of the page. *Verdita*. I read it to myself, the familiar *r* rolling off my tongue. I wanted my nickname story to fill me up, but worried that it never would again.