

# CHAPTER 1

A Siamese cat crouched on a tree branch, peering down at Gaby with brilliant blue eyes. It cried out. The cat was stuck in the tree in front of her house and, as luck would have it, she had on the nicest sweater she owned. Gaby pulled the cardigan sweater tighter around her. This was her last good school sweater until who-knows-when her father would have enough money to buy her a new one. The poor cat cried again. Gaby looked back at her small yellow house. If her mother were here, that cat would already be

out of the tree and purring — safe and sound, in her mother's arms.

Mind made up, Gaby pulled off her sweater and tossed it onto her porch. "You're out of luck, *gato!*" she yelled. "My mom, master tree climber and cat rescuer, isn't back yet." She rolled up the sleeves of her white dress shirt. "But until she is, you got me." Gaby grasped the nearest branch and pulled herself up. "Gaby to the rescue."

The cat meowed.

"I *am* hurrying."

The last time Gaby had climbed the tree was when she and her best friend, Alma, had challenged the boys to a water-balloon fight last summer. Up high was the perfect spot for a full-blown assault on the boys below. Those guys never had a chance.

Gaby secured her feet and hands and climbed higher, until the cat was within arm's reach. "See? You aren't the only one who can climb." But then she looked down. Mistake number one.

She knew that the universal rule of tree climbing said don't ever, *ever* look down, but she couldn't help it. This was the highest she'd ever climbed. If she fell, she'd definitely end up looking like an Egyptian mummy. Gaby imagined herself bandaged from head to toe and sipping dinner through a straw.

Well, she'd just have to not fall. Simple as that. "Here, kitty, kitty!" she called out, the same way she had heard her mom call for stray cats hundreds of times. But this was no stray. The cat was too shiny. Too chubby. Around its neck, a rhinestone collar with gold charms sparkled. Someone loved that cat. She reached out toward it. "Almost got you." Mistake number two.

The cat arched its back and hissed.

Gaby pulled back, startled. "Nice teeth." She resettled on the branch, considering her options.

When Gaby was younger, she had seen her mom climb the same tree many times to rescue a cat. All the way up, her mom had giggled and sweet-talked the cat in Spanish. "*Que bonita eres gatita.* You're so pretty, little cat." Her mom told her that when dealing with cats you should speak softly and pick them up by the loose skin at the back of their neck, because that's how their mothers carried them. Her mom had always made it look so easy. Once she had the cat nestled against her chest, she would maneuver down through the branches, comforting the cat with kisses on the ears and soft words with rolling Spanish *r*'s like purrs. There were never any arched backs, hisses, or sharp teeth.

Gaby took a deep breath and reached out for the cat again. "It's okay, little kitty," she said sweetly. This time the cat latched on to her, digging its claws into her arm and

shoulder. "Ooh, ouch!" She couldn't quite get it by the scruff of the neck like her mom had shown her, but at least she had the animal. That was progress. Now she just had to get down.

Without falling.

She held on to the cat and, with one free hand, made her way down the tree, branch by branch. She was halfway down when a loud, brash voice broke her concentration.

"Gaby, what are you doing up there?" Alma hollered.

"Taking a nap!" Gaby shouted back, careful to keep a tight grip on the tree and the cat.

"Be careful!"

"I'm always" — Gaby's foot slipped, but she quickly regained her foothold — "careful."

A faint squeak of metal signaled Marcos and Enrique pulling up on their bikes. Both of them were wearing their usual long white T-shirts and baggy basketball shorts. Between the branches, Gaby saw Enrique point up at her. Marcos flung his head of dark hair back, laughed, and clapped as if whatever Enrique had said was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. They were probably making a joke about her falling on her butt. "We're almost there, kitty," she crooned.

Finally, she swung her legs over the lowest branch and jumped down. The cat leaped out of her arms with a screech.

"You're welcome!" Gaby yelled as the cat scurried down the street. She inspected her shirt and pants. Her clothes were still intact, but her shoulder ached and her arm was covered in red welts.

Alma pulled a leaf out of Gaby's wavy brown hair. "Not very grateful, is she?"

"That's Mrs. Sepulveda's cat," Enrique said. He leaned his bike against the tree. "Whenever she opens her front door that cat takes off. One time she gave me five dollars to get it down from her roof. It almost ended my basketball career." Tall and skinny in an athletic way, Enrique played all the sports, but basketball was his favorite. He held the neighborhood record for most games of Horse won. "I still have the scars." He stuck out his long arm and twisted it to search his scabby elbow for the old wounds.

"Hey, watch this!" Marcos yelled from across the street. He showed off a no-hand wheelie on his red-and-silver low-rider bike, and then jumped the curb. He stopped a few inches from the girls. "Fa-Zam in your face!"

Gaby yawned. Alma closed her eyes and snored.

"That's cool," Marcos said. He got off his bike and walked it over to the porch. "I'll remember you both when I'm in Las Vegas performing daredevil stunts for millions of dollars."

"Millions? I can see your stunts for free on YouTube." Alma shook her dark curls. "If I were you, I'd stick to the palm reading. Now, *there's* a trick that won't paralyze you from the neck down." Gaby laughed and gave her a high five.

When Marcos wasn't doing wheelies on his bike, he believed he could see the future in the thin, splintered lines of the palm. He steadied his bike against Gaby's porch and sat down on the steps. "I know you only say that because you care." He brushed back a swatch of black hair from his hazel eyes and flashed both girls a smile. "Speaking of palm readings, anyone want one? I need the practice. Anyone?"

Alma busied herself with rewrapping her purple scarf around her neck and hummed. Enrique stared off into the tree as if it had suddenly spoken to him.

"Okay, okay." Gaby grabbed her sweater, tied it around her waist, and sat next to Marcos. "But I don't want to hear that I'm going to die before the age of thirty from a heart attack like you tell everyone."

Even though Marcos and Enrique were a year older than the girls, all four had been friends since they had training wheels on their bikes. As long as they could remember, Marcos had boasted that he was gifted with the power of palm reading. Some women in the neighborhood even paid him to read their palms.

"Tell me what we'll be doing for our sixth-grade service project."

"I'm a palm reader, not a psychic." Marcos took Gaby's hand. "Still, I might be able to help you . . . What are your choices?"

"An animal shelter or the City Harvest Center," Gaby answered.

"Both are lame." Alma rolled her eyes.

"Working with animals would be fun." Gaby shrugged. "That would be better than the City Harvest Center."

"Totally." Alma nodded.

Gaby passed her a slight smile. Ever since Gaby's mom was deported and her father had moved back into the house to take care of her, money had been tight. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that Gaby and her father were struggling, but only Alma knew that twice a month they went to the City Harvest Center to pick up food.

"What you got against free food for poor people?" Marcos chided.

"Nothing. It's just . . . it's just I . . ." Gaby stammered. She was on a first-name basis with the staff at the City Harvest Center. The minute she walked in the door it was, "Hey, Gaby, what's up?" At the center, she and her father picked up boxes filled with canned tuna, peanut butter,

spaghetti, and toilet paper. Sometimes if the center had a special donation of cookies they'd throw in extra for Gaby. She never had the heart to tell them she didn't like sweets. She always took the extra cookies with a big smile and said thanks at least a hundred times before she left. Gaby was grateful for the Harvest Center. She just didn't want to go there with her classmates. "I'd rather take care of the animals. That's all."

"Hmmm, the food pantry or an animal shelter, you say..." Marcos narrowed his hazel eyes and traced a line on Gaby's palm with his finger. Suddenly he lifted her hand to his nose and sniffed. "I smell kitty poop!"

Gaby yanked her hand away while he and Enrique laughed.

"You're ridiculous." Gaby glared at Marcos.

"My Uncle Junior and me took a box of puppies to a shelter once," Enrique said. "We found them by the Parkway Bridge. You know, where the sign is that says NO DUMPING?"

"Why do people do that? It's dangerous with all the cars and the woods." Gaby shook her head.

"My uncle says it's because people think that the animals will like living there. There's lots of birds, snakes, and mice to hunt," Enrique said.

"Or maybe they don't know about your house." Marcos pointed to the small white saucer on the bottom step.

When Gaby's mom had lived at home, she filled the saucer with food for the strays. Sometimes, it was leftover chicken from the evening's dinner. Other times it was slices of sandwich meat or oatmeal, anything she could spare, which wasn't a lot, but her mom always managed to find something. *Animales* depend on us to take care of them, she'd always tell Gaby. Every night, stray cats and dogs showed up on the porch as if a secret animal network had spread the word about the nice woman in the yellow house who feeds the strays.

One night, when Gaby's father still lived with them, he ran a skinny gray cat away from the porch. Her mom was heartbroken. It was the first time Gaby had heard her mom raise her voice to her father. "It's easy *para ti* to scare them off, but I've been that cat," she'd said. "I know how it feels to be the one looking for food and a safe place."

Gaby hadn't known what her mother meant at the time, but later her mom told her about the many nights she had slept outside and traveled on an empty stomach from her home country of Honduras to reach the United States.

That night, after cleaning the scratches on her arm, Gaby filled the small saucer on her porch with milk. It was all she had to spare. She checked the dining room table for a note

from her father. It was covered with bills and newspapers, but nothing from him letting her know what time he'd be home. As usual, she made her bed on the couch, keeping the cordless phone next to her.

When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed there was a knock at the door. Her mom called to her.

"Gaby, it's me. I don't have my key, please let me in," she said.

In her dream, Gaby jumped from the couch and opened the door, but her mother wasn't there. Instead, the Siamese cat she'd rescued earlier gazed up at her. She'd recognize those blue eyes anywhere. When Gaby bent down to pick the cat up it swiped her face with its claws. Gaby cried out. She woke grasping her cheek.

Through the dark, she looked toward the front door. It was closed. No cat. No mom. Then she heard her father's voice. She sat up and saw him hunched over the dining room table with his back to her. She felt around for the cordless, but it was gone. Her father was whispering to someone on the phone. He mumbled something about money and about not wanting to risk something.

"Dad, who are you talking to?"

"Go to sleep, Gaby. It's late."

"Is it Mom?"

He quickly whispered good-bye to the caller and hung up.

"Dad?"

"Don't worry about it. Go to sleep." He stood up, went to his room, and closed the door behind him. Gaby got up, grabbed the phone from the table, and tucked it under her pillow.