

PETALS

A novel by

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CHAPTER ONE

I had seen the man before, I was certain of it. His face was as brown and wrinkled as a raisin, not the sort of face I would easily forget. I first noticed him in the waiting area of the airport. Staring at him over the top of my paperback novel, I silently prayed he would board some other plane, but when the attendant called our flight, he stood up and got in line with the rest of us.

I lugged my carry-on – a wooden box the size of a small briefcase – into the overhead compartment. Dad was already settled at the aisle, so I slumped into the seat beside him.

The other passengers continued to board. There was no rush, no hurry, like everyone was doped up on Dramamine waiting for the inevitable deep sleep of late night air travel.

I had planned to read, but taking inventory of the faces passing by was more interesting. I passed the time imagining what secret lives they might be living, like mail carrier by day, stripper by night or something.

Then *he* got on.

Go to the back of the plane, I thought. *All the way back*.

But he didn't. Instead he took the seat directly across the aisle.

"You all right, Carly?" Dad patted my hand. He meant well, but I pulled my hand away just the same, repelled by our opposite magnetic forces.

"I'm fine," I said, but I didn't feel fine. I felt anxious.

"You can take your hat off now," he said jokingly. "The sun went down hours ago."

I liked my hat – white canvas with a floppy brim. Kind of like Gilligan's from that old TV show. I grasped it with both fists and pulled it snugly onto my head. Then I scooted into the next seat over and looked out the window.

It was dark outside, so dark I could see my reflection in the glass. I squinted at the set of coffee-colored eyes staring back. The pudgy cheeks that plagued me since infancy were nearly gone. My bronze skin and narrow features were framed by long, black hair that did not even have a hint of curl in it. When I was younger my mom would set me down on the floor between her knees while she wove the thick strands into braids. The kids at school called me Indian, a name I despised.

It was well past midnight by the time the plane settled into cruising altitude. The flight attendant came by and filled a plastic cup with Coke and ice.

“Peanuts?” she asked with a pasted on smile. There was a swath of red lipstick on her teeth and I wondered if I should do the polite thing and point it out to her. I ignored the thought and it passed.

“No thanks,” I told her. “Peanuts give me the runs.”

Dad choked on his drink. “Carly!”

“What?” I said. “I’m allergic.”

“Since when?”

“Since you confiscated my iPod and dragged me onto this plane,” I retorted. He looked like he wanted to say something, but I opened my book and buried my face in it.

Dad opened his bag of nuts and picked one out, laying it on his tongue and rolling it around to suck all the salt off. Then he crushed it between his front teeth. He did this over and over until the bag was empty.

“You’ll love Guatemala,” he said, lifting the bag and pouring the last fragments of nuts and salt into his mouth. “It won’t be so bad, spending Christmas there.”

I had serious doubts about spending a couple of weeks in a third world country, but I managed a sarcastic smile.

“It’s a great place,” he continued. “Lush jungles, ancient ruins, coconuts...”

“Malaria, sauna-like heat, amoebas...”

I couldn’t resist. The set up was so perfect.

Dad’s face twisted to show disapproval. “All I ask is that you give it a chance, Carly. Give *them* a chance.”

Them. The so-called family I never knew. For the fourteen years of my life they'd been nothing more to me than pictures on the mantle. Why Dad chose our first Christmas without Mom to change the status quo was beyond me.

The minutes passed in slow motion, or more like stop motion. Being in that enclosed space surrounded by darkness, all sensation of moving forward suspended, felt like time was standing still. And I thought, *This is what being dead must feel like.*

The flight attendant offered me a pillow. Sleep was an unwelcome guest, but I took the pillow anyway and arranged it behind my neck. Her presence pulled me out of my thoughts and I looked around me to reassure myself that the world hadn't really disappeared. Most of the other passengers had dozed off already. The old man across the aisle read a magazine. He licked his thumb before turning each page. I didn't realize I was staring until he turned suddenly towards me. Our eyes locked, and in that single moment my heart nearly leapt out of my ribcage. I broke away from his gaze and pretended to be absorbed in my book.

When my heart returned to its normal rhythm, I set the book aside and shut the window cover. Then I closed my eyes. Thoughts raced through my head like a train barreling through an endless tunnel. I wanted to open my eyes and look at him again. *Is he watching me?* I wondered. *Does he recognize me, too?*

After a while, I started to relax. Oblivion was calling, but like always I desperately clung to consciousness, like a mountain climber gripping a rock by her fingers while dangling above a precipice. The fall was inevitable, but I strained to hold on. Finally, I surrendered, and falling into sleep I struggled to recall just where I had seen that man's face before.

CHAPTER TWO

The flight attendant tapped me on the shoulder. “Put your seat upright, please,” she said. “We’ll be landing soon.”

I forced my eyes open and yawned. The airplane landed and the passengers began to disembark. By the time I remembered the man across the aisle most of the seats, including his, were empty.

As Dad and I exited the plane my first impression was that I had just stepped into hell. The intense heat stunned me. Though it was barely four a.m. and the sky was still a dull ink black, the air was stifling. Beads of sweat formed along my forehead and upper lip.

“Crap, it’s hot!” I complained.

Dad sucked in a deep breath. “You’ll get used to it,” he said.

I adjusted my hat, tightened my grip on my box, and headed across the tarmac to the terminal, self-conscious of the slight limp in my step.

Inside, a security guard ushered us through customs where an indifferent immigration official stamped our passports. Waved through, we stepped into the main hall. Dozens of people marched through the corridor and dozens more waved and shouted greetings from an upper balcony. I narrowed my eyes and scanned the crowd first for the old man from the plane, then for the faces of Abuela and Abuelo, my grandparents. Though there was no sign of Raisin-face, I caught a glimpse of my grandmother waving from the balcony above.

“There she is,” Dad said as he smiled and waved, then added through his teeth, “Be nice, or else.”

“Or else what?” I asked.

He shot a warning glance in my direction. “Or else I’ll slip a cockroach between your sheets.” He grinned at me like he had just won a spelling bee or something.

“You’re so lame,” I told him, but I laughed anyway. “Okay, I’ll be nice.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah, I promise.”

At the airport exit another security guard rummaged through my worn felt suitcase. As I stuffed the contents back inside I was glad I hadn’t wasted time folding everything before packing.

We wove our way through the crowd and reached the exit where Abuela waited just outside. Her gray hair was pulled back from her round face and fastened in a small bun at the nape of her neck. I stood at least four inches taller than her, but she was nearly as thick around as she was tall.

“*¡Bienvenido, Antonio!*” Abuela cried, placing her hands over her trembling lips. Dad embraced her and kissed each cheek. Then he introduced me. She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed so tight I gasped for breath.

“*¡Has crecido tanto! Ah,*” she said, holding me at arm’s length and patting my cheeks. “*Te pareces mucho a tu mamá.*”

“What did she say?” I asked.

Dad squeezed my shoulder the way he does when he’s trying to make me feel better. “She says you look just like your mother.”

“But I don’t look anything like –”

Dad cut me off with an elbow to my ribs. I smiled politely and fished for a proper greeting from among the few Spanish words I knew.

“*Hola,*” I mumbled. It wasn’t Shakespeare, but it would do.

We followed Abuela to the parking lot where a burly looking man in a baseball cap leaned against a yellow two-door sedan with so many dents and scrapes it looked like a giant banana. When we reached him he removed his hat and extended his hand.

“*Soy Papa Mani, tu abuelo,*” he said.

I took his hand. His fingers were so thick it felt like I was shaking a baseball mitt. Despite his being built like a bulldog, Papa Mani’s face was gentle and kind. After filling the trunk with Dad’s luggage, he heaved my suitcase into the back seat, then waited while Dad and I climbed in after it.

Moments later we drove out of the parking lot and turned onto the main thoroughfare. We passed a single streetlamp. There, standing in the halo of light, was the man from the plane. As we drove by his eyes locked on mine. This time I did not look away. We watched each other as

the distance between us grew. Finally, Papa Mani turned the car onto the highway and the man was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time we arrived in Reu, my dad's hometown, it was nearly eight o'clock in the morning. I gazed out the car window at this place where the roads were unusually narrow and the trees that lined them hung heavy with leaves as wide as elephant ears.

The people looked different, too. Many wore skirts or pants of brightly woven cloth while others wore denim jeans and light cotton blouses. Most noticeable, however, was that everyone was short and everyone was brown.

Papa Mani parked the car in front of a square cinderblock house painted bright orange and aquamarine. It reminded me of the Florida football team – the Miami Dolphins.

“You've got to be kidding!” I balked, getting out of the car.

Dad planted another elbow in my ribs, just hard enough to remind me of our agreement. “Behave yourself,” he whispered, then followed Papa Mani into the house.

“Why?” I replied under my breath. “He can’t understand me anyway.”

I stepped through a pair of wooden doors and found myself in a small room furnished with a green couch and two folding chairs. The floor was tiled in tan ceramic squares. A tarnished brass lamp stood atop a television in the corner. Several framed pictures adorned three walls including the family portrait Dad sent last year. Where a fourth wall should have been was a wide arch that opened onto a veranda adjacent to an open-air garden.

Papa Mani escorted us across the veranda onto a cement walkway that formed the garden’s perimeter. Each room faced the garden with the doors opening onto the walkway. He and Dad disappeared through one of the doors. Abuela took my hand and led me to a room at the opposite end of the house. I stepped inside and set my suitcase down on the narrow bed.

“Is this my room?” I asked, barely masking my disdain. Abuela embraced me again. I endured her kisses, doing my best to appear grateful for the hospitality. For a moment I thought Abuela would burst into tears of joy, but she didn’t and in a few moments she left.

Once alone I took a closer inspection of the room. There was a desk with a lamp and a folding chair beside it. On the wall above the bed was a painting. A thin blanket lay folded at the end of the bed. I laid down and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

“Wha’dya know,” I scoffed. “It’s a regular Holiday Inn.”

A clock sat on the corner of the desk, the old-fashioned kind with two bells on top. I watched the minute hand tick its way closer to 9:00 a.m. My eyelids, still on California time – 7:00, felt like lead. Though I fought to keep them open, they finally dropped close against my will. The next thing I knew, the clock’s hands’ positions had changed.

“Eleven-thirty!”

I sat up and stretched my arms over my head. I felt more rested than before, but my stomach growled painfully. I hadn’t eaten since dinner last night. Voices drifted into my room from the garden. I got up and stepped outside my room. Papa Mani sat in a chair at a small table talking to Abuela who was in the kitchen. He smiled when he saw me.

“*¿Le gustó su cuarto?*” he asked.

“I have no idea what you’re saying. Do you realize that?” I replied through a phony grin. Papa Mani repeated his question, pointing past the garden.

“Oh, my room,” I said. “It’s fine. *Bueno. Mi cuarto es bueno.*”

Papa Mani smiled again, seemingly satisfied with my answer. Suddenly I felt the urge to retreat back inside my room, but the hollow pang inside my belly compelled me to stay.

“Have you seen my dad? *Mi padre?*” I asked, gesturing with my arms in what I hoped was the generic sign for *where*.

Papa Mani rattled off a slew of unintelligible sounds. *It’s hopeless*, I realized. So I skulked into the kitchen to see if Abuela would take pity and feed me.

Leaning against the stove I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my jeans, which were beginning to feel uncomfortably warm in the humidity. I watched as Abuela peeled away an onion's brittle skin then minced it with a paring knife. Seeing me, she gestured toward another knife on the counter. Beside it was a pile of pear-shaped tomatoes. Abuela took one and demonstrated how she wanted it cut. Her strokes were smooth and sure resulting in perfectly symmetrical dices. I picked up the knife and sliced into one of the tomatoes. The blade was sharp and cut easily through the flesh. By the time I finished, the juice was everywhere. The counter was a pool of pale red liquid. Abuela quickly mopped it up with a dishtowel.

She mixed the onion and tomato with chopped cilantro, and carried the salsa to the table. As if on cue, the front door to Abuela's house swung open and a slender, middle-aged woman bounded in.

“¡Hola! ¿Ya empezó la fiesta?”

I recognized Tia Rosa from those photos on my mantle back home. She looked remarkably like Abuela, but thinner and with hair as black as oil instead of gray. The moment she saw me she squealed like a mouse stuck in a trap.

“¡Tú has de ser la Carlita!” she said with exuberance. She held out a basket filled with round breads topped with powdered sugar. I took one and bit into it. It was sweet, but a little stale.

“Gracias,” I mumbled through a mouthful of crumbs.

“You're welcome, Mija,” she replied.

A breadcrumb lodged itself in my windpipe. *“Did you just say you're welcome?”* I asked, coughing. Rosa chuckled.

“*Si*. I speak English. Surprised?”

“Well, actually, yeah.”

Rosa’s laugh was warm and sticky – like honey.

“I lived in New York for twenty years,” she said. “Miguel was born there.”

“Miguel?”

“My stepson. He’s about your age.”

I sighed with audible relief. “I was afraid I wouldn’t have anyone to talk to here.”

“Hasn’t my brother been teaching you any Spanish?” Rosa chided, but the grin on her face revealed that she was only teasing.

“Dad tries,” I told her, “but I’m not a very good student.”

“Maybe Miguel can help you. He should have been here by now, but it seems he’s been delayed.”

For a moment Rosa seemed embarrassed by Miguel’s absence, but a smile quickly replaced the concern in her face. “No matter,” she added cheerily. “I have plans for you, Mija. Your visit here will be a memorable one. Just leave it to your Tia.”

Abuela whisked Rosa off to the kitchen. Guests began to arrive. I met Tio Raul, Rosa’s husband, and a whole horde of other aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors – dozens of faces I’d never seen and names I’d never remember. Every few seconds some new relative hugged me and prattled on in Spanish. Though I caught a word and even a phrase now and then, the vast majority of the conversation sounded like pure gibberish to me.

Dad finally showed up with a pineapple under each arm. Everyone swarmed around him like bees to blossoms, kissing and hugging him, patting him on the back. I

stood aside to watch Dad's performance – smiling, laughing, acting like he was happy to be here.

He was convincing.

A little too convincing.

When he saw Rosa he stopped and stared at her as though he hadn't seen her in twenty years. Come to think of it, he *hadn't* seen her for twenty years, although I wasn't sure why. He had never talked about his family much, that is until recently.

After he set the pineapples on the table, they wrapped their arms around each other in a long, tender embrace. When they finally let go of each other they both had tears in their eyes.

“Rosa,” was all my father managed to say. Rosa took his face in her hands and kissed him sweetly, like only a sister could.

“Welcome home, Tony,” she whispered. “Welcome home.”

Abuela emerged from the kitchen and set a large platter down on the table. Then she called everyone to dinner.

In addition to the salsa, the table was laden with a veritable feast: thin slabs of barbecued beef, hot corn tortillas, rounds of white cheese, and roasted green onions. At the center of the table sat a large bowl filled with a creamy brown substance.

Chocolate pudding.

I love chocolate pudding.

I scooped a hefty spoonful of it onto my plate. I didn't pause a second before stuffing a large bite of it into my mouth. The grin that adorned my face a moment earlier quickly changed to a grimace. I swallowed hard.

“What is that?” I asked, my tongue hanging halfway out of my mouth. The entire family started to laugh. Tia Rosa pointed at the bowl.

“*Frijoles negros.*”

I wrinkled my nose and tipped my head to one side. Rosa must have seen the confusion on my face because she tried again, this time in English.

“Black beans.”

“Beans?” I said, processing this new information. “You mean I just ate beans?” The laughter that erupted from every member of the family was something right out of a bad dream – the kind where you show up at school naked – but the vile taste in my mouth was far worse than the humiliation I felt.

“Great,” I mumbled under my breath. “I hate beans.”

The meal was a smorgasbord of textures and flavors, and everyone ate more than their fair share of it. With the exception of the *frijoles*, I liked most of the food and everyone had a wonderful time – everyone but me. Even though everyone seemed so happy to see me, I felt like I didn’t belong. Every sight, every taste and smell only made me long for home even more. But I decided to keep my feelings to myself – for now.

Several hours later, after the food was eaten and everyone had settled into chairs or on the floor for card games and conversation, the fatigue from the long day began to weigh heavily on me. It wasn’t late, barely three o’clock, but I had had my fill of both beans and company.

“I think I’ll turn in,” I told my father.

“Sure, honey,” he said, “but you’ll need to say good-bye to everyone first.”

I glanced around at the roomful of guests, members of a family I hardly knew existed until today.

“Fine,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You remember how, right?” asked Dad.

Though I was not exactly sure if I knew the correct phrase, I was not about to give him the satisfaction of embarrassing me even more by having to remind me.

“I think I can manage,” I said. Then I scraped together what dignity I had left after the bean fiasco and tromped to the center of the room.

“All right everyone,” I began, waving my hands and mustering the sincerest smile possible. “It was very nice to meet you all, but I’m pooped out so I’m going to bed.”

I cleared my throat and cast a nervous glance in my father’s direction. Sometimes pride can really be inconvenient. I paused for a second, flipping through the index of phrases in my mind. *Ah-hah!* I thought. *There it is!*

“Uh, *buenas tardes*, everyone!”

As I turned to leave, satisfied that I had done my duty, everyone in the room flocked around me. Each person bestowed a kiss on my cheek and I heard “*Buenas tardes, Mija,*” and “*¡Que Linda!*” over and over again. Nearly ten minutes passed before I was finally released and wandered off to my room in a daze.

Closing the bedroom door behind me I laid down on the bed and stared out the window at the palm trees that lined the entire length of the avenue. Unfamiliar sounds reached my ears: the cheers of spectators from the nearby soccer stadium, the calls of a street vendor, a neighbor’s radio blaring *ranchera* music. I thought of the sounds from

my own home: the crackle of logs in the wood burning stove, the laughter of my friends playing in the snow, and dogs barking. I longed to be back there, back in my own home.

I had never felt so alone.