

## CHAPTER One

**W**HEN YOU'RE an ordinary-looking guy, even *feo*, you got to suck it up and do your best. You got to shower, smell clean, and brush your teeth until the gums hurt. You got to dress nice and be Señor GQ. You got to have a little something in your wallet. You got to think, *I'll wow the chicas with talk so funny that they'll remember me*. This was my lover-boy strategy as I stood in the restroom of Club Estrella combing my hair in the mirror over the sink. I was going to meet Rachel at the dance—Rachel, the girl in the back row in English, the one whose gum-snapping chatter made Mrs. Mitchell's brow furrow. I shook water from my comb and plucked the teeth like a harp. I brought the comb back into my hair again. I had to get it right.

It was from happiness, I guess, that I turned to the guy next to me. I said I liked his shoes. They were yellow and really strange to a dude like me who clopped about in imitation Nikes but on that night was wearing a pair of black shoes from Payless. I looked back at the mirror and noticed a telephone number carved with a key in the corner—265-3519. I let my mind play: I could call that number. I could say, "Your number's on the mirror, girlye." I pictured someone like Rachel answering and roaring a frosty, "So!" Then she would be cool, come on strong, and ask, "What's your name, tiger? What's your school? What kind of ride you got?"

Ride? I had a bicycle with a bent rim and a skateboard from junior high somewhere in the garage. But a ride? It was Payless shoes made of plastic. Shoes I was going to toss in the closet once the night was over.

But the private world inside my head disappeared quickly. The guy next to me, the one with the yellow shoes, worked an arm around my throat, snakelike, and with his free hand plunged a knife into my chest. He struck me just left of my heart, right where I kept an unopened pack of Juicy Fruit gum—I had intended to sweeten my breath later when I got Rachel alone. I groaned, "No way," and touched that package of gum as I turned and stag-

gered. He lunged and struck me a second time, just above my belly button—blood the color of pomegranate juice spread across my shirt. I thought, *This is not me*, and leaned against a sink, grimacing because that one hurt. My legs buckled as I turned and straightened when he struck me in my lower back. I cried, "How come?" I saw myself in the mirror, my breath on the glass, a vapor that would disappear. I breathed on the surface and saw, in the reflection, the guy stepping away and looking at the ground as if he had dropped a quarter. Then, chin out, he stepped toward me, pulled out the shirttail from the back of my pants, and wiped his blade.

"What did you say to me, *cabron?*" he breathed in my ear. He smelled of a hamburger layered with onions.

My answer was on the glass. It was a blot of my breath, a blot of nothing. I couldn't form a word because of how much I hurt.

The guy in yellow shoes pushed me away. He put his penknife into his shirt pocket like it was a pen or pencil. He pulled a paper towel from the dispenser, and wiped his face as if his meanness could be stripped away. He coughed once. I could have used some of that air he was exhaling—I was starting to pant, worried because my lungs couldn't fill. He inspected his hands and discovered freckles