

DISAPPEARED



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FRANCISCO X. STORK

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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CHAPTER 1

SARA

FRIDAY, MARCH 24

9:10 A.M.

“You need to give up on the missing girls,” Felipe says.

Sara isn’t sure she heard him correctly. Although Felipe’s tone is not harsh, the index finger he points at her makes his words sound like a reprimand. He’s sitting behind his desk, covered in a disordered mess of envelopes and paper. Sara looks at her editor, Juana, who stands up and closes the glass door to the office.

“Look, Sara,” Felipe continues when Juana sits down. “You’ve done a great job with your column, but now it’s time to focus on the good stuff. This is not 2010, when twenty girls went missing every month. Juárez is prospering. Tourists are coming back to the shops, nightclubs are hopping again, Honeywell just opened a new assembly plant. We need to get on board and contribute to creating a positive image. Why don’t you write a weekly column on the new schools opening? The slums getting cleaned up?”

Sara feels Juana’s hand on her arm. Ever since her article on Linda’s disappearance, she’s written a weekly profile of one of the hundreds of girls who have gone missing. That column has been her fight and her comfort, the fulfillment of the promise she made to Linda to never stop looking for her. It cannot be

taken away. Juana has always been Sara's close friend and staunchest advocate, and her touch gives her strength.

Sara speaks as calmly as she can. "You're right that there aren't as many girls disappearing as a few years ago, or even a year ago," she says. "But there are still so many girls who go missing, like Susana Navarro last week. And what about the dozens still unaccounted for? Where are they? Maybe some of them are still alive. The fact that we're still getting threats is proof that our articles hit a nerve. We're the only ones keeping the pressure on the government. They'd give up if it wasn't for us."

Felipe rubs the back of his head. Sara knows he always has trouble responding to logical arguments. "Bad news doesn't sell anymore. The newspaper is finally beginning to do well. We went from daily to almost dead to weekly and now we're biweekly. I don't want to take a step backwards here. No one wants to buy ads next to pictures of missing girls."

"But that's been true for a while now," Sara says. "Has there been a specific threat?"

Felipe and Juana look at each other. Then he sighs and pushes a single sheet of paper across his desk. It's a printout of an e-mail.

If you publish anything of Linda Fuentes we will kill your reporter and her family.

Sara reads the e-mail once, then again, pausing on the words *kill, reporter, family*.

"It was sent to me around six this morning. I forwarded it to you," Felipe says to Juana. Then, fixing his eyes on Sara:

“Are you doing anything with Linda Fuentes? Research, interviews, calling people?”

“No,” Sara says. She’s received threats before, but this is the first time her family has been mentioned. The thought of anyone coming after Emiliano or her mother makes her shudder. But alongside fear, something like hope blooms in her chest. If someone needs to threaten her about Linda, does that mean she’s still alive? She places the sheet of paper on the desk. “I mean, Linda was . . . *is* my best friend. I’m still close to her family. They live in my neighborhood, and I go with Mrs. Fuentes to the State Police headquarters every couple of weeks. But I’m not doing anything about Linda that’s related to my job.”

“Well, someone thinks you’re investigating or writing about her.” Felipe leans back in his chair and touches the pocket of his shirt, searching for the cigarettes he gave up smoking a month before. “There’s something weird about this threat. It’s like they know it’s you who’s been writing the column.”

“There hasn’t been a byline on the column since Sara’s article on Linda,” Juana says. “No one knows it’s her.”

“You think those people can keep a secret?” Felipe points with his hand to the room full of cubicles outside his glass wall. “And what is this about family? Since when do families of reporters get threatened? No more articles on missing girls. That’s it.”

“Someone has to keep the memory of these girls alive,” Sara blurts out louder than she intends. She takes a deep breath and looks into Felipe’s eyes. “If we don’t care about them, then who will?”

“Sara,” Juana says softly, “I’m with Felipe on this one. We lost two reporters during the cartel wars. They were both

young and enthusiastic like you.” She takes a deep breath. “If our articles were doing any good, maybe it would be worth the risk. But has a single girl turned up since we’ve published these profiles?”

“No,” Sara says. “But if nothing else, the families know their daughters and sisters are not forgotten. That makes a difference.”

“I don’t want to be responsible for another dead reporter,” Felipe says with finality. “No more articles on the Desaparecidas. There’s more to life than just evil and pain, no? Think of something happy for a change. I want a proposal for a positive story on my desk by the end of the day.” To Juana he says, “You better clear your day tomorrow so we can finish that damn budget. That’s all. Let’s get to work.”

Sara stands and walks out of the office. She needs to do something before she speaks—or worse, shouts—the words on the tip of her tongue. She heads for the stairs that connect *El Sol*’s IT room to the main floor. They are dark and cool, as expected.

She sits on one of the steps and grabs her head. Is it true that all she can see is the suffering and injustice that need fixing? She remembers her first column about Linda, the most personal article she’s ever written. It was a miracle that Juana convinced Felipe to allow one of his reporters to write about something that affected them. In the days that followed the publication of the article, *El Sol* received dozens of letters from families of missing girls. The article provided hope and comfort to many, and the positive response convinced Juana and Felipe that a regular column on the Desaparecidas was

worthwhile. The column has been Sara's way of keeping Linda alive in her heart—and Felipe just killed it.

Think of something happy for a change. There's more to life than just evil and pain, no?

She gets up and stands by the steel door that leads back to the newsroom. After a few seconds, she takes a deep breath and opens it.

Think of something happy for a change.

Yes, she can do that. Of course she can do that. Can't she? She thinks of Mami, getting on with life after Papá left her, making delicious cakes for a bakery. Or her brother, Emiliano, falling in love for the first time, and how he squirmed and blushed when Sara finally got him to tell her the name of the girl he's smitten with. Just thinking about Emiliano makes Sara happy. He was going down a bad path after Papá left, and now look at him, helping other at-risk kids with his folk art business. Thank God for Brother Patricio and the Jiparis.

The Jiparis, Sara thinks. They're like the Boy Scouts, holding long hikes out in the desert that save boys from delinquency. That's a feel-good story if there ever was one. She goes back to her desk and types out a brief proposal; then she attaches it to an e-mail and sends it to Felipe. A message from Juana appears on her screen.

Let's talk. Can you come over now?

In her office, Juana gestures for Sara to close the door. Sara sits down in one of the yellow plastic chairs in front of the desk.

Juana's voice is businesslike. "I'm sorry I didn't support you in there. But this one scares me more than the other e-mails. It mentions a specific girl, and it does seem to be directed at you and . . . your family."

"I agree with you that it's written in a peculiar way," Sara says. She doesn't tell Juana that the e-mail scared her too. "It's the first threat that uses *we* instead of *I*. It's as if it came from a group or an organization of some sort."

Juana knits her eyebrows the way she does when she's trying to read someone. "Look, I know you, Sara, and I know that regardless of Felipe's orders—or mine, for that matter—you're going to try to find out who and what's behind this. *Don't*. I agree with Felipe. From all kinds of angles, this is not a good idea. You are in danger, and I don't want anything to happen to you. But also, Felipe is right. It's not good for business to be pushing negative news right now. We're finally doing well enough to hire a few more people. We're working six days a week again. I want you to stand down, as they say in the armed forces. Stand down completely."

"You don't really mean that," Sara says. "That's not the Juana Martínez I know, who always says where there's a bad smell, there's a skunk, and it's our job to find the skunks. There's a skunk behind this e-mail. I want to find it."

"This time I think we need to live with the smell," Juana says, looking away.

"Juana." Sara leans forward, waits for Juana to look at her. "When the cartel wars were raging and every newspaper reporter had been threatened, you were one of the few who kept on. Even after *El Sol* lost two reporters, you continued writing the truth. I remember reading your articles when I was

in grade school. You're the reason I decided to be a reporter. Your courage is why I'm here. You can't want me to stop looking."

"It's different now," Juana says quietly.

"How?"

"I told you already. This newspaper has to survive." Then, as if regretting the tone of her words, Juana shakes her head. "Nothing I say is going to stop you, is it?"

"I can't give up," Sara says, thinking of Linda.

For a moment, Juana looks almost angry, but she says, "Keep me informed of everything. I mean *everything*." She waits for Sara's nod. "This is not a request. It is an order from your boss."

"I will. I promise."

"Here." Juana picks up a business card and hands it to Sara. "Call this guy. He's constructing a new mall near Zaragoza. I want you to do an article about why he's doing it now—what signs he sees in the city and the economy that make him think a new mall will succeed. Go to the site where he plans to build it. Get some pictures."

Sara holds the card in front of her for a few seconds. "Is this for the happy article Felipe wants me to do? I sent an idea to him a little while ago."

"No, it's a favor to someone who's willing to spend a lot on advertising. This is a business, remember? We can't do any good if we're not in business. Do this one after you write the one for Felipe."

"Okay." Sara stands. "Juana, can you forward the e-mail with the threat to me? I want to study it a little more."

Juana reluctantly hits a few keys on her computer. As Sara

is leaving, she reminds her, “Sara, the e-mail mentions the reporter’s family. Your family.”

Sara swallows and says softly, “I know.”

Back at her desk, Sara thinks for a long time. Does she really want to pursue something that could affect Mami and Emiliano, the two people she loves the most? They took so many precautions after Sara received her first threat. Their address is not in any public records. All the bills go to Sara at work. Juana is the only person at *El Sol* who knows where she lives, and most nights, Emiliano walks to her office after school and they take a bus home together. She’s done all she can to protect herself and her family. She did all that so she could continue to investigate the disappearance of Linda and so many other girls. She owes it to them not to give up now. She will go slowly and carefully and stop if she senses any real danger. How can she “stand down,” as Juana says, when Linda may be alive?

She forwards the threatening e-mail to Ernesto, the head of *El Sol*’s two-person IT department, and asks him if there’s any way to figure out the identity of the sender. An hour later, Ernesto calls. “Just from a quick look, this e-mail was sent by someone who knows a lot about encryption. The server bounced the message around so no one can locate the sender. If it’s okay with you, I’ll send it to my friends.” His friends are the Jaqueros, a group of technology and computer experts he knows. The Jaqueros helped her with an article she did on a joint investigation between the FBI and the Mexican Attorney General’s Office. They had access to e-mails and texts between cartel members and government officials that no one else could get.

Sara says what she always says when he offers to send something to the Jaqueros: “Okay, but don’t break any laws.”

He responds like he always does: “Who do you think we are?”

After Ernesto hangs up, Sara answers his question silently:
You’re the people who will help me find my best friend.