

# Taco Tuesdays

**Mónica Mancillas**

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# CHAPTER 1

## DULCE

It's the first day of summer vacation, but not for me. Not for Dulce Díaz. The word *vacation* is so foreign in my house, it rolls off the tongue like burnt flan. I blink back the 6:00 a.m. light as I walk through the halls of Fidelia, thinking enviously of my friends from school still tucked in their beds.

If I were them, I'd be dreaming of beach days and endless screen time. Of summer camps, suntanned skin, and overnights with my besties. Staying up late watching mindless TV and sleeping until midafternoon. And no one would care if I spent the whole day in pajamas daydreaming and sketching.

Because that's what it's like when you're not me. When you're *not* in the Díaz family, where every second of every day is dedicated to Fidelia, our restaurant. Fidelia is our lifeblood. It's the thing that puts food on the table. It's what keeps the roof from crashing in on our heads. At least, that's what Mami says.

Only I remember a time when Fidelia was about more than just surviving. More than 6:00 a.m. shifts, empty cash drawers, and

worried expressions on faces. There was a time when Fidelia was joy, and customers lined up out the door, dining room tables brimming with laughter and endless jokes in the kitchen. Back then, our restaurant felt like home, like the place I most wanted to be.

But that was before Taco World moved across the street and changed everything.

I stop at the open kitchen door and survey the scene beyond, the smell of frioles and stewing meat filling up the space around me. Tía Fermina coughs out demands while the others shuffle obediently—my mom, my dad, my primo Lalo, and my other primo Hernán.

“La sopa, Araceli,” Fermina barks.

My mom rushes over to the stove, the permanent circles under her eyes deepening as she turns down the burner. Lalo stands by the sink chopping lettuce in his uniform—a tank top and jeans. The bandanna on his head catches sweat as he sings off-key to the radio by the window.

“Andale, Gordo, get chopping.” He sticks a teasing tongue at Hernán. The two look like Bert and Ernie—one lean, one round—standing next to each other. “They’ll put you on bathroom duty sí no te apures.”

Hernán grimaces. He shuffles to the counter, picks up a knife, and begins dissecting tomatoes.

“Y no como lo hiciste last time,” Fermina warns. “It’s salsa, not tomato Campbell’s.”

“I *won’t*, Mamá.” Hernán frowns.

Fermina scowls for good measure. I lean my shoulder against the cold doorjamb and anxiously wait to be noticed. Maybe, if I'm quiet enough, they'll forget that I'm even here. Then, maybe I can go back home and sleep like the other almost seventh graders. And maybe I won't have to be here to watch Fidelia slowly drown.

"Dulce!"

I snap to attention as Fermina barks in my direction. She runs a meaty hand beneath the line of her short curly hair.

"Make sure all the tables are clean, *mija*. And do the floor—and the windows!"

"The windows, *Tía*?" I groan.

"Sí, pues. It's our grand reopening, *que no*?"

She dumps a handful of ingredients into the steaming pot in front of her while Mamá skirts around her and then works the palm of her hand into a ball of dough. Papá hums absent-mindedly as he works at the pollo asado, tall tendrils of flame creeping up from the grill like tongues reaching for a meal.

And me? I stand there wishing that, for just one second, I was somewhere else. I could be on the beach, sketching with my best friend Marnie, while cute surfers stroll by in wet suits. I can almost taste the salt in the air as the wind sweeps through my hair, the summer sun a good kind of heat—not the heat of this too-crowded kitchen.

Fermina wipes her hands on the soiled apron around her waist,

then rests them on her hips as she turns her whole body in my direction.

“Y?”

Her face means business.

“Sí, Tía.” I push myself off the doorjamb, the heavy smells of Fidelia forcing away the perfume of hot sand.

I slump toward the closet by the bathroom door where the cleaning supplies are kept, and pull out a rag, a bucket and mop, and a tub of all-purpose cleaner. I head to the bathroom and flip on the light before turning the knob on the faucet, then stare at the black-and-white pictures that coat the wall as the bucket fills.

In the middle of it all, Fidelia stares back at me from where she’s hung for the last sixty years, the angular tilt of her pointed face both regal and discerning. I recognize myself in her deep brown eyes, fair skin, and dark hair. Only I’m a *lot* less elegant, and a whole lot less important.

“Hey, Bis,” I say, even though I know she can’t possibly hear me. It’s just a thing I do—like praying. I share all my secrets with Fidelia.

“This sucks. This *isn’t* summer vacation. I might as well be at school.”

I swear I see her eyes roll as she stares at me from the wall.

“Seriously, Bis. It isn’t fair. Other kids don’t have to work. And anyway, it’s not like they need more help ruining this place.”

I flinch and toss an apologetic glance Fidelia's way. "Sorry, Bis. You know I love Fidelia. It *used* to be supercool."

She looks at me like she knows that her legacy is disappearing. I can almost hear her through the picture frame glass. *Why, Dulce? Why did you let them do it?*

"I know," I sigh. I turn off the faucet and let the bucket rest in the sink. "I told them, but they just wouldn't listen to me."

I can almost see her head shaking.

"That orange paint and those tacky wooden chairs, and the banners they hung from the ceiling." Fidelia's eyes seem to narrow like she knows just what I'm thinking. "It's like Mexico Disney in there, Bisabuela. And the menu." I hang my head. "They took all your recipes off. It's all just tacos and cheese-filled things now. It's . . . embarrassing, Bis."

I jump at the squeak of the door as it swings open. My sister, Flor, freezes, her pencil-lined eyes wide as she gawks at me.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Huh?" I shrug. "No one."

"Ooo-kay."

She lets the door swing shut and steps toward the mirror for her hourly primp session. I heft the bucket onto the floor, and she squeals as it splashes her legs.

"Ay! Watch it!"

She wipes down her legs, her perfectly glossed ponytail swinging.

“Sorry,” I scoff.

She straightens herself and pulls out a tube of red lipstick. I grimace as she purses her lips and cakes on another unnecessary layer. Then, she tugs at her too-tight skirt, rearranging her too-short matching crop top. She tosses a glance at me in the mirror, raising a painted eyebrow.

“We gotta get you to the mall, Lechita. Seriously, what even is this?”

She waves a hand over my T-shirt and sweats, and I cross my arms defensively.

“What? It’s not like I’m going to prom.”

“Prom, right,” she scoffs.

I roll my eyes and pick up the bucket, dragging it through the doorway.

“*Tables!*” I hear her call through the wall.

I grunt and stomp down the hall.

I stare at the long open dining room capped on one end by a bar, the walls decorated with yellow clay suns and Diego Rivera prints. Gone is the peeling food-stained paint, the pictures Fidelia once hung. My stomach tightens as I dip a rag into the bucket and bend to a table.

I look up as Abuelo shuffles in, his head buried in a newspaper. He pulls out a chair and sits down, setting his fedora on the table in



front of him. He grumbles and shakes his balding head, engrossed in whatever he's reading.

"Good morning, Abuelito," I say.

"Eh?" He looks up, smiling as his eyes focus in on me. "Oh. Buenos días, hija. Good morning. Watchu doing here so early? Shouldn't you be at school?"

"It's summer vacation, Abuelito."

"Eh? Oh, right."

He turns back to his paper.

"Anything good?" I smile.

"Just the usual basura. Crooks, political scandals, that Kim Cardi B on some new TV show."

I laugh as Mami strides in from the kitchen like she's got a fire on her heels. "Hola, Papi." She sets down a plate of huevos rancheros in front of Abuelo. "Don't forget, we need you to hang the new sign."

"Sí, sí," Abuelo mumbles.

Mami stands there and watches as Abuelo digs in, that worried look on her face. "Bueno." She turns to go back to the kitchen, then stops and looks at me. "Make sure he gets that sign up, eh?"

"Okay, Mami," I huff.

I wait for Mami to leave, then plop myself down across from Abuelo. "Abuelito?"

"Mm?" Abuelo looks up at me, chewing, his weathered cheeks sweating.

“Do you think Fidelia would like all these changes?”

“Changes?” He smacks his lips.

“The restaurant—the new orange paint, these banners, and those tacky piñatas in the corner?”

Abuelo looks around, still chewing, and shrugs. “Looks nice to me, *mija*.”

“But what about this?” I swipe a menu from the counter and shove it in his face.

“I like tacos. What’s wrong with tacos?”

I sigh and slump back into my chair.

“It’s not the tacos, Abuelo. It’s just, that’s what everyone thinks we are. Oh, Mexican people *love* tacos.”

“And burritos!” Flor chimes as she swans in from the bathroom.

Lalo strides in behind her and grins, a dish towel tossed over his shoulder. “And quesadillas—don’t forget them.”

“And nachos,” Flor chuckles.

“Tamales, taquitos, flautas,” Lalo adds.

“Ooh, not flautas.” Flor winces. “Those are Fake-sican. They don’t even have cheese.”

“It’s not Mexican if it doesn’t have cheese.” Lalo plops himself down in the chair next to Abuelo and swipes a bite of his beans.

“You guys,” I say, rolling my eyes. “This is serious. Fidelia is in trouble.”

“Yeah, we know.” Flor takes the chair next to mine and picks at

her nails like she's bored. "That's why we're having this grand reopening. We're *mainstreaming* to get more customers."

"Listen to your sister, Lechita," Lalo says. "She knows what she's talking about."

"Why?" I roll my eyes at the nickname—little milk, because of my fair skin. "Just because she took a class in restaurant management at the San Fernando Valley Adult School?"

"It wasn't just a *class*," Flor spits. "It's going to be my major."

"You're only sixteen," I say. "You still have, like, two years left before college."

"So? I'm ambitious." She sticks out her tongue, and I point mine back, Lalo laughing.

This right here is the reason I feel like the polka-dot sheep of the family. It's like I'm the only one who has dreams that don't involve Fidelia.

"Niñas," Abuelo says. "Don't argue. You'll bring out your Tía Fermína." He leans in closer and tosses his eyes toward the kitchen, lowering his voice. "You know she has that . . . *Spideyman* sense." He waggles his hand by his head.

We all throw a hesitant look at the kitchen and set our arguments aside.

"I still think we're making a *big* mistake," I say under my breath.

"Why?" Flor gives me that you're-weird look.

"Cause we're killing Fidelia's legacy. She built this place, like,

sixty years ago right after she came here from Mexico. And her food was *so* good that there were customers lined up out the door just to taste her corundas!”

“Nobody wants corundas anymore. Do you *see* any customers?” says Flor. She waves her hand at the empty dining room, really rubbing it in.

“No.” I pout. “But Fidelia wouldn’t want this. Would she, Abuelito?”

“Hmm?” Abuelo looks up from his plate as he scoops up the last bite of beans. “Fidelia *loved* this restaurant, it’s true.” He wipes his mouth with a napkin. “But you know what she loved more, *mija*?”

I wait, pretty sure I know where this is going.

“She loved her family. She would do whatever it took to keep this family together. Even if it meant serving tacos with those cardboard shells and those drinks with umbrellas.”

I sink into my chair, defeated, then stiffen at the sound of Fermina approaching.

“Y que?” She glares with her hands on her hips. “We don’t have any work to do?”

“Sorry, Tía,” I say.

I push my chair back, and Flor and Lalo follow.

“Andale, viejo, you too!” barks Fermina.

Abuelo stands up obediently. We all disperse and head to our tasks as Fermina stomps back to the kitchen.

When I'm done with the tables and floors, I drag my cleaning supplies outside, my hands clenching as they long for my sketch pad instead of this gross wet rag. The ashen gray sky has been swallowed by the orange hue of a California morning. I shiver as the chill air brushes my skin, sticky with the sweat of my labors.

I raise a hand to my forehead and squint at the building across the street, the giant taco on the sign above the door an affront to the good name of Taco. Already, the drive-through window is buzzing, a line of cars patiently waiting—morning commuters ordering their breakfast faux-rritos and Styrofoam cup coffees.

Abuelo shuffles around the corner, dragging an old yellow ladder. “*LA-LO!*” he bellows. Lalo comes jogging up with a second ladder. Behind him, Hernán and Gabriel—my other, *other* primo—sidle down the sidewalk, each carrying one end of a giant banner. I watch as the four of them work, positioning the ladder as Abuelo climbs up it.

“Should *he* be doing that?” I say.

Lalo shrugs, tugging at his baggy jeans.

“Que esperes, Flaco?” Abuelo says, tossing a frown at Lalo.

Lalo climbs up the second ladder as Abuelo starts to totter. Gabriel grabs the leg of the ladder with his free hand as I rush over.

“Careful, Abuelito!” I call.

“Déjame, mija.” Abuelo dismisses me.

I slowly step back, biting my lip as Lalo and Abuelo heft the sign

up. I watch as they tug, straighten, and tie, then climb down to survey their work.

“Muy bien, muchachos,” Abuelo says, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He stands there and stares at the sign with me while my cousins head back to the kitchen. He turns to me, the sound of morning traffic behind us roaring. “‘Fidelia’ means loyalty, mija. Remember that.” He pats my back.

I sigh as I dip my rag in the bucket and turn my attention to the windows. “Don’t worry, Abuelo, I know.” I scrub away all dreams of a summer vacation.