



CECILIA'S MAGICAL MISSION

VIOLA
CANALES



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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my mother Dora Casas Canales, who passed away while writing this book.



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Cecilia and Julie ate chocolate bars as they sat on the front steps of their apartment building. Both eighth-graders had just walked home from the bus stop. Julie and her mother had recently moved to California from New York, after they lost everything they owned in the horrors of Hurricane Sandy. Cecilia had lived her whole life in the same San Jose apartment after her parents migrated from Mexico.

“When’s your mother due?” Julie asked as she bit into her chocolate bar.

“She’s in her twenty-fifth week,” Cecilia said with a quick smile.

Julie wrinkled her nose. “Gosh, you look so happy. I guess you’re looking forward to the new baby, huh?”

“Of course!”

“But the apartments are so small,” Julie said. “I for sure wouldn’t want another sibling.”

Cecilia let out a short laugh. “I’ll get used to it. I’ve been sharing my room with fifty-pound sacks of potatoes, beans and . . .”

Julie clapped Cecilia on the shoulder. “Hey, I’d gladly sleep out on the fire escape if I had a mother like yours. She cooks like magic.” She added wistfully, “Boy, I’ve never, ever tasted anything as delicious as the *carne guisada* your mother brought over to welcome us.”

“That’s her *don*,” Cecilia said.

“Her what?”

“Her talent, her celestial gift. It’s a belief from Santa Cecilia, the town where my parents were born in Mexico. It’s a Catholic belief, a *Mexican Catholic* belief.”

“What are you getting at?” Julie asked. “That because I’m not Mexican or Catholic, I can’t understand what a *don* is? Your mother cooks like . . . how can I describe it?” Her eyes darted upwards. “Your mother’s cooking feels like a carnival that appears out of the blue and transforms the empty, weed-choked lot you hurry by every day and think ‘How creepy!’ into a joyous marvel of flashing colors, music, smells and tastes that take you to another world.”

It was clear her mother’s gift had cast a spell on Julie. Cecilia said, “That’s a good description of what a *don*’s supposed to do.” She took the last bite of her chocolate bar and, when she glanced up, she noticed the patches of bright blue sky between the soaring steel and brick apartment buildings. “A *don*,” she continued, “is the gift, the special talent supposedly everyone, not just Mexicans or Catholics, is born with . . . but a person has to discover her own gift, nurture it, and then share its fruit with others. My mom’s *don* is cooking.”

Julie looked surprised.

This was a look Cecilia recognized. *Does she think this was weird?* Cecilia jumped to her feet, snatched her backpack and swung it over her shoulder.

“Wait.” Julie grabbed Cecilia’s wrist. “Tell me more.”

“It’s getting late,” Cecilia said as she pulled away from Julie’s grip. “I have to help Mom with the cooking for tomorrow’s route.”

“Okay.” Julie scrambled to her feet. “But tell me why this *don* thing makes you look sad.”

“It’s because I’m coming up on my Confirmation and I have to choose a saint. . . .”

“And?”

“This saint is supposed to represent one’s *don*,” Cecilia finished as she unzipped her backpack and rooted around for her keys.

“And?” Julie jingled her own set of keys. “Why does this make you sad?”

“Because I have no idea what my gift is!” Cecilia dropped her shoulders with a heavy sigh.

Julie wanted to hear more but she knew that Cecilia needed to hurry to help her mother. “I’ll see you at the bus stop,” she said and they clambered up four flights of stairs to their apartments.

Julie thought of Cecilia’s bright, fragrant kitchen. Her heart sank as she opened the door to her own apartment where her mother slept in a dark, gloomy bedroom.