



# A BRIDGE HOME

MONA  
ALVARADO  
FRAZIER

“With its honest teenage voice and gritty realism, this novel stands out.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

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*Piñata Books are full of surprises!*

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*Dedicated to the fearless advocates and champions of equality, both past and present, who fight tirelessly to dismantle barriers and build bridges of understanding and acceptance. Your enduring commitment to justice and fairness serves as a beacon of hope for future generations.*



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# CHAPTER 1

## FEBRUARY 1972

The door swings open. Heads swivel right. The new principal of St. Bernadette High lumbers into senior history, stands at the head of the class and peers over her wire eyeglasses like an oversized owl draped in a black tunic.

“Good afternoon, Sister Mary Grace,” thirty voices say. She nods, “Students.”

Her bulk grows as she shuffles to the last row of seats, a grimace on her face. Sweat dampens my underarms.

Sister stares down at me. “Jacqueline Bravo, come to my office immediately after class.”

The red brick administration building resembles a gothic cathedral more than a high school with its stained-glass windows, pillars and arches. Stone statues of saints and white rosebushes border the kneeling figure of St. Bernadette in the courtyard. The surrounding classrooms cast shadows over the area. The old place reeks of damp brick and wet dirt.

In grammar school, I learned St. Bernadette was the oldest in her family, the patron saint of poverty, and her middle name was Marie, like mine. All similarities end there unless I begin seeing visions of the Virgin Mary.

The closer I come to Sister Mary Grace's office, the tighter my shoulders shrink. There's nothing to be nervous about since I can't think of anything I've done wrong.

I brush off my burgundy blazer, straighten my pleated skirt and push open the heavy glass door to the school office. A small bell with a sign says, "Ring Once." I set my books on the long counter and tap the bell. Mrs. Jasper, the school secretary, jerks her head up. Her blonde flip hairdo doesn't budge. I guess that's why the students call her Helmet Head.

"Um. Sister Mary Grace said to come to see her?"

"You may go in, Jacqui." Mrs. Jasper waves her hand to the open door on her left.

The office is three times the size of my old elementary school. Better scent too. Lemon oil from the polished bookcases and mahogany desk lingers in the room. An enameled letter opener sits on one side of the desk, with immaculately labeled folders on the right.

Sister hangs up the shiny black telephone, motions to the chair. "Sit, Miss Bravo." Her cold voice is an order. She clasps her veiny hands on the desk and leans forward until the silver crucifix around her neck clanks against the edge.

I sink into the leather seat, grip the carved arms. A shudder runs through my chest.

"I understand your mother is a St. Bernadette alumna and these are difficult times for your family, *but* we must have a payment on your tuition. February is the third month you're overdue. St. Bernadette has a *huge* waiting list."

Overdue? My teeth clench along with my shoulders, but I manage a tight smile. The transparent blueness of Sister's eyes focuses on me like she's trying to force me to explain.

I don't understand why my tuition isn't paid. Mom didn't say a word to me. "There must be a mistake."

“No. No error.” Her thick finger thuds on the desk three times. “We called your mother two weeks ago, but no one answered. We mailed a reminder letter last week and haven’t heard from her yet. The bill comes to one hundred and fifty dollars. When can we expect payment?”

The amount is a fist to my stomach. I fold into the chair, hoping to miraculously disappear. What happened to the hundred bucks Mom had in the cigar box in December? I just gave her fifty bucks last month—my entire pay. I shift my eyes to the carpeted floor, the ceiling, anywhere but Sister’s piercing stare. My bottom lip quivers until I clamp my mouth shut.

“Miss Bravo, pay attention,” her voice booms. “You are not taking this seriously. Perhaps a transfer to a public school is in order because of your circumstances.”

“No way.”

Her eyes blink a warning. I take a deep breath and fill my stomach with one of Dad’s sayings: *Don’t let them see you sweat.*

“Sister, I need to stay at St. Bernadette. This is the best school for me, and the UCLA alumnus scholarship is important. We’ll come up with the money. I promise.”

“College is expensive. A much more realistic avenue would be a vocational school. Someplace to learn secretarial or vocational skills until you are married.”

Married? Vocational? St. Bernadette is a college prep school. Beads of perspiration make their way down my forehead.

“My mom started a new job. An office one. She’ll pay the tuition soon.”

Sister’s lined face relaxes. “Good news. But if we don’t have the bill paid by March first, you’ll have to transfer.”

That’s twenty-eight days from now. I bite down on my lip. Hard. The sharp sensation travels across my face and stops the

tears threatening to flood my eyes. Mom's first paycheck can't pay the entire bill *and* our rent.

Sister removes an envelope from a folder labeled *Jacqueline Bravo*. "Here's another letter. Hand deliver it to your mother."

The odor of wet wool from my sweaty blazer rises to my nose. Sister's thin-lipped smile makes me want to gag. Don't cry. Breathe. She stands, motions to the door without taking her hand out of her pocket like a giant bat spreading its wings.

I stumble into my sixth-period English class, my head full of questions about my late tuition. My future rides on that scholarship, and I'm not transferring out of here in my senior year.

All conversation stops as Ms. Fine, my favorite teacher, enters the room in super bell jeans and a yellow frilly blouse. Both are a huge no-no at St. Bernadette High, but I've noticed she's ditched her long black sweater and slacks for more colorful outfits in the past couple of months. But flares and a yellow blouse? She's living dangerously now.

She grabs a piece of chalk, writes *Ms.* on the blackboard. "Class, I'm changing how you can address me. Instead of Mrs., I'd like you to call me *Ms. Fine*." Her red lipstick grin stretches from one silver hoop earring to the other—another no-no.

Murmurs rise through the classroom. "Miz?" "Like Gloria Steinem?" "Radical."

We don't have a Ms. anybody at school. The lady lay teachers are Miss or Mrs. The male teachers are Mister. They wear old people's clothes. And Sister Mary Grace isn't going to like the new Ms. Fine. I bet Sister tells her she'll go to hell for calling herself Ms.

"Using my new prefix will take a bit, but times are changing," she says. "Take out your pens for a quiz. Jacqui, hand these out, please."

I'm Ms. Fine's helper, and I like that because she's always helping me out with stuff. She's talked to me about college and my future since I was a sophomore.

At the first desk, I slap a sheet of paper down. The kissing sounds from the back begin. "Smack," someone says. You'd think I'd be used to the juvenile comments about being a brown noser, but this is bearable because, in the last row, the middle chair is Petey Castro. The closer I move to his desk, the more I pray I don't trip on my big feet or drop the papers in my hand.

"Your quiz."

I slide the sheet on his desk while breathing in the strong scent of his Irish Spring soap. He must have showered after gym class because his thick hair is lined with comb marks and glistening with hair cream. I imagine moving one of those deep brown waves off his forehead. He raises his chin ever so slightly, but enough so my stomach flutters when he smiles. I tuck my trembling fingers under the hem of my blazer. Act cool.

"Hey, snap out of it," Larry says from the desk next to Petey.

Laughter surrounds me. My throat chokes up like I ate a jalapeño from Mom's salsa. *Damn that, Larry.* I slam the paper down on his desk and move on.

"Petey, don't you think Jacqui looks like Angela Cartwright from *Lost in Space*? She acts like she's lost in orbit."

His snorts are like a hail of rocks. I freeze. My cheeks flush hot. "Shut up, Lunkhead Larry, I'm amazed you're even cognizant of the word *orbit*. You dumb jock."

"Jacqui, it's just a joke. Lighten up," Petey says. "Why you gotta be so serious?"

"You're defending Larry? You wouldn't be here if it weren't for that sports scholarship, Pay-droh. And don't go acting like a rich guy. You live in the housing projects too."



“Jacqui, back to your seat and begin,” Miss Fine says. “Margot Sanders and Jacqui, come see me when you turn in your quiz.”

Ten minutes later, I finish and doodle inside my Pee Chee folder. I’m deep into daydreams about Petey until I catch Margot Sanders slink a long leg out of her seat. My cue. I hustle up to Ms. Fine’s desk first. Margot rolls her eyes behind her John Lennon eyeglasses and flicks her wavy red hair behind her back.

“Good news. You both qualify for the scholarship.” Ms. Fine waves two sheets of paper.

A wealthy alumnus sponsors the one-year scholarship to the University of California in Los Angeles. None of the public schools have anything like this award. UCLA is my number one college choice, and winning the prize is my chance to make it out of San Solano. I’ll be able to live at college where cousin Bebe says, ‘You’re free to think as you want, to question authority and do your own thing.’

Margot reaches around my shoulder, takes the papers from Ms. Fine and hands me a sheet. *Autobiography and Scholarship Essay Questions are due March 30<sup>th</sup>.*

“Reference your college applications,” Ms. Fine says. “Easy-peasy, right?”

“Sure, no prob. I keep all my records.” Margot pivots and returns to her seat.

She’s prepared, of course. I hear she has a private tutor. She probably has a secretary to copy and file all her schoolwork. If my parents owned the biggest department store in the city, we could afford all that too. I don’t have a typewriter and need to figure out how to accomplish this before the deadline. I work after school, and I study when I’m not working. I’m taking care of my siblings when I’m not doing that.

“Uh. . . Ms. Fine, I don’t have copies. I didn’t know anyone with a copy machine.”

She leaps to her feet, her shoes clacking on the floor to the filing cabinet. Bright red painted toenails peek out of her Candie slides. Ms. Fine doesn’t care about fitting in.

“Here,” she says and hands me the forms. “We’ll go over your essay answers at the end of the week. I know you can do it.”

Yeah, if I’m still at St. Bernie by the end of the week. I need to think of something quick to ensure that happens.