



# Chapter 1

## Not My Fault

It was all the cat's fault.

In my defense, I only fed it once. Really, how could I have resisted that sweet face? Yesterday when I saw it sitting on the snow-covered picnic table in my backyard, I snuck out of the house and placed a can of organic tuna nearby. I should have known that small decision would wreck my life. Hadn't I learned time after time that no good deed goes unpunished?

Twenty-four hours after my spur-of-the-moment kindness, I heard the telltale sounds of something hungry rummaging in the garbage, apparently looking for more free food. If she heard the noise, Mami would send me out to check. Did she even care that I had things to do or that I

was sick with a virus? I didn't dare ask aloud in case the answer hurt more than swallowing rice pudding did.

Just when I thought Mami hadn't heard anything, she muted the cheery Puerto Rican Christmas music on her phone and asked, "What's making that escándalo outside?"

I kept typing at the computer, pretending I couldn't hear the racket, as she'd called it.

"Shhh, Natalia, listen," she whispered, and put the pudgy plastic succulent leaf down on the table. She was making flower arrangements for one of her commissions.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard. The sound of a can clanking on the driveway echoed all the way into the kitchen.

Silly cat. I told it to keep the secret between us. If my mom found out I'd been feeding a stray, she'd ground me for the rest of winter break. Today was only the first day, and as soon as I shook off this bug, I intended to have the most unforgettable staycation ever.

Mami narrowed her eyes and shook her head, as if she

could imagine nothing good happening outside. “Go and make sure the garbage bins are lidded, and while you’re at it, take them to the curb. Tomorrow’s garbage day.”

Although I knew this was coming, I still groaned. “Why is the garbage my job?”

But now *she* was the one pretending to have selective hearing. “I don’t want our leftovers attracting sabandijas,” she said. “Poor little chickens; they never hurt a soul. They were the happiest creatures ever.”

Happy creatures? I almost laughed. Give me a break. Mrs. Lind’s rooster would crow its heart out at dark o’clock every morning (and, I swear, even earlier on weekends and holidays). This week I’d slept in for the first time in ages. I was *grateful* the raccoon, or whatever it was, had eaten the chickens.

A terrible possibility flashed in my mind—had the cat eaten the chickens?

No way. The cat I’d fed was too small. It didn’t even have a tail, just a fluff. But what if the cat had really been *that* hungry? I knew nothing about cats. I’d have to ask my best

friend, Reuben, if it was possible for such a small animal to have that big of an appetite.

I only had time to type the question when Mami said, “Natalia . . .”

“What, Mami?” I rolled my eyes. “I’m talking with Reuben!”

Reuben was also home sick with the same virus. I told him a million times not to drink from my water bottle, but did he ever listen?

When she didn’t reply, I swiveled in the computer chair to look at her.

“You’re always talking with Reuben. Since you’re on that computer all day, you could spend a little minute to send your father a note.” She smiled tightly and bobbed her head from side to side.

And this woman wondered who I got the attitude from.

I swiveled the chair back to break the eye contact, but I could still see her reflection on the screen and the smirk on her face. Writing to my dad was a topic I didn’t want to discuss right now. Or ever.

“Why are you asking *me* to do it?” I tried to change the subject.

“Because I did it last time and I had to clean up the mess you left. You always leave the lids on the ground.”

“I never!” I said . . . even though I *might* have left them on the ground last time. But what was I supposed to do? The bin had been full. “Can’t you ask Beli?” I forced a cough and grabbed at my throat for emphasis.

Mami laughed. “Seriously?”

Of course she would never ask my grandma. Beli was a guest, and a reluctant one to boot. She loved us, but she was used to the year-round summer weather in Puerto Rico and hated the cold. She was now in her room, the heater blasting as she watched TV. She wouldn’t leave the house unless it was absolutely necessary—or if my sister, Julieta, invited her to go shopping or something.

“What about Julieta, your *favorite*?” As soon as the word was out of my mouth, I wanted to bite my tongue. Telling the truth always got me in trouble.

Mami didn’t answer. Of course she wouldn’t send Juli to

do anything as undignified as checking on raccoons in the garbage. Julieta always did everything perfectly right, like writing to my dad every week without being asked, plus keeping up with her own dad. She called my dad Papi and hers Dad, and they both adored her. She was everyone's favorite.

I stomped to the door and made a show of putting my puffy red jacket on.

“Gracias, y por favor stop it with that *favorite* business,” Mami said, looking smug. “Your sister has been an angel lately. You could learn from her that when you spread kindness, you attract good things in your life.”

Julieta wasn't an angel, not to me at least, and seriously, my previous experience proved that kindness didn't always bring good things. I'd fed the cat and now it was practically haunting me.

I made a dramatic exit through the kitchen door that led to the carport, flipping my hair out of my face. Right next to the door was a photo of Papi in his fancy army uniform. Mami had put photos of him all over the house. This one

sat on the wall shelf as if he were one of those peeping holiday elves.

The door slammed behind me in the wind, and I heard the photo frame fall. I cringed. Oops. Mami would think I'd thrown the door shut on purpose.

She didn't understand. It's not like I could spread kindness like honey butter on a warm dinner roll. When I'd been nice in the past, people like Meera Rogers had thought I was dumb and taken advantage of me. Never again!

Now, I was pretty sure that as—and I quote Mrs. Snow, the principal—“the most controversial student in Andromeda Elementary,” *kind* wasn't the first word that popped into people's minds when they thought of me.

If Papi were here, he wouldn't send me out, or he'd at least come to check on the noise with me. He'd make it into an adventure. Although he loved Juli, he didn't really play favorites, but a part of me liked to think I was his. Now he'd been gone for months, and who knew when he'd be back?



I told myself not to think about it too much and walked toward the bins.

“Gato!” I called in a whisper-shout.

The cat didn’t answer, but I saw little paw prints marking the pristine snow. I followed them all the way to the bins lined up by the wall. I glanced up across the street. The Rogerses’ house was lit up and decorated for the season, unlike ours. Mami had said this Christmas would be like any other, but the truth was that without Papi nothing was the same. We hadn’t even put up a tree.

The Rogerses always had a lot of company over. I recognized their grandparents’ car parked at their curb. At least there was no sign of my ex–best friend, Meera. Seeing her every day at school was bad enough. Crossing paths with her in the neighborhood and witnessing her perfect family was the worst.

More crumpling sounds called me to the task at hand.

When I looked behind the bin and yelled, “Fuah!” all I saw was the same scared, small, hungry cat I’d fed yesterday.