

---

CHAPTER

1

Tia Ramirez was the only girl heading into senior year at South Central High School who did two hundred sit-ups every day at four o'clock in the morning.

"Nishell? Can you count them for me?" Tia snapped on the harsh overhead light. Her bedroom was as spare as a prison cell. She had a bed, desk, chair, and a poster of Mexico City on the far wall. That was it.

"Tia. Come on. It's summer vacation. And it's four in the morning!" her friend Nishell Saunders protested sleepily. She'd

slept over at Tia's place. "Whatchu doing? Gettin' in shape for *Ultimate Fighter*?"

Tia stretched out on a rubber workout mat. She wore just panties and a white bra. Her lush dark hair was back in a ponytail. She was barely five foot two and had a cute figure that no one would guess at, since she usually hid it under conservative clothes. Recently, she'd started wearing glasses for nearsightedness but didn't need them for her morning workout.

"This is what I do when I get up." She got a mischievous look in her eyes. "Unless you want to do them with me?"

"No!"

"I didn't think so. Now, are you going to count, or am I going to have to hurt you?" Tia asked with a wink.

"You crazy, girlfriend," Nishell told her, rubbing some sleep from her eyes. "But I'll help you. Show me what you got."

Tia started crunching. Nishell started counting.

“One. Two, three, four—dang, girl, slow down, you trying to set a world record? Eight, nine, ten ...”

With each crunch, the noise in Tia’s head quieted; life got simple as her muscles and her body took over. She called this her workout zone, and she loved it. Her workout zone took her mind off the stresses of her life, and especially the coming year, when she’d be a senior at gritty South Central High.

Nishell would be a senior too. The two girls had met at yearbook club, which everyone called YC. At first, it seemed like they had nothing in common. Nishell had a white mom, no dad at home, and used to live in a homeless shelter. Tia and her family were new Americans, having moved here fourteen months ago from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

Her parents had begged, borrowed, and scraped enough money together to open a little bakery. They gave new meaning to the words “working hard.”

Tia had their work ethic. She was one of the two best students at South Central High School, even though English was her second language. During the summer, she toiled at the Northeast Towers day-care as a counselor, plus helped her parents at the bakery, plus was doing all her summer reading for senior year and starting to think about colleges.

“I don’t know any kid who does what I do,” Tia thought as she crunched. “Since I’m new in America, I have to work twice as hard to succeed. This is a country of so much opportunity. I can’t take that opportunity if I am lazy.”

“Fifty-five, fifty-six,” Nishell counted in wonder. “Day-um, girl, you got abs of