

CHAPTER ONE

Death came for me at around lunchtime. I was walking out of Ms. Alonso's third-period history, on my way to the cafeteria, and didn't even see it coming. No one usually does. In fact, as I started down the hallway toward the little stairs plastered with prom posters, all I saw was a girl. And she didn't look particularly deadly, either. She was, as a matter of fact, *seriously* pretty. I mean, who would've thought somebody that cute was gonna bring about the end of the world? Definitely not me, or else I wouldn't've stood there like some starry-eyed *goof*, basically just gawking at her as she slipped her way between the streams of hungry middle schoolers and came right up to me.

"¿Perdona, tú eres Charlie Hernández?"

Large hazel eyes blinked up at me from beneath ridiculously long, ridiculously thick lashes, and I think I might've managed a couple of blinks myself. I *think*. . . .

She tried again. "Are you Charlie Hernández?"

And this time I managed a whole nod. (Impressive, I know.) But before I could work up to an "Uh," or a "Huh," or even an "Uh-huh, that's me!" her hands snapped out, quick as a thought, and she was shoving me backward— back, back, back past the broken water fountain, past the row of second-floor lockers, past the little janitor's closet with all the brooms inside, and through a door very clearly marked *GIRLS' RESTROOM*.

"Hey, what are you *DOING*?" I hissed, watching her flip the dead bolt.

"Locking the door."

"Yeah, *that* I can see. My question is, *WHY*?"

"¿Cuál es el problema?"

"The problem is that this is a *girls'* bathroom!"

"So?"

"So there could've been *A GIRL* in here!"

"There *is* a girl in here."

"*WHAT! Where?*" I whirled, my heart doing its best flippity-floppity, fish-out-of-water impersonation; and a moment later I felt the tap of a cold finger on my shoulder. "Right *behind* you . . ."

Ah. Her. Right.

As I turned back around, I couldn't help noticing that she was now staring up at me the same sorta way someone might stare at a three-headed mule. "You're . . . *different* than I expected," she said doubtfully.

"Well, that's kinda your fault for expecting. Most people don't expect much from me. And it usually works out better for everyone that way."

Her dark eyes narrowed. "You seem *tense*."

"That's because I am tense! And I'm getting outta here before someone catches us and I get even tenser!"

I started toward the door, which was definitely a step in the right direction, but not nearly enough. I should've gone running out of that bathroom and not stopped until I'd reached the *North Pole*. (Which, in case you were wondering, was approximately 3,972 miles from South Florida.)

“Wait!” Suddenly, Little Miss Shoves-a-Lot leapt in front of me, flinging her hands out like a traffic cop. “¡Necesito tu ayuda!”

And it was the fear—no, the pleading in those last few words (“I need your help”)—that really got me. She sounded alone. And scared. And near tears.

So I stopped. I stared at her, and she stared back. Her hair was thick and dark and wavy, and her skin was smooth and tan and so uniformly flawless that you had to wonder if she’d ever even had a single zit.

She was almost too perfect to be real. Which, come to think of it, should’ve been my first tip-off.

The second, though—*easily*—should’ve been her fashion sense. Or, rather, her lack thereof . . . She looked like someone who had been told how middle school kids liked to dress but hadn’t actually ever *seen* one. At least not in a while. Her hairstyle and bell-bottoms made her look like she’d just stepped out of Austin Powers’s groovy time machine, and her colorful purple sweater screamed eighties pop (and actually read, on one sleeve: THE 80S ROCK!).

She said, “I’m in trouble.”

“*Trouble?*” Confused, I shook my head. “Well, in that case, you should probably find a hall monitor. And those are usually found out in *the halls*. . . .”

“But I don’t need a hall monitor,” she said pleadingly. “I need a *Morphling!*”