

## **Nayeli's Nightmare**

**By Michael Pacheco**

The new nurse had an hourglass figure easily discernible through her tight scrubs. Her dimples complemented her blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. The male nurses hummed around her like bees after honey. Even the doctors made excuses to get a glimpse of her.

Nayeli didn't care. Well, she did care if the new girl tried anything cutesy with Nayeli's boyfriend, Frankie. He would be coming by soon to pick her up from her internship at Santa Maria Hospital.

In a month, Nayeli would graduate from Torres High School and this internship would be over. Then, maybe community college could help her land a job in the medical field. Ever since her mother's death from breast cancer, Nayeli's dedication to caring for the ill had grown stronger.

She considered studying to become a doctor, but who was she kidding? She didn't want another four years of school. She was a chubby girl with average grades; she wasn't an athlete and she had no money for college tuition at a big school.

Nursing was still her best option. Besides, Frankie said he loved her and she believed him. He said he loved her dark lustrous eyes, high, rounded cheekbones, long black hair and her full lips. He'd never mentioned her weight though, and Nayeli was content to leave the subject alone.

They had been a couple now for over three weeks. You can't put off true love forever.

Nayeli was changing the sheets in a vacant patient room when a squeaky-sounding voice from behind startled her. She spun around.

“Hi! You must be Nayeli. Nurse Johnson told me to follow you around till her administrative meeting is over, in about an hour. Is that okay?”

Nayeli smiled at her and almost laughed. It was the blond bimbo, dipping her shoulder toward Nayeli and batting her eyelashes, as if she was flirting with a horny young man. Her nametag said *Breeze*, and Nayeli could almost feel the air flowing through this girl’s head.

“Yeah, I guess so. My name is Nayeli. I’m not a nurse, you know. I’m an intern, so I can’t show you nurse kind of stuff.”

“I know, but that’s okay. I need to learn to do everything. I just got out of school a week ago and some things you just can’t learn from books. You know what I mean?”

Nayeli turned back to the sheets. “You’re right about that.” She pointed with her chin to the other side of the bed. “Get on the other side and tuck the sheets in, the way I’m doing it here.”

There was only silence. Nayeli turned back to Breeze and the hussy was checking out Doctor Morales as he strode by in the hallway.

“Hey. Mensa, over here.”

Breeze spun back toward Nayeli. “What? Oh yeah, sure.”

“I’d hit on someone else if I was you. Dr. Morales has already walked down the aisle.”

“Oh, I’m not looking to take him or anyone else from their honeys. I have more fun just borrowing them.”

Nayeli forced a smile and waited for Breeze to tuck in the sheet. When the bed was made and the wiping down of the room was complete, only a half hour had passed.

“Okay, what’s next?” asked Breeze.

“Well, down the hall, we’ve got to change the bedding for Mr. Isaac. He’s not expected to live long and he’s lost control of his bodily functions.” Nayeli looked at Breeze, gauging her reaction to this information. Breeze nodded, but otherwise her reaction was barely noticeable.

When they arrived at Isaac’s room, Nayeli entered and went straight to the old man’s side. He appeared to be in a deep sleep. The gaunt look on his face left no doubt as to his weakened condition. Breeze remained standing at the door. Nayeli caressed Isaac’s bony hand and glanced at Breeze.

“It’s okay, you can come in. Say hi to Mr. Isaac.”

Breeze sidled up to Nayeli and lightly touched the old man’s veiny skin. “Can he hear us? He doesn’t look conscious.”

“I think he knows we’re here,” said Nayeli. “I read to him sometimes. Doctors say he could live for another two years, more or less.” Nayeli heard a sob and turned from looking at Isaac to Breeze. The baby blues were glistening and welling up. “It’s alright. He’s not in pain. Nurse Johnson says he’s resting comfortably.”

“I don’t believe that!” said Breeze. Her statement, though hushed, rang defiant. “The poor man ought to be allowed to die.”

“What are you talking about? You don’t even know him. He doesn’t want to die. That’s crazy talk, Breeze.”

“I’m not crazy. Look at him. He can’t eat or clean himself and he can only breathe because he’s hooked up to that ventilator. If you ask me, that’s not really living.”

Nayeli stared at Breeze for a second and wondered how a girl her age could have grown so bitter toward sick people at such a young age. “Are your parents still alive, Breeze?”

“Yeah, they are. So what?”

“Well, imagine if this old man was your father. Would you still feel the same way?”

Breeze smiled and nodded. “I see what you’re trying to do, but that sympathy trick doesn’t work with me. It just so happens that my dad left me and my mom when I was three years old. If that bastard was on his deathbed, I’d pull the plug on him myself.”

Nayeli shook her head. “Man, you’re screwed up.”

She lifted the sheet covering Mr. Isaac, revealing the man’s saggy skin and bones. It seemed that’s all that was left of him. Nayeli carefully moved the catheter and ventilator tubes out of the way. Then they log-rolled him to the left side of the bed and pulled up the bottom sheet. Nayeli spread out a clean sheet, rolled Mr. Isaac back to the right side and pulled away the soiled sheet.

Nayeli shot a look toward the hallway. “Come on, follow me.”

As they neared the nurse’s station, Nayeli noticed Frankie talking to the receptionist. He had probably just told the woman a joke or something funny because she was covering her mouth in laughter.

He turned to face his girlfriend and Breeze. “Hey, Baby-girl!”

“Well, hi to you too, cupcake,” cooed Breeze. She stood, full breasts moving in an interesting fashion behind her snug top and smiled sweetly at him.

Nayeli gave her a confused and angry look. “Stop it! You crazy? This is my boyfriend.”

“Oh, of course he is.” She seemed to be studying his muscular upper torso that was on full display in his cotton tank top, then added, “I’ve already told you. I’m not crazy.” She kept her gaze on Frankie who seemed to want to look at her. He apparently knew better and averted his eyes and faced Nayeli.

“But I do love handsome men,” said Breeze.

“Ladies, ladies, over here,” said the receptionist. “We need room 107 cleaned and sterilized. Nayeli, you can clock out now, okay?”

Nayeli pointed her nose in the air, pivoted and headed for the elevator. Frankie followed behind her turning his head for one last peek at Breeze.

Frankie and Nayeli stepped out of the building and into the few rays of sunshine that still managed to break through the downtown smog. She unwrapped a bite-sized chocolate and popped it in her mouth. It was a cool day in East Los Angeles and Frankie had the top up on his Chevy Impala.

They buckled their seat belts and sat without speaking. Frankie broke the silence. “What’s the matter?”

“I saw you looking at her.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t act dumb, Frankie. That blond gringa with the big boobs, that’s who. Your tongue was almost touching the floor.”

He chuckled. “It was? I mean, no, it wasn’t. Come on. It’s nothing.”

Nayeli crossed her arms and stared straight ahead. Her grandmother had said three weeks wasn’t a lot of time to get to know someone. Maybe she knew something about men like Frankie that Nayeli still had not discovered.

She’d met Frankie at her friend’s *quinceañera*. Most of the partygoers were between fifteen and sixteen years old. Nayeli and Frankie as the two “old people” naturally gravitated toward each other. It was then that she learned he was *mojadito*—in this country illegally. He’d grown up in the streets of Tijuana doing sales, but beyond that, she knew little about him.

He sneezed, turning his head away from her.

“Whatever you got. Don’t give it to me,” she said, shaking her head. “There’s enough of that going around without us making it worse for each other.”

Frankie pulled down his visor mirror, checked his face and wiped his nose with a handkerchief. He took a pocket comb from the console and ran it through his thick black hair. “*Horale*, I’m good. Give me a kiss.”

She grinned at him and teased. “Is that all you want from me?”

“We’re in a parking lot, Baby-girl. If we were down at my crib you know I’d want more. ¿*Sabes que*? We could go down there right now.”

Nayeli broke their embrace and pushed her hair away from her face. “Cool your jets, Papi. Buelita’s waiting for me. You know that.”

“Your grandma can wait,” he said, reaching to caress her chubby cheek.

“No,” she said, pushing his arm away. “*You* can wait.”

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The next day, Nayeli arrived at Santa Maria Hospital and on her way to the nurses' station to receive her work assignment, she passed by Mr. Isaac's room. It was empty. She approached the receptionist. "Where's Mr. Isaac?"

"Oh honey, I'm sorry. He passed early this morning. Dr. Morales was surprised he went so quickly. They've already taken him to the morgue."

"My Lord," gasped Nayeli. She made the sign of the cross, ending with a kiss to her crossed fingers. "I can't believe it. One minute he's here and the next he's gone."

A rush of memories cascaded upon her. When it finally happened, it seemed her mother had gone suddenly, too. But not like this. Nayeli's mother had suffered a slow death and at times she felt like Breeze, wanting to end another's suffering. She remembered her mother saying, "I don't mind dying, just don't let them kill me."

A frightful thought came to Nayeli. Had someone killed Mr. Isaac?

Jenny gave her the to-do list. "I'm gonna log you in." She looked Nayeli in the eyes. "Are you okay?"

Nayeli dropped her head and looked at the tile floor. She gave Jenny a barely noticeable nod. A frog lodged in her throat but she managed to croak a response. "Yeah, I'm good." But she wasn't well at all. She was heartbroken. She had begun to consider the old man a good friend. He wasn't supposed to die yet.

First item on her list: wipe down room 110, where Mr. Isaac used to be, second item: change sheets in 120 for Mrs. Gina Gamboa, third item: empty the laundry bins for all five floors to be ready for Monday pick-up.

Nothing new. She'd followed this routine for three months now. Just to avoid having to think about Mr. Isaac, she decided to carry out her assignments in reverse

order. She went to her locker, stored her purse and sweater, then proceeded to empty the laundry bins.

In room 120 a flat-screen television played an afternoon soap opera. Mrs. Gamboa's eyes were closed and her chin was on her chest slowly rising and falling.

"Gigi? Are you awake?" asked Nayeli, using the ninety-year old woman's nickname. Mrs. Gamboa was an upbeat lady who lived from one burst of energy to another. However, once her lucid moments were over, she'd fall asleep and nothing could bring her back. When she first checked into the hospital, she looked like a healthy five-foot, petite woman with a slight hunch in her back. Since then, the small tumor in her left chest had been successfully removed. However, now, she was bedridden and weighed only about ninety pounds, slowly withering away.

Nayeli punched the remote control and silenced the soap opera. She wasn't quite sure of the motivation for what she did next. She pulled up a chair and drew a paperback from the side pocket of her scrubs. It was a reprint of *Great Expectations*. She read for about ten minutes and then promised Mrs. Gamboa she'd return the next day.

Before leaving Gigi's room, Nayeli followed standard procedure and filled out her portion of the nurse's chart notes on the clipboard that hung next to the door. She wrote the time and initialed the place where it indicated bed sheets had been changed. She gazed farther down and saw the name of the attending nurse. It was Breeze. Nayeli let out a hushed groan and rolled her eyes.

"Ay *Dios*. Watch out for this one, Gigi. She's not your typical nurse."

As if to acknowledge the warning, Gigi rolled her head to her left side, but otherwise remained asleep.

When she went to Mr. Isaac's room, Nayeli expected to feel an eeriness. But to her relief, the dread never materialized. As she wiped down the trays, the bedrails and furniture in room 110, she caught a glimpse of Breeze approaching in the hallway. Nayeli cringed and turned away. She didn't want to talk to the airhead today.

"Hey. Sorry 'bout Mr. Isaac."

It was Breeze talking from the doorway. Nayeli ignored her.

"I know you had a thing for him."

Nayeli spun around quickly and glared at the golden floozy. "Don't you dare talk about Mr. Isaac that way, *pendeja!* He was a good man. He wasn't supposed die yet, but now that he has, I hope you're happy."

"What did I do?"

"I'm not like you, Breeze. You got a thing for this guy and that guy or any guy that gets your motor running."

"I didn't mean it like that, silly. Besides," added Breeze with an irritating smugness, "I can have a thing for whoever I want. I could even have a thing for Frankie, if I wanted to."

Nayeli wanted to slap her right there and then, but she held back. "He wouldn't fall for your kind."

"Ha!" said Breeze, turning to leave. "I wouldn't be so sure."

Nayeli seethed as Breeze hustled out of the room. She waited till Breeze turned the corner, then called out, "Bitch!"

She gazed up at the small bronze crucifix above the doorway. "Sorry, Lord, but you probably already know this. She pisses me off."

Her heart thumped in her ears. It wasn't like her to be so possessive and jealous. She took out a caramel and sucked on the sweetness. After she drew a deep breath, the pounding subsided. A calming voice in her head whispered its approval.

She thought about Breeze's indifference to Mr. Isaac's death. The image brought back the memory of her mother. Nayeli's Mami, though no longer in this world, was never far from her. Whenever Nayeli felt stressed, she sensed Mami nearby, or sometimes above, watching over her.

For the rest of the day, Nayeli avoided Breeze and left the hospital earlier than usual. For reasons she didn't fully comprehend, she didn't want to see Frankie either. That evening, she whispered her prayers and crawled into bed, sliding quickly into a dream.

In her vision, she saw Breeze in the arms of a muscular young man with bronze skin. They flirted coquettishly as he touched her in places that made Breeze giggle. Nayeli craned her neck but couldn't see his face.

To get him to turn around, she threw rocks at him and missed, prompting nearby pigeons to take flight. She ran toward the pigeons to tell them they were not the object of her anger. They flew back to her as if to let her know they understood. But as she touched them, they disintegrated like clods of earth or dry leaves.

She heard laughter. It sounded like Frankie, but she couldn't be sure.

Breeze and the boy spoke softly in each other's ears. From time to time, they turned part way to look and wave at her. Something prevented her from waving back. She yelled at them, but they didn't seem to hear her. The boy kissed Breeze's neck the same way Frankie's lips touched Nayeli's. Then the boy turned and Nayeli finally saw his face.

It was Frankie. She turned and ran. Nayeli screamed and screamed again, crying with all abandon.

Then, Nayeli awoke, sat up and heard herself let out a whimper. Buelita appeared and sat next to her. She put her left arm around Nayeli's shoulder and with her other hand, caressed her cheek.

"It's okay, *Mija*. You're having a *pesadilla*. It's over now."

They rocked in their embrace. Nayeli shivered. Outside through the bedroom window the night was silent and the moon lit up the whole street, the whole of Boyle Heights and the whole Los Angeles sky.

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Only forty-eight hours had passed since Mr. Isaac died, but to Nayeli it felt like it had just happened. She was waiting at the front door of the hospital and ready to go home when Frankie's Impala pulled up to the curb.

Today, the sun was up and the top was down. Frankie took off his shirt and flung it onto the back seat. She never tired of watching the glide of muscles in his bare back and arms. Someday she'd tell him how she felt about him, but she was certain he'd laugh at her today. His face had a look of worry and apprehension.

"Hey, Baby-girl. Sorry 'bout last night."

She had no idea what he was talking about. For a moment she thought maybe he was referring to her terrible nightmare, then realized he wouldn't know about that. She decided to play along. "What happened?"

"You got home, okay. Right?"

She suddenly realized that he probably didn't show up to take her home from the hospital. "Yeah, I took the Metro. Where were you and how come you didn't call?"

"I was here. I mean, I showed up, just a little late. Just ask Breeze. She saw me."

Nayeli glared. "You talked to her?"

He fidgeted and looked away. "Only a little bit. She said she was attending a dying lady named Gigi."

"Gigi's not dying," said Nayeli. "She might be getting weaker, but she's still got her good moments."

"She looked dead to me," he chuckled.

"What? Did you go to her room?"

"Well, duh. That's where Breeze was." He thought about the hole he was digging. "*Mira*, I was looking for you."

"So, why were you late?"

He brought his shoulders in, as if a sudden chill had shot up his spine. "I overslept. I wasn't feeling too good, so my homey's gave me some of these to take." He reached into his pants pocket and dug out a half dozen red, oval-shaped capsules. "They make me sleepy."

"What are they?" she asked.

"Be damned if I know, but they're supposed to relax you."

She looked at him quizzically wondering what kind of a fool he was. She shook her head. "I wouldn't take those. You probably just have the flu."

She studied him closer. His eyes were glazing over and he was beginning to stoop as if a mantle of guilt had been draped over his shoulders. “You need to rest. Take me home,” she ordered. “And don’t breathe on me.”

He exhaled on her, like when he blew cigarette smoke rings in the air.

“Asshole,” she said, smiling and turning away.

“Love you, too, Baby-girl.”

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That evening and without knowing why, Nayeli felt profoundly alone. After brushing her teeth, she noticed Buelita had already turned down her bed.

Now, Nayeli sat quietly on her bed, pondering the death of her mother and her father who had gone to heaven before her. With the door closed, only a fractured sliver of light managed to come through the keyhole. She breathed in, still tasting the chili in her nose and mouth from Buelita’s enchiladas. She scanned the room, surrounded by darkness. Her eyes burned. She rubbed them but the pain worsened. Her face and back became wet with perspiration. She reached for a piece of hard candy on her nightstand, then put it back.

She got under the sheet, but kicked off the top cover. The blanket, once bright pink but now faded to the color of melted peppermint ice cream, was one of the things her mother had given her. Nayeli would never be able to give or throw it away.

Until a few days ago, she had missed only her mother but now she missed Mr. Isaac, too. She stared at a crack in the ceiling and called on God.

“By means of this holy prayer and your most pious mercy, Lord, please forgive me all my sins. Forgive me for not listening to you when Mami was ill, when the silence

of death scares me and when I am tempted to indulge in ungodly thoughts, like hurting others, like that girl, Breeze. Forgive me when I crave so much food when I know I don't need it. Grant me peace. Grant Mami and Mr. Isaac peace and entry into your Kingdom. These things I pray to you, through Christ Jesus, Amen."

As if by magic, Nayeli's mind felt at ease. Her body relaxed and the next thing she knew, the sun was rising.

Later that day, Nayeli reported for work at Santa Maria, looking forward to reading for Gigi. She went to Jenny's desk and saw her somber countenance.

"What happened?" asked Nayeli.

"It's Gigi. She didn't make it through the night." Jenny turned away as if to hide tears that aren't supposed to be shed by a professional nurse.

"Oh no!" cried Nayeli in a hushed tone. "Not her, too. What's happening around here?"

Jenny avoided the question and handed her the to-do list. Same as before. First item: wipe down room 120, where Mrs. Gamboa used to be, second item: change sheets in 110 for Mr. Silva, third item: empty the laundry bins for all five floors to be ready for next-day pick-up.

As she began to walk away, Jenny smiled at Nayeli and said, "Breeze said Gigi had a happy, lucid moment yesterday and mentioned your name."

Nayeli froze in her tracks. She acknowledged Jenny's comment forcing the words out. "Thank you." She then wandered aimlessly down the hall. What had Breeze been doing in Gigi's room?

Instead of continuing to her assigned task, Nayeli went straight to the office of the Director, Ms. Martin. The door was part way open. Nayeli tapped softly and waited for Ms. Martin to answer.

Ms. Martin was the ultimate professional woman, wearing a grey pin-striped business suit. Her short hair gave prominence to her tiny diamond earrings. She glanced up. “Hi, Nayeli, Come in. What can I do for you?”

“Ms. Martin, I don’t know how to say this but I think something weird is going on around here.”

“Really? Something like what?” She was keying in numbers on her calculator, trying to balance an accounting sheet in front of her.

Nayeli closed the door quietly and scooted into a chair in front of Ms. Martin’s desk. “Well, it has to do with Mr. Isaac and Gigi.”

With those words, Ms. Martin stopped her calculating and set her pen down. She leaned forward and clasped her hands.

“What exactly do you mean, Nayeli?”

Nayeli glanced over her shoulder at the door to make sure no one else was listening. “Please don’t think I’m going nuts or something like that, okay?” Nayeli wrung her hands and reached for a treat in her pocket.

Ms. Martin waited for her. “No, honey. I wouldn’t think that. Now just relax. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Well, you know I lost my mother not too long ago, right?”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. Is that troubling you? We have counselors, you know. Do you need some time off?”

“Oh no, no. It’s not that. It’s just that I learned to notice the gradual decline of persons as they approach their last days. Before Mami, I’d never seen anyone die. But by the time death came calling her name, I knew the sound of its voice. You know what I mean?”

Ms. Martin remained composed but appeared puzzled. “Of course, go on.”

“Well, in the case of Mr. Isaac and Gigi they didn’t show those signs, of dying, I mean. The Voice never called their name. They... they weren’t super healthy but they weren’t dying either.”

Ms. Martin tilted her head and smiled. “You really liked those two, didn’t you? They were sweet people, but we can’t control every aspect of their health. This is a Catholic hospital, Nayeli and, as you know, we pray fervently for all our patients. But there’s only so much we can do for them. I’m sorry.”

“There’s something else, Ms. Martin.”

“And what would that be?”

“It’s that new girl, I mean that new nurse, Breeze.”

“Yes.” Ms. Martin frowned. “What about her?”

“Breeze came in contact with Mr. Isaac the night before he died. She also was in Gigi’s room the night before Gigi died.”

Ms. Martin shook her head once. “She’s a nurse. She’s supposed to go in their rooms. Think, Nayeli. It’s not that unusual for a nurse to go into a patient’s room, is it?”

“Oh no, of course not. I didn’t mean like that.”

“Breeze has only been here a couple of days and...”

“That’s my point, ma’am,” interrupted Nayeli. “She’s been here two days and two people have died. I don’t want to see another person die because they’re around her.”

“Okay, stop right there! Nayeli. Those are serious charges.” She tilted her head. “I believe you may be experiencing some form of anxiety. And because of that stress, you’re processing, mentally that is, normal events in an abnormal fashion. It is not an uncommon condition.”

Nayeli bowed her head, tracing the edge of her to-do list with one finger.

“Now, can you control your emotions enough to perform your tasks today? I don’t mind if you need a day or two to grieve or to rest a bit. What would you like to do?”

Going home now would only add to Nayeli’s fears. Her head lifted, a shock of black hair falling over her moist and somber eyes. “I’m okay. I’ll work my shift.”

As she reached the threshold, Nayeli heard Ms. Martin’s voice again. “Honey? Your mother was a friend of mine. I miss her, too.”

Nayeli gave her a weak smile, turned and began her work assignments.

Her last task was to attend to Mr. Silva. He was a construction worker whose health had unexpectedly declined over a two-month period. It was believed that the fumes from his welding profession had brought about his infirm condition.

“Hi, Mr. Silva. I’m gonna change your sheets today,” announced Nayeli.

“*Hola*. Mija,” said the old man. “You just tell me what to do. And take your time. I like to have company. It gets pretty lonely in this place. I’d rather be outside, hammering nails or welding steel.”

She took the clipboard from the hook on the wall and there it was. Breeze, night-time nurse. “I believe you, but there’s things you can do to stay busy in here, like reading, writing or watching television or using a computer.”

“Not for me,” he said, gazing out the ground-floor window. “Even with all that smog, I’d rather be out there.”

Nayeli paused and thought for a moment. “Mr. Silva, I just bought a new book that I bet you’d like. It’s about men like you who build things, except these men are stone masons, building churches and things like that. Would it be okay with you if I came back and read it to you tonight?”

His face lit up. “Why that would be *bien padre!*”

“Great. I’ll be back after my shift, later tonight. *Hasta luego.*”

Good, she thought. Now she had a way to keep an eye on him. She wasn’t going to let Breeze get near him, if she could help it.

Surprisingly, Nayeli didn’t run into Breeze that afternoon at all. Nayeli completed her tasks and after not finding Frankie at the door, caught the Metro once again.

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After dinner, Nayeli told Buelita she was going to see a movie with one of her girlfriends. She would have said she was going with Frankie, but he hadn’t called her. Nayeli didn’t want him to show up and blow her cover.

On her way to Santa Maria, Nayeli thought about what she was doing. Was she just being paranoid? Maybe Ms. Martin was right. Maybe the stress was wiggling her out. She popped a mint candy into her mouth to freshen her breath and walked into the hospital.

“Mr. Silva! How was your dinner?” asked Nayeli.

“It’s hospital food. What can I say?”

“How are you feeling? You up to this?” She held up a copy of *Pillars of the Earth*.

“Sure. But I tell you what. If I fall asleep while you’re reading, it’s nothing personal, okay?”

Nayeli grinned. “I understand.”

After twenty minutes of reading, Mr. Silva’s eyelids began to droop. Thirty seconds later, he started to snore. She pulled the covers up higher over his chest and took her seat again. She leaned back her head and everything faded slowly away.

She was startled when Ms. Martin touched her shoulder.

“Nayeli. I’ve been trying to locate you.”

“What?” She shook her head to clear the cobwebs. “Why were you looking for me?”

“I called your home and your grandmother said you went to the movies, but then someone saw you here. That’s how I found you.”

So much for the cover story. “I was reading to Mr. Silva. I must have fallen asleep myself.” They both glanced at Mr. Silva as he continued to snore.

“That boyfriend of yours. His name is Frankie Bravo, right?”

“Yes, it is. Why?”

“Come with me,” ordered Ms. Martin. “There’s something I want you to see.”

Nayeli followed the Director to the floor with the rooms for isolation where people are under quarantine due to infectious diseases. She could not imagine why Ms. Martin was taking her there.

“What do you want me to see?” asked Nayeli, a half step behind, trying to keep up with Ms. Martin’s quick pace.

“It’ll be self-explanatory when we get there,” she answered without looking back.

They arrived at the window of one of the rooms. A uniformed police officer sat outside the room. Nayeli expected the smell of antiseptic or Lysol but curiously, there was an absence any scent. Ms. Martin pointed at the glass window of the room. “These are one-way mirrored windows. People inside can’t see out.”

Nayeli peered through the window and her jaw dropped to the floor. Lying and tossing restlessly on a bed was Breeze. Her eyes were closed and her pull-over shirt was ripped at the top of her left shoulder. She seemed to be resting, but the oxygen mask covered the lower half of her face. One pale ankle was shackled to the bedpost.

Without a word Ms. Martin strode to another room on the same floor with another bored police officer outside. The man in blue acknowledged Ms. Martin with a slight nod.

Here Nayeli felt her stomach drop as she saw Frankie sweating and breathing hard into an oxygen mask, as if he’d just run a wind sprint. One of his deep brown ankles was also shackled.

“What happened?” asked Nayeli, wondering whether she should be wearing a protective mask also.

“Well, we’re quite sure the underlying problem is a severe case of H1N1. They’ve got pleural effusion and the onset of pneumonia, but apparently Breeze and that Frankie have self-medicated.” Ms. Martin shook her head. “We all make mistakes, Mija.” She looked in the direction of Breeze’s room. “But I never thought a trained nurse would do such a thing.”

Nayeli thought of the red pills Frankie had shown her. It was only then that she analyzed what he’d said about his past. When he said he was in sales, he meant drugs. When he said he grew up on the streets, he meant delivering drugs all over town. How could she have been so blind?

Only now did she begin to realize what Buelita had tried to tell her about trusting someone too much, too soon. She also now knew that one doesn’t have to understand something to feel it. By the time her mind would be able to comprehend what had happened tonight, the wound in her heart would already be too deep.

Nayeli swallowed and cleared the lump in her throat. “Did they come in together?”

“Yes, the police brought them in.”

Tiny furrows formed in Nayeli’s forehead. “Why did the police bring them in?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it? They’re here now and we’re going to try to help them.”

“I do want to know, if you don’t mind.” Nayeli saw the hesitation in Ms. Martin’s response. “Frankie and I, we’re not that serious, you know, but he is a friend.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to be upset,” said Ms. Martin.

The question locked her mind on a time she should have forgotten by now, the night Frankie first smiled his special smile only for her, the night he touched her and held her, and she wanted to rest, wrapped in his strong arms forever. “Just tell me.”

“They were found in possession of illegal drugs on a traffic stop. That’s all I know. Apparently, they were both high. While still in custody, other symptoms appeared and the police then rushed them to Santa Maria.”

“Dear Lord!” exclaimed Nayeli. The resident nympho had found a kindred spirit.

Ms. Martin took Nayeli’s trembling hands in hers. “Honey, what you came to tell me the other day about Breeze and those people dying, was very thoughtful of you. Wrong, in a technical sense, but completely on the mark from a common sense point of view.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nayeli.

“I think your friend, Frankie and then Breeze, herself, infected Mr. Isaac and then Mrs. Gamboa with the H1N1 virus. You were immune to it for some reason. It wasn’t you, child. Otherwise, they would have succumbed long ago.”

Her words didn’t comfort Nayeli much. She felt an empty sadness in her heart. She shivered. A familiar voice, the same voice she had learned to call Death, began calling, first the name “Frankieeee,” then “Breeeeze.”