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JAQUIRA DÍAZ

## Section 8

THE SAME SUMMER THE MAGIC CITY STRANGLER started cruising South Beach men's rooms, before the Section 8 projects were dismantled and we were all forced out, I did my last stint in juvie. I was sixteen, and I went in pretending I owned the place, bragging to all the younger girls that it wasn't my first time. I'd been locked up twice before. Once, for stealing a bottle of Mad Dog from a local bodega, and another time, for breaking into that same bodega with my homeboy, Cabeza. That much was true. But I didn't tell them that both times I'd only been there overnight, until my hearing. That part I kept to myself. Didn't think I'd be there long, even if it was my third strike. I had my hearing the same afternoon, and I was sure the judge would send me home again. After all, it was no big thing. All I did was get into a fight with some girl from Treasure Boulevard. But the judge didn't see it that way. I needed a wake-up call, she said. I looked over my shoulder at the benches behind me, at the families of all the other juvenile delinquents, the empty spot where my people were supposed to be. A wake-up call was the last thing I needed.

Then she sentenced me. Twenty-one days.

I didn't get out for another month, though. They wouldn't release me until a parent or guardian came for me, and it took my mother that long to convince one of her asshole boyfriends to take a drive down to JDC.

The first time my homegirl Boogie and I heard about the Strangler, we were in my room, knocking back a six-pack of my mom's Colt 45. We were watching *Deco Drive* when the show was interrupted by the local news, a report about the third body found in one week. All the victims had been professional, openly gay men. Strangled.

"Are you hearing this?" I said. "There's a serial killer in South Beach."

"Yeah," Boogie said. "Well, I hope he kills me." She was all drama. Her father had just left her mom for some *sucia* who worked at a tollbooth on the 836, and now her mom got served with custody papers. He was going back to Jersey, and

wanted to take Boogie with him. He had family there. In Miami, Boogie had no one except for her mom, who was always threatening to send her ass away if she kept acting up.

"I ain't going nowhere," Boogie said, lying back on the bed. She slammed both fists on the mattress, grinding her teeth, squeezing her eyes shut as if trying to push back the tears.

"Don't worry," I said. "You can stay with me." We thought we were grown up, invincible. That we could take on the world as long as we were together.

"What about your mom?" she asked, wiping her face with the backs of her hands.

"She won't care."

Boogie and I had been friends for so long, I couldn't imagine she'd let them send her away. She was strong. She wouldn't let them get away with it.

"He only wants me so he can avoid paying child support."

"Fuck him," I said. I lay next to her and took her hand.

She rolled onto her side, buried her face in my neck. Moments like this made me nervous. As long as I could remember, there had always been this thing between us, the way we looked to each other for comfort. And afterward, we wouldn't talk about it. The last time she slept over, we were in bed, and I had this feeling, but it was just a feeling. And now I was having it again. I thought of my mother in the next room, partying with her man, how she could walk through that door at any time. Maybe it was the way we were raised, the way we were programmed to think of two men, or two women, as simply wrong. Maybe we were excited by the wrongness of it. Or by the danger. Either way, it didn't matter. I thought of the possibility of losing her, Boogie up in Jersey without me, lying like this in someone else's bed. And so I kissed her. Not the way they kiss in the movies—eyes closed, bodies entangled and throbbing in a heated embrace, hands in all the right places—but it was still a kiss. My whole hand grasping two of her fingers, my lip trembling, the stink of my armpit sweat in the back of my throat. And she kissed me back.

We were friends. Just friends. On my first night back in the Section 8 projects, the thought repeated itself in my head. Me and Boogie were sitting around on the milk crates on the rooftop of my building, watching a bright red sky turn dark, listening to N.W.A. on Power 96. We were finishing off a quart of St. Ides, waiting for Cabeza to show up with a bag of haze.

"What was it like?" Boogie asked. She lowered the volume on her radio.

I'd spent the better part of the day listening to gossip about who got caught making out behind the portables at school, who got arrested for beating down their mother, or evicted, all the things I'd missed while I was locked up. Not once had I volunteered anything about my time in juvie. Didn't want to make a big deal, just wanted everything back to normal.

"You know," I said. "Thirty days of bad hair."

"That's not what I meant."

Usually Boogie and I talked about everything. But then the kiss happened, right before I got locked up. It was just one kiss, but we never brought it up. Didn't want things to get weird.

"It was fine," I said. "Got into a couple fights at first, but that's it."

I was relieved when Cabeza showed up.

"Nena," he called out to me. "You fucking delinquent!" He brought another guy with him. Looked just like him, except he was fine as hell and his head wasn't as big. "You remember my cousin Junito, right?"

I did. He used to spend summers with Cabeza and his dad when we were kids. But he was all grown up now. Boogie and I said what's up, and I wondered if he could tell I was nervous. It had been an entire month since I'd been around guys, locked up with twenty other girls. And Cabeza didn't count since he was more like a brother.

"Long time," he said, gave us both a kiss on the cheek and handed us each a brand-new quart.

"He just moved in," Cabeza said, sitting on one of the crates. He pulled out his baggie and a dutch, starting rolling on the spot. That was Cabeza. Always took care of business first. "Maybe you can show him around, introduce him at school. Hook him up with one of your homegirls."

"Don't listen to him," Junito said, shaking his head.

"Fine," Cabeza said. "Then hook *me* up."

"Like hell we are," Boogie said. Cabeza was our boy, but every girl we introduced him to turned out to be a stalker, or tried to get him to stop hanging with us.

Cabeza lit the dutch, took a long drag, and passed it to Boogie. When it was my turn, I just held up my hand, shook my head no.

"I'm good," I said.

"What, they put you in the program?" Cabeza asked.

"Yeah," I said, even though I had no idea what he was talking about. I just didn't want to get too fucked up with Junito around, say something stupid.

“What program?” Boogie asked.

“Some at-risk youth intervention shit,” Cabeza said. “They make you piss in a cup every week.”

“So why did you move?” I asked Junito, changing the subject. It was darker now, but I could make out his loose T-shirt flapping in the wind.

“My mom got locked up.” He passed the dutch back to Cabeza.

“What’d she do?” Boogie asked.

Cabeza shot her a quick look, mouthed the word *don’t*, shook his head from side to side. Junito looked straight ahead, across the street at Normandy Park. I wanted to tell him that I understood, but kept my mouth shut. I hated when people thought they knew what I was going through.

We sat in awkward silence for a moment, until Cabeza started coughing.

“This weed,” he said, “is shit.”

Junito started school with us that fall. At lunch, instead of playing basketball with the rest of the Section 8 boys, he’d go turn wrenches in the auto shop. Sometimes me and Boogie would hang by the handball courts, laugh at all the girls who would gather outside the auto-shop bays to see if they could catch a glimpse of him shirtless. The other girls were fascinated by Junito because he was new, and because he was from Philly, and to Miami girls that meant he was exotic, like he could take them away to some other world where they would be exotic, too.

One afternoon, as we headed to our usual lunchtime hangout, we spotted Amanda Lopez and Junito talking. I stopped in front of our table. They were out by the bays, and every time Junito made a gesture like he was heading inside, Amanda touched him on the shoulder or grabbed his hand. I watched them until she kissed him on the cheek and strutted away.

When I turned back to Boogie, I realized that she’d been watching me, not them. I sat at my usual spot, placed my bag on the table in front of me, didn’t even touch my lunch.

“What’s up with you?” Boogie asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Nena . . .” she started saying. Then, “Never mind.”

I knew where she was going, but like me, Boogie decided it was better to let things be.

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When I got home that afternoon, the living room was littered with half-empty beer bottles, and my mother was asleep on the couch. She was lying on her side, one dirty sofa cushion covering her naked body. Her face was wrinkled and ashy, smeared with black mascara, and her forearm was hanging over the armrest, a lit cigarette between two fingers.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I reached for her hand, swiped the cigarette, and dropped it into one of the bottles. “One of these days you’re gonna burn down the whole damn building.”

But my mother never heard a thing when she was sleeping off a *borrachera*. She just turned over, her back to me, as if I wasn’t even there. I left her on the couch. Didn’t bother cleaning up after her anymore.

I was in bed, plotting ways to get Amanda Lopez kicked out of school, when Boogie showed up. She came in through the window, which I never bothered to lock.

“Are you crazy?” she asked as soon as she got inside. “I could’ve been the Strangler.”

“What? The Strangler only kills men.”

“Haven’t you been watching?” She turned on my TV, tried adjusting the rabbit ears, but couldn’t get a picture that wasn’t scrambled.

“They just found another body,” she said. “A woman. Set on fire.”

“Then it wasn’t the Strangler,” I said.

“Yeah? How do you know?”

“Because she wasn’t *strangled*.”

Her eyes narrowed like she was considering this. “Am I sleeping over?” she asked, changing the subject. Before I got locked up, she slept over all the time when her mom worked the graveyard shift.

“Don’t know,” I said. “Are you?”

“If you want me to,” she said.

It had been nothing, but we were still dancing around it. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. I took her hand, and we sat there for a while, our fingers interlaced.

“I want you to,” I said finally.

We slid under the covers, neither of us saying what we were both thinking. We lay next to each other for a while, and I could smell the Newport she smoked before coming over.

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The first time had been in juvie. It was Ethel, a girl from an Opa-locka crew. My first cell mate, Estrella, gave me the rundown. Don't give away any food in the mess hall, 'cause they'll think you're soft. Don't let the *morenas* braid your hair, 'cause then you'll owe them. And whatever you do, don't fuck with Ethel. She's a *pata*.

At first I was down with the rules. But then, everywhere I went, there was Ethel. I could feel her eyes on me, in the yard, in the mess hall. Until one day she caught me looking at her. It was one of those things, you know. We were in the shower, and I didn't even realize it until it happened, and by then it was too late.

After that I avoided her. It was easy at first, since they kept us locked up most of the time. But then one of the other girls asked for a new cell mate, said she couldn't handle being locked up with a *pata*. And who ended up with Ethel?

A week later I was home again.

After Halloween, the Strangler was all over the news. Bob Blackwell, some famous South Beach music producer, went missing after leaving a party alone. He was a rich, gay man, so everyone assumed the Strangler got him, that it would only be a matter of days until they found his nude, lifeless body in a Dumpster somewhere.

I was getting on the metro when I spotted some kids from school. Nestor Socarras, Alvin Jean Pierre, and their boys.

"Just the other day," Alvin was saying, "I was crossing the street and I saw two of them holding hands. *Nasss-ty*."

I walked all the way to the back of the bus, as far away from them as possible, even though all the seats were taken. The other people on the bus acted like they couldn't hear them, looked straight ahead or pretended to see something out the window.

"Miami Beach is overrun with them," someone else said after a while, and I was glad we were getting closer to Normandy Park.

"The Strangler's just cleaning up the city," Nestor said. "Doing us all a favor." The rest of them smiled or nodded in agreement. I rang the bell for the next stop, even though it was two stops before mine.

Halfway home from the bus stop, I ran into Junito. He was bouncing a basketball in front of his building.

"Headed to the park?" I asked.

"Waiting for Cabeza," he said. He started walking with me, bouncing the ball. Then he stopped. "Nena, can I ask you something?"

"What's up?" We were at the light, waiting for it to change so we could cross the street. He balanced the ball on two fingertips.

“What’s up with your homegirl?”

“Boogie?” I asked. “What about her?”

“I mean, you know what they say about her, right?”

I knew what he was getting at. “I don’t give a shit what people say,” I said, knocking the ball out of his hand.

“Damn, Nena.” He took off down the street, chasing after it, and I kept walking. I wasn’t in the mood for this shit.

“My bad,” he called out, running up beside me. We were already in front of my building.

“It’s not true,” I said. “Whatever they say is bullshit.” I sped up until I reached my door, then turned to him. “Who?”

“Who what?” he asked.

“Who said that?”

“I don’t know. People.”

I looked him dead in the eye. “Well, you and those people can go fuck yourselves,” I said, and shut the door in his face.

Later, I locked myself in my bathroom and let the shower run until steam filled the room. When I couldn’t see myself in the mirror anymore, I undressed slowly, imagined someone was watching me. It was Junito first. Then Boogie.

The next morning they found Bob Blackwell, strangled, in the trunk of a stolen taxi.

That Friday, Boogie and I went roller-skating at the old rink on Collins. Between the two of us, we’d polished off one of the bottles of strawberry Cisco we got from the bodega around the corner. I had two more in my backpack, but I didn’t think we’d need them since we were already pretty fucked up. We were hanging on to each other, and Boogie was getting stupid, so I tried dragging her off to the bleachers. I put one arm around her waist, and threw hers over my shoulder, trying to keep my balance. We were almost to the sitting area when I saw Cabeza and Junito walk in. I was trying to play it cool, like I didn’t even see them, when Boogie noticed them and started waving her arms in the air.

“Yo, Cabeeza!” she said. I lost my balance and fell flat on my ass. Boogie fell sideways on top of me, then rolled onto her back and burst into laughter. I laughed, too. I had no choice. It was either laugh or cry.

Cabeza was hunched over, laughing and pointing at us, but Junito came over right away. It was then that I noticed they were with a group of other guys from

the neighborhood, but they spread out, ready to scam on a crowd of girls from Saint Brendan's Catholic High School.

"You okay?" Junito asked.

"I'm fine," I said. I was dusting myself off, avoiding his eyes. Then I pulled off my backpack, checked that the bottles hadn't cracked.

"You sure?" He was helping Boogie to the bleachers. She was still laughing, and Junito smiled at her, then looked back at me, shaking his head.

I sat on the bleachers, next to Boogie, and she laid her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes. I wished she wasn't drunk so he would see that there was nothing weird about us.

While she was untying the laces on her roller skates, Junito found a spot next to me. Then she took off, wearing only socks, toward the rental counter to return her skates.

"Nena, I didn't mean to offend you," he said. He was looking into my face and I could tell he meant it.

"Why would you say some shit like that?" I asked. He was leaning forward, looking down at his sneakers like he was considering what to say. Until that moment, I had no idea that a simple question would be so hard for him to answer. Or maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe he could see right through me.

"You know why," he said. He leaned toward me, gave me a peck on the cheek, then pulled back slightly, waiting for me to make the next move. I considered what it would mean, Cabeza and all his homeboys watching, Boogie at the rental counter, what it would lead to. I could've said no, could've pulled away. I made a choice. I closed my eyes, pressed my lips against his, and waited.

The next thing I knew we were kissing. When I finally pulled away, Boogie was standing right in front of us, looking sober as hell.

"Just getting my sneakers," she said. She picked up my backpack and got her Nikes and a bottle of Cisco. "See ya." She tossed the backpack at me, turned for the exit.

I should've called her back. Should've asked her to wait up. But I thought of Junito, of Cabeza, his homeboys, all the other kids from the barrio I'd have to face day after day, and I let her go.

I was running late for my Health class when I saw them again, Nestor and Alvin, standing in front of Boogie's locker. There was a cluster of kids gathered around them, watching as Nestor shook a can of spray paint, the marble inside beating



against the metal. Then he popped the top and painted the word *tortillera*. Bold black letters against the red steel.

Then Alvin snatched Nestor's can, a smile forming on his face, while the crowd cheered and called out, "Do it!" and "Oh hell yeah!"

His first word was *madivinez*. I didn't know what language it was, but I knew what it meant. He kept writing. *Faggot, eat pussy, cunt*. Then he turned to the crowd. "What else?" he called out.

"Dyke," someone yelled back.

That was the last word. *DYKE*. In capital letters.

As quickly as the crowd had formed, it vanished. All of them, Nestor and Alvin also, took off laughing down the halls. One of the security guards, Mr. Boyd, was coming over to see what the commotion was about. I stood there, reading the slurs over and over.

Then I saw her. Boogie was walking slowly toward her locker, toward me. She was already late for class, so she should've been in a hurry, but she walked slower and slower the closer she got, fixed her eyes on the locker door. She stopped where Alvin and Nestor had stood a moment before, jaw clenched, chest rising, falling. I thought she would burst into tears. I thought I should hug her, say, "Fuck those assholes. They don't even know you."

But I didn't. I didn't say one word. Just turned and walked away.

I avoided Boogie for about a week after that. At lunch, I hung out with Junito at the auto-shop bays. I didn't even meet Boogie for our usual Saturday, when we pretended to be turistas on Miami Beach. I took Junito with me instead, spent the entire day browsing the electronics and T-shirt shops on Lincoln Road, then snuck into the pool at the Carillon on Collins. When we got back to Normandy Park, the streetlights were coming on. I didn't expect to see Boogie, but there she was, sitting at the bus stop in front of my building when Junito and I rolled up.

"What's up, Boogie," Junito said. For a moment I thought she would blow up on him, since I'd stood her up to spend the day with him. I hoped she knew that he didn't mean any harm.

"Hey," I said. I couldn't look her directly in the eyes.

"I came looking for you," she said to me. She avoided looking at Junito, pretended he wasn't there.

I couldn't think of anything to say, no explanation for the way I'd acted the last few days.

"I wasn't home," I finally said. I tried to make out Junito's expression from the corner of my eye.

"Yeah. I noticed," she said. She got up, headed for her place, and I could feel the heat of her as she brushed past me into the night.

I was waiting for the metro after school a few days later when I spotted Boogie headed my way. She saw me, then turned around, pretended she was checking for the bus. When she glanced back at me, I looked the other way, pretended I didn't see her either. We'd stood there for a while, not seeing each other, when Nestor, Alvin, and their friends showed up.

Alvin did the talking while his friends surrounded her.

"Hey, baby," he said. She looked him up and down, then checked for the bus again.

Alvin glanced at me, but didn't seem to have any interest.

"Where's your girlfriend?" he asked her.

"Fuck off," Boogie said. She stepped around him.

Alvin inched closer to her, put his face next to her ear, whispered something I couldn't hear. Boogie pushed him away, tried to break from the crowd, but Nestor blocked her.

"Get out of my way, asshole," she said, but Nestor was laughing.

Alvin came around again, made sure I was watching, then turned to Boogie. I thought he would touch her, of what I'd do if any of them laid a hand on her.

"Maybe what you need is the feel of a man," Alvin said, grabbing himself. "You ever been with a man?"

She let out a chuckle, and I could tell she thought he was lame as hell.

Then Nestor pulled something out of the pocket of his jeans. It was a water gun.

"Are you fucking serious?" she said.

He aimed directly at her face and sprayed. She turned away and lifted her forearm to protect herself, but Alvin and his friends pulled out their own guns and sprayed her, too. I wanted to jump in, but didn't. I was frozen. She took a few steps back, but the boys moved with her, Alvin hopping around on the balls of his feet.

That's when I saw it. The wet spots on her jeans were changing color, getting lighter. There were spots on her green T-shirt that were already fading to amber. They were spraying her with bleach.

For a moment I stood there, not moving, not breathing, just letting it happen. Alvin stopped spraying, stepped back to get a better look at her. He was pleased.

“Fucking dyke,” he said.

I lunged at him. Pushed him back as hard and fast as my body would let me. He took a few steps, tried to steady himself, fell on his ass. The crowd backed off, but Nestor turned his water gun at me and sprayed. I didn’t care. I went directly for him. He inched away, backward, laughing at me, and kept spraying. I didn’t see it coming, and neither did he, but when he stood, turned on his heel and started to run, he ran right into Boogie, and she kned him hard in the groin.

The boys took their friends and their guns and walked off, Nestor clutching his stomach. They turned the corner, disappeared behind the Ocean Bank building.

Another crowd had formed, kids waiting on their buses. I looked around at familiar faces. Some of them lived in our neighborhood, but none of them had stepped in.

“Are you okay?” I heard myself ask, but didn’t wait for an answer. Just kissed her. It didn’t even matter that people were watching.

I’d like to imagine that she kissed me back. That we didn’t care about the rumors starting right there on that sidewalk, didn’t notice the whispers, the judgment. Later, we would head back to the Section 8 projects. We would watch the news, holding hands, and praise the Lord that they finally arrested the Magic City Strangler.

But she didn’t.

She grabbed hold of my shoulders, her eyes narrow. “Don’t you fucking touch me,” she said, before pushing me back against the bus stop.

That night, right outside of the Section 8 projects, someone set another woman on fire.