

CHRISTINA'S PORTRAIT

by Matthew Arnold Stern

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For Mary Ann, Angel, and Andy.

CHAPTER ONE

Benicia: October 2021

We're in the back of our high school, near the Phoenix Academy. They used to have a little farm here, back in the day. That's where they found her body. And her ghost continues to haunt our school to this very day...

"Beni, you're coming out too dark."

I groaned through my mask as Maya lowered her iPhone.

"And you gotta speak louder. I'm barely picking up your audio."

"It's this stupid mask!"

"Then take it off."

"Maya! We're supposed to wear a mask that covers our nose and mouth on campus. School rules."

"Nobody else is here, Beni. Not even COVID is up this early. Take it off."

I removed the straps from behind my ears. I took a deep breath. It felt good to take the mask

off. Besides, we were breaking enough rules just being here right now. I took another deep breath and started again.

We're in the back of our high school, near the Phoenix Academy...

"I still can't pick up your audio, Beni. Speak louder."

"I can't speak louder. We'll scare off the ghost."

"You don't really believe there's a ghost, do you?"

"There must be a ghost! They've been talking about it for decades. And if there is one, and we capture it on video, wouldn't that be cool? It would be better than those stupid cat videos Eve Chang makes. Or Agustín's gross ones about school shooters."

"What do you think we're doing? Didn't this girl die sort of horribly? Like raped, and strangled, and beaten, or something?"

"But we're not talking about her murder. We're talking about her ghost!"

Maya raised her voice. "Well, she wouldn't be a ghost if she hadn't been murdered!"

I had to hush her. We were trespassing on school property at three in the morning. We didn't know who might be lurking at this hour. Psychos. Drug dealers. Gang members. Or worse, cops. But as Mr. Patel said, to make good videos, you had to be courageous.

"I told you, Maya, a video about a ghost at our school would be awesome."

"And I told you, Beni, a video about that creepy old haunted house on Yolanda Avenue would be better."

"That rundown house by the wash? Why would that be a good video?"

"Because recording at that creepy old house won't get us suspended. Or expelled!"

"But what if that creepy old house has a creepy old guy with a big-ass gun? Do you want us

to be the subject of Agustín's next video?"

Maya shrugged. "Guess we're doing this."

I nodded, straightened my posture, and took it from the top.

We're in the back of our high school...

"I'm not getting enough light," Maya complained.

"Then use Night Mode," I grumbled.

"My iPhone doesn't have Night Mode. It's an iPhone 7 Plus, remember?"

"Then use the flash."

"And scare off the ghost? Or give ourselves away?" Maya pointed to a light post. "Look, Beni, why don't you stand over there?"

"We're supposed to be in front of the Phoenix Academy!"

"But it's pitch dark over here!"

I groaned louder. "Of course, it's pitch dark. It's fucking three in the morning!"

"But it's too dark to shoot here. I need more light!"

An intense light flooded the entire area. Its brightness made my eyes flutter and tear. When I adjusted to it, I made out the shadows of what I knew were police officers.

"You made unwise choices." Mr. Patel spoke with the same patient, measured tone he did in our video production class. He didn't have to chew us out. I felt like dirt as he led us out of the police station.

I was sure Maya felt like dirt too, but she didn't have Tía Gabriela waiting to rip me a new one when I got home.

I still had to speak up, “But Mr. Patel, you told us to be courageous in our videos. We should be willing to take risks...”

He shut me down. “There are smart risks, and there are poor ones. There’s courage, and there’s recklessness. You need to know the difference.”

I lowered my head. Mr. Patel did us more than a solid, getting us out of jail and convincing the cops to drop the charges. Tía Gabriela would have kept me there all weekend just to teach me a lesson. I was in no position to ask Mr. Patel about anything.

But I asked, “Mr. Patel, you aren’t going to tell our folks, are you?”

He answered without hesitation. “I already have.”

“¡Tontería! ¡Tontería absoluta!”

When Tía Gabriela used Spanish, I knew she was super pissed. Nothing was going to calm her down. No explanation would satisfy her. All I could do was listen to the barrage of words, half of which I understood. I knew somewhere in there, she cursed Mamá for not teaching me la lengua before she passed.

It must have been a good ten minutes before she ran out of words and breath. I had a brief gap to try to defend myself. She didn’t give me enough time.

“You and your YouTube. Who do you think you are, pinche PewDiePie?”

We had come to the part where her scolding mixed English and Spanish. The lecture was coming to an end, but it would be the worst part of it.

“I tell you, Benicia Veracruz, you’re wasting your time with this YouTube foolishness. Look at yourself. Look at me. You think they give women like us a chance?”

I looked down at myself. My round belly. My thighs plump, soft, and dark as hotdog buns. I knew I wasn't as skinny and light-skinned as the influencers I saw on Instagram. But I was the one who wanted to be in front of the camera. Tía Gabriela was right. This is tontería.

“You need to get a good education and a good job. That's the only way women like us are going to make it in this world. Understand?”

With my head still down, I muttered, “Yes, Tía Gabriela.”

“¡Ándale!”

A sharp whisk of curtains. Sunlight that burned my flickering eyes.

“Get up,” Tía Gabriela grunted. “Time to go to school.”

I let out a deep, long moan.

I didn't want to get up. I hardly slept since getting busted on campus on Saturday night. And I wasn't looking forward to what I'd face in first-period video production class this morning.

“Ew, Gus! That's disgusting!”

Eve, Maya, and other students gathered around Agustín's MacBook Pro. I knew he was working on a video about another school shooting. I didn't want to see what he had loaded into Final Cut Pro, but I was too curious about what monstrosity he had inserted into his project.

Unfortunately, he didn't disappoint.

“I found a new surveillance video from Building 12.”

It was that Parkland video he had been working on for the last two weeks. My stomach was already unsettled by a lack of sleep and a cafeteria breakfast burrito. I didn't know how I was

going to hold my breakfast down from what I was watching. I couldn't believe there are politicians who would call what happened a hoax.

Maya folded her arms. "You know, those victims have loved ones who are still mourning for them. They wouldn't want people to see this."

"And worst of all," Eve planted her fists on her hips. "You're going to get demonetized."

"It ain't about getting monetized."

He turned back to the computer screen and set his fingers on the trackpad. The students drifted away from him. I did too, but I gave him one quick glance. His eyes remained fixed on the video clip. I wondered what was going through his head. What was it about school shootings that fascinated him so much? Was he just curious, like I was about the ghost? Why do we make these videos?

"Class."

Mr. Patel took his place at the front of the room. We rushed to our seats. Before I could sit down, he called out to us.

"Benicia Veracruz, Maya Adebisi, please report to the principal's office."

Maya and I said nothing as we headed to the Administration Building. Maya's heavy-heeled shoes clacked on the concrete, while I struggled to keep that breakfast burrito in my stomach. Mr. Patel may have saved us from going to juvie, but he couldn't save us from whatever punishment the principal was going to give us. Suspension? Expulsion? I played out all the possible worst-case scenarios in my head, and even worse reactions Tía Gabriela would give me.

As we entered the school office, Principal Martin's door was wide open. She was laughing

about something with one of the secretaries. We knew she wouldn't be laughing when we got into the room. Maya and I stood silently in front of the door. We kept six feet away, not just for social distancing, but out of fear of what would happen next. Principal Martin looked up and saw us. I wished she wasn't wearing a mask, so I could see whether she was smiling or frowning at us.

She waved us in. We walked slowly, side by side. My body trembled as we stepped into the room.

She glanced at her secretary. "We'll catch up later at lunch, Suzanne."

"Sounds good, Michelle."

The secretary clutched a bunch of paper-stuffed folders to her chest as she headed out of the office.

"Oh, and could you get the door, please?"

"Sure thing."

The secretary slowly closed the door behind her, sealing us in with Principal Martin.

She shifted her shoulders side-to-side, folded her hands together, and set them on her desk. She gave each of us a quick glance before she spoke.

"Please, have a seat."

Maya and I lowered ourselves into the chairs in front of Principal Martin's desk.

"Well." She spoke in the same pleasant tone that she used with her secretary. "I had a discussion with Mr. Patel about the incident Saturday night."

Reflexively, I lowered my head. I couldn't look at Maya to see what she was doing.

"Trespassing on school property is a serious offense. I know you are both exemplary

students. You've been on the honor roll multiple times. No disciplinary problems of any kind. Why would you do such a thing?"

I looked up at Principal Martin. Then at Maya. I glanced down at the edge of the principal's desk. Why would she ask us this question? If she spoke to Mr. Patel, she already knew the answer. Was she looking for us to incriminate ourselves?

But I knew my answer would determine the type of punishment Principal Martin would give us. I exhaled hard. My mask slapped the warm air back onto my face.

"We were shooting a video."

I glanced at Maya, checking for a reaction. She nodded. It gave me the slight relief we were on the same page.

"A video?" Principal Martin said. "Of what?"

Maya stared straight ahead. She was clearly too afraid to speak. I knew I had to do the talking for us. I took a deep breath. That breakfast burrito was definitely doing backflips in my stomach. I took one more deep breath.

"Of a ghost, Principal Martin."

She sat silently for a moment. I was afraid that breakfast burrito was going to fly out of my mouth and not even my mask would prevent it from dripping all over Principal Martin's desk.

But she quietly leaned back in her chair.

"Christina Andrews," she softly mused.

Maya sat up straight in her chair. "You know?"

Principal Martin rocked in her seat. "It's an old story. I heard about it when I started working here."

She then turned to a bookcase behind her. It had every yearbook our school ever published, going back from when it opened in 1955. She pulled a blue hardcover book out of the case. It had a photograph of the school's quad with a rainbow airbrushed on it. The title said "Talisman '78." She set the book on her desk.

"This was the school year when Christina Andrews was killed." She flipped the book open. The pages were in black-and-white. I guess they didn't have color printing back then. "She was a junior that year. She would have graduated in 1979."

"1979?" Maya murmured. "That *was* a long time ago."

"Forty-two years." Principal Martin kept thumbing through the yearbook. "She would be 60 today if she had lived."

"That's the same age as my grandma," Maya said.

I thought about Mamá. She didn't make 60. COVID took her last June. We had a few FaceTime calls before she passed. But I couldn't visit her in the hospital. She died alone.

The times since then were a blur. I barely remember moving in with Tía Gabriela. I threw myself into my videos, school, and finding that ghost. Now, I was going to lose it all. I sniffed, trying to hold back tears. I didn't want to cry in front of Principal Martin, and I didn't want to get my stupid mask all wet.

I looked at Principal Martin, hoping that she didn't hear me. But she kept her attention focused on that old yearbook.

"Here she is."

She flipped to the last page of the yearbook and slid it towards us. Maya and I leaned towards it. The center of the page had a painting of a girl. It was printed in black-and-white.

The girl's hair was long, really long. It fell across her puffy sleeved and ruffled dress in relaxed curls. It must have been black or dark brown. But what caught my attention was her broad, dimpled smile. It radiated cheerfulness. It settled the breakfast burrito in my stomach.

Whoever did that painting was an amazing artist. It almost looked like a photograph, but it made her look like she was still alive. Like she could walk into the office right now. It's a shame we couldn't see it in color.

Below the picture were the words, "In Memory of Christina Andrews, 1961–1977."

1961. She really would've been 60. An age she and Mamá would never see.

"You seem interested."

Principal Martin's voice made Maya and me pop up to attention.

"In her, not just a ghost."

Maya and I turned to each other in puzzlement. We didn't know where this was going.

Principal Martin rocked back in her chair again.

"From what I understand, the story of Christina Andrews's death is not a pleasant one. It's one nobody wants to talk about. Especially not at a charter school that's working to attract new students."

I trembled. Blood fled from my face, hands, and feet. That breakfast burrito started churning in my stomach again. I knew I screwed up majorly. Maya was right. We should have investigated that creepy house by the wash.

"I could suspend you for trespassing. I could even expel you. But..."

We both inhaled.

"You're both exceptional students, and Mr. Patel said you're promising videographers. So,

I'm going to give you an assignment."

My back stiffened to attention.

Principal Martin leaned forward. She tapped on the painting of Christina Andrews.

"Create a video about this girl. Learn her story. Capture memories of her from her family and friends." Her voice softened. "I don't believe in ghosts. But I believe the dead should be remembered, especially with everything that has happened over the past few years. Perhaps it's time for us at Reseda to face this painful past, just as we as a country are facing the difficult parts of our history."

Maya and I nodded. I probably nodded even harder.

"I'm glad you agree." Principal Martin leaned back in her chair. "Consider this, let's say, your penance for breaking the rules."

CHAPTER TWO

Noreen: October 1977

“Dear Heavenly Father, we are grateful for the life of Christina Hope Andrews, albeit brief...”

I couldn't listen to the priest, the bishop, or whatever they call the person leading the ceremony. I had never been to a Mormon funeral before. The last time I'd been to a funeral was when my Grandpa Raymond died when I was four or five. I remember nothing but the sadness and solemnity of the day. “He lived a good long life,” my Grandma Sarah told me. The same couldn't be said about Christina.

“When confronted by an immeasurable tragedy such as this, it's easy to lose faith. But it is times like these when faith can sustain us. We can have faith even in painful moments like these. We can know there is a divine order, even if it is hard to see. As the Prophet Alma told his son, ‘Now behold, it was not expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, for

that would destroy the great plan of happiness.”

I stared at the mahogany coffin where Christina lay. A large bouquet of white roses was draped on top of it. They usually open the coffin during a funeral. Not this one. The descriptions of how they found her were too gruesome for me to imagine. They said what he did to her was so horrible, not even the best mortician could make her look presentable.

“We can depend on our Heavenly Father to comfort us in times like these. As it says in John 14:18, ‘I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.’”

All I could picture was the last time I saw her. What happened at the dance. What happened outside the gym. How I watched her disappear behind that gym door, never to see her again. How it still hurts!

“We may take comfort in knowing that Christina has been brought to her heavenly paradise, that she is at peace, that she has been saved from the woes and corruptions of this world...”

Woes and corruptions. Christina died pure—just as she wanted—despite what he did to her. But what really happened between us? Was it something I imagined? Or wanted so desperately? Did *I* corrupt her? Or...

“...And that she can await the glorious day when she and all souls are resurrected...”

Sadness and solemnity. That was what I remembered from my grandpa’s funeral. What I felt at Christina’s was something else. Shame. I wanted to dissolve into that pew and sink into the carpet. I wanted to be in that box instead of her. And there was a possibility I might have been.

“From this, we may find hope amid sorrow and comfort in our deepest grief. We shall move forth from this heartbreak, carrying Christina’s memory with us as a blessing...”

The events of that night and the days after it were a blur. Days before, Christina was a sweet, innocent girl in modest frocks and a gentle, dimpled smile that lit up her entire face. A smile that

raised my spirits and warmed my heart. A smile that hurts too much to remember.

“All this we pray, Amen.”

“Amen,” the crowd uttered.

I remained silent. I found no comfort in the bishop’s prayer. Christina was dead, and part of me died with her.

I walked out of the mortuary chapel. A cold and sharp wind cut through my black Qiana dress and rustled the hem around my calves. I clutched my arms around my torso. Fall had returned to the San Fernando Valley, and it was going to be a cold and bitter one.

Around me, murmured sobs punctuated solemn words. I didn’t know most of the people at the ceremony. The people I knew, I didn’t want to talk to. I wasn’t sure about going to the funeral in the first place. But I knew I had to be there for Christina, especially with everything that happened.

I was torn about staying for the burial service. Mom told me not to rush, but she also said I had to bring the car back in time so she can get to her night shift at the phone company.

The crowd split in half, leaving a wide aisle for the pallbearers to carry Christina’s coffin to the hearse. I fell in with one side of the group. As the crowd cleared the path, it compressed. Coldness turned into heat from the gathering group. The Qiana dress that didn’t shield me from the cold now trapped in my sweat, making me sticky and itchy. I kept moving back, away from the edge of the crowd, trying to find a clearing and some air.

I froze in place. Eyes fixed on me. I slowly turned to my left.

Jenny Carruth stood by herself in her own long, black dress. Her arms folded. Her thick lips

pressed hard against each other. Her eyes burning with the most intense hate I had ever seen in anyone. A hate she focused solely towards me.

I turned away quickly and headed towards the parking lot. I knew I couldn't be there when they buried Christina.