

AIRBORNE

by

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Chapter 1

I liked the feeling of air under my feet. It freed me from myself for a moment. While airborne, I was just another particle of air, freed from the confines of gravity and the solidness of the ground. Collisions weren't possible when it was just me and my cushion of air. I believed, for that moment, that my arms and legs flung outward with grace and strength. There was no one there to tell me otherwise.

That's the way it was when I had the trampoline to myself.

But that year, my seventh grade year, I learned there's more than one way to feel lightness and a soaring in my heart. That feeling captivated me more than ever. And I learned that I'd do whatever it takes to have that feeling.

It started on a hot August day. I had spent the morning helping Tia Imelda in her garden, and now I was in my circular oasis, the trampoline in our backyard. It wasn't uncommon for hours to fly by while I bounced and flipped. The light, firm touch of the net walls always made me feel safe.

That day I concentrated on a new stunt—adding a twist to my front flip. I timed my jumps so my rebound off the trampoline increased my height with each jump. At the top of my third jump I pulled my legs and arms into a tuck to do a front flip. Halfway through the flip I let my legs drop, and I threw my arm out. My body followed the path of

my arm to twist before landing. I only got 90 degrees of twist but I hoped to work up to 180. My landing wasn't great; I was hunched over and my feet askew. That didn't keep me from imagining the cheers and the announcer saying, "What a fine flip by the talented Paola Rodriguez! She's up for gold with such skill and daring."

My brother Saul had been the one to tell me that trampoline was an Olympic event. I had swatted at him at the dinner table, thinking he was teasing me again.

"No, it's true," he had said. "Tomorrow there'll be some coverage, and you can see for yourself."

"Promise?" I had eyed him, looking for a suppressed smirk.

"Why would I lie? I was looking up the soccer schedule. Trampoline was near it in the list of sports." Here he had broken into a huge grin. "You know, you should watch it. They need at least *one* fan!"

So the next evening, content with my twist progress, I did something unusual—I joined my family in the cool living room to gather in front of the TV. I had never had patience for TV. I couldn't sit still for it, and I couldn't stand the stupid commercials. But that night I was anxious to see what the upper level of trampoline looked like.

Mama worked on her mending in the corner chair. I sat near Papa . . .