



The Princess of Las Pulgas

C. Lee McKenzie

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After her father's slow death from cancer, Carlie thought things couldn't get worse. But now, she is forced to confront the fact that her family is in dire financial straits. To stay afloat, her mom has had to sell their cherished oceanfront home and move Carlie and her younger brother Keith to the other side of the tracks to dreaded Las Pulgas, or "the fleas" in Spanish. They must now attend a tough urban high school instead of their former elite school, and on Carlie's first day of school, she runs afoul of edgy K.T., the Latina tattoo girl who's always ready for a fight, even on crutches. Carlie fends off the attention of Latino and African American teen boys, and one, a handsome seventeen-year-old named Juan, nicknames her Princess when he detects her aloof attitude towards her new classmates. What they don't know is that Carlie isn't really aloof; she's just in mourning for her father and almost everything else that mattered to her. Mr. Smith, the revered English teacher who engages all his students, suggests she'll like her new classmates if she just gives them a chance; he cajoles her into taking over the role of Desdemona in the junior class production of Othello, opposite Juan, after K.T. gets sidelined. Keith, who becomes angrier and more sullen by the day, spray paints insults all over the gym as he acts out his anger over the family's situation and reduced circumstances. Even their cat Quicken goes missing, sending Carlie and Keith on a search into the orchard next to their seedy garden apartment complex. They're met by a cowboy toting a rifle who ejects them at gunpoint from his property. But when Carlie finds him amiably having coffee with their mom the next day -- when he's returned her cat -- she begins to realize that nothing is what it seems in Las Pulgas.

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