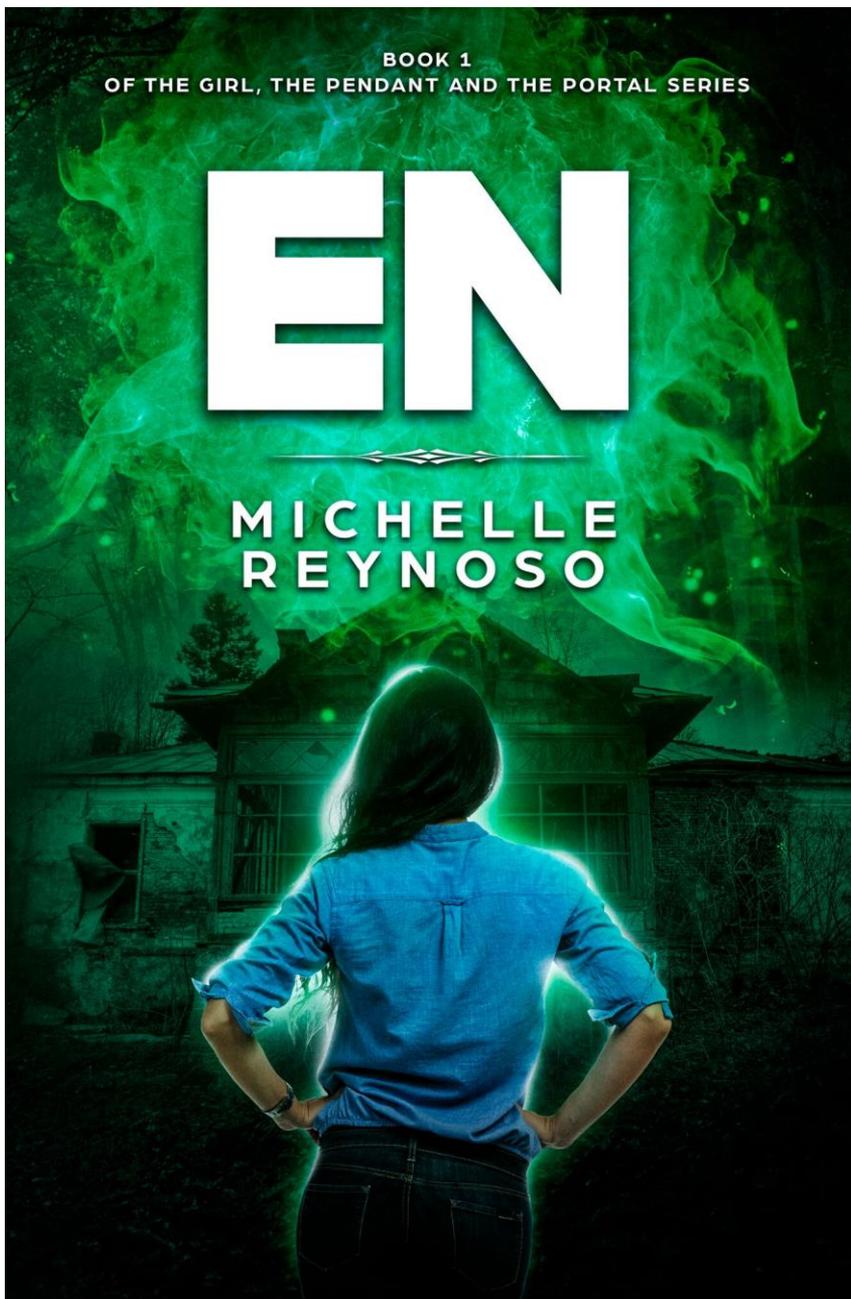


Sample Chapter

BOOK 1
OF THE GIRL, THE PENDANT AND THE PORTAL SERIES

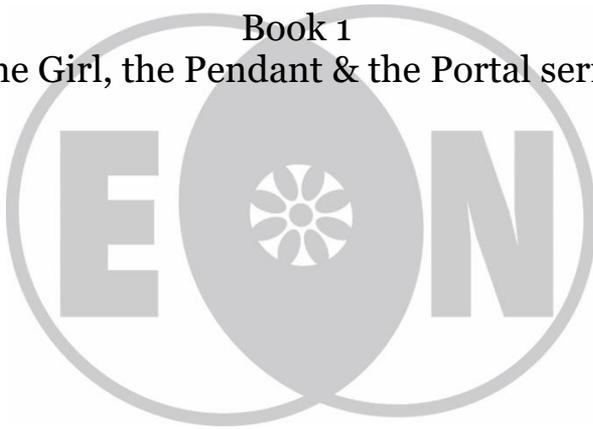
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MICHELLE
REYNOSO



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Book 1
The Girl, the Pendant & the Portal series



Michelle Reynoso

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CHAPTER ONE



I am invisible. Not the literal kind of invisible but something worse, something a step lower than feeling ‘less than.’ I am a zero.

No one wants to be associated with a zero, I remind myself shoving forward through a teen-mob of fitted jeans, team shirts, cellphones and earbuds, trudging the halls with my head bent and my eyes up just enough to see the way through the post-bell crowds of Madison High School. I am a ghost in daylight. That’s how I feel anyway. I push forward into the science wing where the crowds thin, and I make a sharp right turn to the bathroom at the furthest end of school, pushing at the door and stepping into the stench of mildew and sweat. It’s empty as usual, and I head to the last stall. And then I see it...good-god there’s pee on the toilet seat.

Seriously people?

‘If you sprinkle when you tinkle, please be neat and clean the seat.’

Have these Neanderthals not heard this before? I want to scribble it on the wall in permanent marker, but I don’t. Instead I clean the toilet seat. Twice. And settle-in.

I’ve been at this dump-of-a-school for three months and the only thing I’ve learned is to lay-low; that and master the stall perch with my ass on the back of the toilet seat, feet stretching up to the toilet paper holder and back resting against my bunched-up sweatshirt. Comfortable – I try to convince myself - but it’s not really, and today is not a good day for me to be so isolated, I know that, but it doesn’t change anything. Tomorrow will still come, and with it comes the three-month anniversary of my mother’s death. I can’t be with people right now. Not *these* people – strangers who look at me with pity, who see me as someone who *needs* them. I don’t need them. What I need are my real friends from back home. I need my glue, my Kiara, my modelish African queen bestie, because without her I’m falling apart. All the technology in the world doesn’t bring me Kiara in the flesh - her Colgate-smile, stellar hugs, and super-sappy ‘therapy-voice’. I call

it her phone-sex voice. We joke about it all the time. She calls me crazy because I call her KiKi sometimes, which sounds like a phone-sex name to me.

Kiara – Kiki, I don't care. What's in a name anyway? Except when you've got my name that is – Faith; hard to justify a name like that when you've got no faith at all. Which is exactly why I need to talk to Kiara. She keeps me sane on these days when mom is heavy on my mind, and my brother Eddie (aka Six-Foot-Gestapo-of-the-House) is being a pain-in-the-ass, which he was this morning when he snagged my phone for 'wise-assing', which is why I can't call or text Kiara. Honestly, I think Eddie just wants an excuse to keep tabs on me, but whatever, phone or not, I'll find a way to talk to Kiara, because if I don't I might just barricade myself in this bathroom all day long. I do have a plan though, I do, and like a spider-in-wait for prey, I wait in my stall for the next girl to walk in.

The bell rings, and after a few minutes the bathroom door opens and a group of girls enter in the middle of a rapid-fire discussion. Their individual voices are hard to distinguish over the sound of shuffling feet and the mixed conversations of late students rushing to class in the outside hall, but once the door closes, the girls' voices echo around the small space. There are three of them, none of which I recognize by their voice, but then again, I barely know anyone. Purses open & close and makeup compacts click. I imagine them preening in front of the mirror, grooming themselves for one of the guys on the football team.

"Give me one," screeches one of the girls. Then the sound of a lighter's spark-wheel ignites with a thumb flick. I can hear the exaggerated sucking of air and the exhaling of smoke.

I wonder if I should wait for someone else. Chances are slim anyone else will walk into this bathroom now that classes have started, and besides, Kiara will be heading to her Bio class in about ten minutes. The clock is ticking.

I flush the toilet to alert the girls they aren't alone and slide my feet off the toilet-paper-holder to the floor.

"Put it out, put it out!" one of the girls squeals, rushed and desperate. I can hear her moving her arms in the air to disperse the smoke. Then the smell hits me – strong and skunky – and I know that cigarettes aren't the only thing they're smoking.

Shit.

One of the girls turns from the mirror - I hear her feet scuff on the floor, and then the thwack of flip flops knocking the tile as she walks the narrow space in front of the stalls. I can't back out now, it's now or I don't get to talk to Kiara.

"Hey, can I ask a favor," I say in a small voice through the door, trying to sound casual and nonchalant.

The girl's footsteps stop in front of my stall, but she doesn't answer.

"I know you're out there, I can see your flip-flops," I say.

"What are my flip-flops to you?" the girl finally answers in a high, flippant voice.

"I just need to borrow a phone," I say.

"You got twenty bucks?" The girl asks quickly.

"Twenty bucks, are you crazy?" I reply.

"It's twenty, or nothing; the price goes up in 10 seconds," she says. Her friends giggle.

"Fine," I say through my teeth. I stand up, pull out the last bill I have in my pocket - from my brother for lunch - and pass it to the girl over the top of the stall.

"Here," I say. She pulls it from my hand with a quick sweep and places a pink jeweled phone where the bill had been.

"You've got one minute," she says, "After that it will be another twenty."

I feel my cheeks flush. I want to punch this girl in the mouth.

"And if you drop it, you're dead," the girl says.

I move to the corner of the stall that faces the back wall, mimicking the girl silently. I hold the girl's phone in my hand, and for a minute I contemplate dropping it in the toilet, but it's just a momentary thought before I slide my fingers over the touch screen, dialing Kiara's memorized number. She picks up after the first ring.

"ello?" She answers, obviously not recognizing the number.

"KiKi, it's me," I whisper into the phone.

"Faith? Hey girl, where've you been? New cell?" Kiara asks with sunshine in her voice.

"No, borrowed it," I say lowering my voice.

"I can barely hear you. Why do you sound so far-away?"

"I've got company," I say raising my voice slightly at the end so she can hear me, "Eddie swiped my phone this morning."

"Damn. What did you do?" Kiara asks.

"Why did *I* have to do something?"

"He took your phone, dumbass," Kiara says.

"Screw you," I say.

"I'm just kidding," Kiara says.

"I need 'kidding' like a hole in my head," I say.

"Hey. Don't joke about that," Kiara says, her voice turning serious.

"You're supposed to be making me feel better, not worse. You know what tomorrow is, right?" I ask.

“I know. Talking about that, I was thinking I’d come up to see you tomorrow night. We can spend the anniversary together,” Kiara says.

The girl outside the stall shuffles her feet. “Are you done talking to your girlfriend? Your minute is up. Phone or twenty,” she says, her hand outstretched & extended over the stall.

“Were you listening to my conversation?” I say through the stall door.

“So? Think of it as terms of our contract, which is now up. Give me back my phone,” the girl snaps.

“Is someone charging you to borrow their phone?” Kiara asks.

“Bingo,” I say.

“Kick her ass,” Kiara says and then laughs, her laughter so loud it echoes inside the stall. I can’t help but chuckle. See, she makes me feel better.

The girl outside the stall rattles the door, “Phone or twenty bucks,” she demands.

“That’s my cue,” I say to Kiara.

“I’ll call you later at home, we’ll plan for tomorrow. K?” Kiara says.

“No softball?” I ask. Kiara feigns a pained voice, “*Mom my stomach reeeeeeeally hurts. I think it’s cramps.*”

“Oscar-worthy,” I say.

“Yeah, one practice isn’t going to kill anybody. Besides, it’s not like I play all that much, I’m nothing more than a glorified bench-warmer.”

I chuckle again.

“Talk to you later,” I say.

“Later,” Kiara says. I click off the call, take a breath, and open the door to find the girl stationed in front of the stall, hands on hips as her mouth snaps gum through her teeth. I recognize her immediately, Olivia Johnson – soccer captain and Class President. She’s wearing a tight fitting white tee, black polyester training pants that hug her hips, and flip flops with white socks that push into the thong. She’s flanked by two Miss Teen Beauty Pageant contestants in cheerleading uniforms, one with short black hair and the other with a red-cropped cut.

“Freaky new-girl, give me my phone,” she says.

“Here,” I say, shoving the phone toward her.

“Eww, it’s freak germs,” she says, taking the phone with the tips of her fingers and wiping the screen on her pants.

“Shut up,” I say. It’s the only reply that comes to me.

“Why, you going to make me?” She asks. Kiara is right, I should just kick her ass, but she’s not worth my energy.

“Just move. *Please*,” I say.

“You hear that girls, freaky girl’s got manners,” she says.

Olivia steps up close, invading the barriers of my personal space, the smell of high-end perfume and marijuana soaks her clothes. I push at her chest, hard enough to force her back two steps, her black hobo handbag whipping backwards. Without hesitation, Olivia glides over the floor with the grace of a ballerina and the hardened face of a hockey player. She shoves at me, her hands square to my shoulders, barreling me back into the hard metal frame. The stall rattles behind me. Olivia lunges again pinning my hands to the wall and shoves her knee into my crotch. I try to wriggle free, but I can’t move. She leans in - eyes red and irritated – her hot breath on my cheeks, turning the air between us thick and stifling.

“If you ever touch me again, I’ll kill you,” Olivia says, ending the sentence by weirdly sniffing the air like an animal searching for the scent of fear. Then she turns away from me and walks to the mirror.

I get the message. I’m not a threat.

Standing at the mirror continuing to ignore me, Olivia pulls out a small Visine-type bottle from her purse and automaton-like snaps her head back - her eyes rolling up to the ceiling - and releases a thick, marigold liquid into her eyes, and then drops the empty bottle into the trash. She blinks several times. And then she turns toward me and starts to talk, in a voice not her own, in a tone an octave deeper - a male voice, in breathy and broken speech like a patient relearning to speak again - “Your mother *tried* to hide you,” Olivia says.

“Are you making fun of my mother?” I ask from my spot against the stall door, my insides churning between anger and tears.

Olivia continues with the altered voice, “She can’t hide you anymore. I have found my way to you.”

“Are you on drugs, seriously?” I blurt out before remembering what the girls were smoking.

“Very soon Faith, we will see each other very soon. We have much to discuss,” Olivia says, and as she utters the last word a puff of marigold dust bursts from her eyes, instantly disappearing into the air, and her pupils’ return to their normal green.

The red-cropped-cut sidekick steps up to Olivia and pats her on the back - “That was awe-some! So creepy,” she exclaims.

“Those acting classes are really paying off,” the other sidekick chimes in.

“You’re all nuts,” I say and move away from the stall and toward the door.

“We’re not done,” Olivia says in her back-to-normal flippant voice, as she adjusts her t-shirt over her sweats.

“What are you playing at?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“You don’t make the rules here missy. I do. And you go when I say you go,” Olivia says.

“You’re such a bitch,” I say.

She doesn’t hesitate, she drops her purse on the counter and lunges forward toward me, ramming the heel of one hand into my ribs and the other into my chest, punching the air out of my lungs. A voice screams inside my head - *block! block!* - but I can’t for some reason. I stand there, frozen - like in my dreams when I want to scream but I can’t - even as I hear the remaining air leaving my lungs, traveling up through my mouth in a forced exhale. There is no air left. I gasp, clutching for a breath, but I can’t get more than a hiccup of air. My chest is heavy and my head dizzy. A kaleidoscope of white stars fills my eyes. I double over, and crumble to the floor. Olivia lets me fall.

“We *are* done now,” she says, twirling on her heels, fetching her pocket book, and walking toward the door, “And word of advice, ditch the sweatpants and UGGS, they’re so passé.” She exits the bathroom with her sidekicks in tow, laughing and chirping like chickens as they leave. I stay on the floor, even after the door closes behind them.

I know I can’t stay here, even though this floor with its cool tiles on my burning chest and aching ribs feels like my only friend, this is the worst place for me to be. The bathroom still reeks of lingering smoke and marijuana. I need to get up and out of here before someone walks in.

I force my eyes to focus, noticing a wad of toilet paper by my cheek, and then another further to the left by the trash, and another stained yellow with god-knows-what. There are wads of pink-gum-turned-black that dot the tiles, and hair on the floor by the mirror. And then I think, how many feet have walked across this floor with shoes streaking the tile with piss and dirt, and cigarette ashes, and - *good-god* - period blood? I dry heave sending another sharp pain across my ribs, but I ignore it and force myself up, dragging myself to the garbage. Olivia’s transformation and that marigold-liquid are important, familiar, but like a word at the tip of my tongue I can’t pinpoint why. I grab the discarded bottle, tilting it so the remaining drops of liquid pool together at the bottom corner.

It’s important, I know it.

I stuff the bottle in my backpack and wait for the next bell.



Thank you for reading the first chapter of *EN*, Book 1 of *The Girl, the Pendant & the Portal* series. If you'd like to read more, you can find *EN* at these locations:

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Watch for book two coming in 2019.

Thank you and welcome to the *EN* family!

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