

MEG MEDINA

Author of the Newbery Medal Winner *Merci Suárez Changes Gears*

Merci Suárez

Can't Dance



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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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First edition 2021

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number pending
ISBN 978-0-7636-9050-2

21 22 23 24 25 26 LBM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Melrose Park, IL, USA

This book was typeset in Berkeley Oldstyle.

Candlewick Press
99 Dover Street
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

www.candlewick.com



A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

FOR MERCI FANS WHO WANTED TO KNOW
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT . . .

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS MISS McDANIELS'S IDEA for me and Wilson Bellevue to work together in the Ram Depot, a job that nobody wants. For the record, I applied for an anchor spot on the morning announcements with my best friend Lena. But wouldn't you know it? Darius Ulmer's parents decided it was time he addressed his "shyness issues," so he got the job instead.

Anyway, when Miss McDaniels called Wilson and me to her office, neither one of us had any idea what she wanted, which should have been a big warning right there. We sat on the wooden bench near her desk at 8:15 sharp, just like her note said, since being late is the quickest way to get on her bad side. It's why some kids call her Stopwatch behind her back.

Talk about awkward: Wilson and I had nothing much to say as we waited. I only knew him from PE and earth science, the quiet kid with freckles across his nose and reddish hair he wears natural. I had noticed his walk, too. He swings one hip forward so his right leg can clear the ground. He says it doesn't hurt or anything. He was born that way, he told us last year during one of those annoying icebreaker activities we're all subjected to on the first day of school. Anyway, we hadn't really talked much this year. The only other intel I had was that his family is Cajun and Creole from Louisiana. He told us that when he brought gumbo to the One World food festival when we were in the sixth grade, and it was pretty good, if you didn't mind breaking into a full-body sweat from the spices.

Miss McDaniels grabbed her key ring and made us follow her down the hall toward the cafeteria, our loafers squeaking in the quiet halls.

A few minutes later, we stood in front of the Ram Depot, formerly known as the custodial supply closet before Mr. Vong and his equipment got upgraded to a bigger room near the gym. That's where she told us the lousy news.

We'd been drafted.

"I think you two would make a fine management team

at the school store,” she said as she unlocked the door to the tiny space. A box of pencils labeled INVENTORY was stacked against one wall near the dust bunnies. A metal cashbox and calculator sat on a cast-off desk with uneven legs. “You can hone your business and math skills right here and get real-world experience.”

I tried to keep my glare of death to a minimum level. First of all, if my business skills were any sharper, I’d have to register them as weapons, thank you very much. Who does she think helps Papi figure out job bids and write ad copy? Sol Painting, Inc., doesn’t have five stars on Yelp for nothing. As for Wilson, he was already a math whiz. I hear he computes circles around the other kids in the algebra class he takes with ninth-graders.

But the bigger thing is how unfair this all was. Lena had morning announcements. Hannah was assigned to be the supply aide in the cool makerspace that’s new this year. Me? I was facing a dungeon where fun goes to die—and with a boy as my only company no less.

Wilson seemed just as appalled. “Isn’t there anything else?” he asked. “Maybe the Earth Club? I wouldn’t mind rinsing out recyclables.”

I sneaked a glance at him, secretly agreeing. Even washing out juice boxes and plastic Snackables trays seemed

better. What was there to do at the Ram Depot except sell pens and pencils to kids who forgot theirs at home?

She pursed her lips. “I’m afraid not. Dr. Newman is very interested in improving the school store this year, and I need especially strong student helpers for the task.”

She was buttering us up like biscuits. The question was, Why?

Then she handed over a brochure from the Poxel School in North Palm Beach. The Pox, as we call them around here, is our archrival in everything from soccer to landscaping. You want to drive a stake through our headmaster’s heart? Tell Dr. Newman that the Poxel School is better than Seaward Pines at anything. The brochure showed photos of their recently finished building project. Smack in the middle was a picture of their new school store, looking like it belonged in the Gardens Mall. Clothes, electronics, coffee bar, beanbag chairs, you name it. There was even a web link for online orders.

I gave her a grim look. “You’d need miracle workers, miss, not us.”

Wilson nodded, backing me up. “She’s right, Miss McDaniels.”

I could practically feel the air around us grow colder as she narrowed her eyes, digging in.

“Perhaps I can persuade you another way. I have been authorized to offer you a significant perk if you will both agree to take the job,” she said.

“Perk?” Wilson said.

“Let me guess,” I said, my soul already on life support. “Free pencils for life.”

Wilson started to chuckle, but her sharp look turned my joke into ash. *Being churlish*, as she says, is at the top of her list of no-no’s, especially for seventh-graders.

“Not that pencils aren’t useful,” I mumbled.

“Better than pencils.” She lowered her voice, her eyes steady on ours. “What would you say to eating free dessert from the cafeteria every day. Mrs. Malta’s key lime pie, in fact.”

My mouth watered.

Graham cracker crust. Tart filling and whipped cream. That’s my lunchroom Kryptonite, and she knew it. From the look on Wilson’s face, it was his, too.

Maybe we could be business partners after all.

“Free?” I always bring a bag lunch thanks to Mami. No sugary treats are ever part of it.

She nodded slowly to let it sink in. “Every. Single. Day.” Wilson and I exchanged looks.

“It’s settled, then,” Miss McDaniels said, victorious.

Sometimes you have bad options, but you still have to pick, like, do you eat the yucca or the quimbombó at Lolo and Abuela's house for dinner? You just make the best of it. So that's what I did.

"I'm in," I said. If I was going to die of boredom with a kid I barely knew, at least there would be pie. And Wilson, shrugging, said he was in, too.

CHAPTER 2

“HEY, WHERE Y’AT?” WILSON SAYS. That’s *hello*. He doesn’t know, but I kind of like how he talks. He puts no *r*’s on the ends of words, which makes him sound like Mr. Finley, who’s from Boston and teaches American history. *Cah. Bah. Fah*, instead of *car, bar, far*. Wilson isn’t from Massachusetts, though. He’s from New Orleans, which is hot and steamy just like here in South Florida. He says it’s not *evah* pronounced New Or-leenz. If you say it that way, he corrects you—even if you’re Miss McDaniels. I’ve heard him do it with my own ears.

I’ll be honest. At first, I wasn’t crazy about working with a seventh-grade boy in close quarters, especially because of their annoying jokes about farting and body

parts. In sixth grade, most of the boys were relatively normal, but not anymore. Now the lunch menu can't list chicken breast sandwiches without them elbowing one another and convulsing. Some of them punch other boys in the privates to be funny, like that guy on YouTube. Michael Clark went down like a tree and had to go to the nurse when Jason Aldrich got him after hiding under his desk. And God forbid if one of the boys likes you. He'll spend a whole class saying obnoxious things so that you'll look at him, even if it's with murder in your eyes. More than one girl has had to tell the teacher or scream "I hate you!" to get them to stop. It's so confusing. I mean, if you want someone to like you, shouldn't you act nice? But no. They act so badly that the kids they have crushes on dream of beating them to death with a shovel.

Wilson, it turns out, is not like that at all, and this job is not the worst thing that could happen to a person. His top qualifications so far: He doesn't make mean comments about my lazy eye and then complain that I can't take a joke. He doesn't copy off my tests in earth science and take credit for smart answers. He doesn't hog the basketball in PE so he can make the shot himself. Plus, he's basically a human calculator, which is good when you're trying to revamp a total disaster of a business like we are.

He hangs his backpack on the hook behind the door

and looks around for a place to sit. We only have room for a table and two chairs in here, and today it's even more cramped than usual.

I look up from the poster I'm making on the floor. "Careful. You're going to stomp me," I tell him.

His shoes are badly scuffed, especially his right one, the one that's wider on account of the brace he wears to keep his toes from dragging down. The soles are caked with wet grass, too, a telltale sign that he didn't stay on the walkways like we're supposed to as per the gazillion signs about keeping our campus beautiful. That's a level-one offense in Miss McDaniels's book. And I would know since I'm more or less a regular on walkway infractions.

"Wipe those off if you know what's good for you," I say. "I got hassled again just yesterday." Miss McDaniels saw me run across the grass because I was late for English.

Wilson pays me no mind. "What's all this?" He fishes out his sandwich and offers me half. Ham and cheese, same as every day, and his mom uses full-fat *máyo-nay-is*, so I'm in heaven. At least it's better than Mami's healthy turkey breast with alfalfa sprouts "for fun," which she says are "nutrient dense." I looked it up and found out sprouts are full of vitamin K, which helps your blood clot. Useful in case I'm stabbed, I guess.

"I'm making room for new stock, of course," I tell him,

taking a swig from my water bottle. “We have to unload those dumb erasers before the new inventory gets here. So, we’re having a winter clearance sale.”

We’ve been waiting weeks for the bobbleheads we ordered. Hunky Jake Rodrigo, hero of the gene-spliced-universe bobbleheads. It’s a million-dollar idea. No one will be able to resist them.

“We are, huh?” he asks. “Did we have a meeting to decide that? Let me think . . . NO.”

I push the hair off my face and roll my eyes. He’s such a stickler about things. “We didn’t need a meeting. We needed action. So, I took it.” I cap my marker and hold up the sign.

Fix your mistakes in style.

Two-for-one erasers! Wile supplies last!

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I think you spelled *while* wrong. I thought you were good at English.”

I look at it and grimace. Then I add a few words and hold the sign up again. “How’s this?”

Fix your mistakes in style.

Two-for-one erasers! Wile supplies last!

(See? An eraser would have helped!)

Wilson grins and crosses his arms. “Erasers don’t work on marker.”

“You’re nitpicking again,” I say. But I don’t mind when

he teases sometimes. I let my tongue roll around on *mah-kah*, just the way he says it.

“And have you run the numbers on this so-called sale that I didn’t co-sign for? What if we lose money at that price, woadie?” That’s another of his New Orleans words I like. It means we’re friends. “Stopwatch will get cheesed, you know—”

“I will get *cheesed* about what, exactly, Wilson—aside from those grassy shoes that have created a mess along the hall?”

Miss McDaniels stands at the door with our custodian, Mr. Vong, in tow. He’s pushing a hand truck stacked with a pile of cartons that’s taller than he is. He glances around it and gives Wilson a steely look.

“Thank you, Mr. Vong,” Miss McDaniels says. “I believe the students and I can manage from here.”

Then she folds her hands and turns to us again as Mr. Vong unloads. “You were saying, Wilson?”

Wilson goes mute, of course, a common side effect of encounters with Miss McDaniels, especially since his footwear is about to earn him some time, just like I warned. When we both stand up, he takes the merest step behind me.

Luckily, I’ve had plenty of practice with Miss McDaniels, so I can save him from his sorry mess this time.

I go right to what I learned in the “Sound Management Principles” chapter from *Peterson’s Guide to Building Your Business*, sixth edition, which I’ve been reading at night.

“Oh, hello, miss,” I say. “Wilson and I were just talking about how to make things tidier in here. Clutter makes us seem very unprofessional.”

“Oh?” She glances around at our mess.

“I’m sorry to say this, miss, but those snowflake erasers that you ordered aren’t selling, and we’re coming up on February already. Luckily, I have a plan to fix the loss—and clear some space in here.”

“We,” Wilson says, peeking out from behind me. “We have a plan.”

I try not to roll my eyes. “OK. We.”

She looks over her glasses at us, waiting, so I hold up my sign. “Ta-da! A clearance sale! What do you think?”

She reads the words and arches her brow. “You’ve worked out the finances, I hope.”

Wilson squeezes my elbow in an “I told you so” move.

“Yes, miss. They’re right here.” I crouch back on the floor to riffle through the scratch papers where I’ve done all my figuring. Numbers are scrawled all over the place because sometimes it takes me a few minutes to work something out. It’s not automatic like it is for Wilson or my brother, Roli. I’m never sure at first how to solve a problem.

Do I add, subtract, divide, or what? I find the paper and squint at my own horrible writing.

“The way I see it, we bought two thousand erasers for only a dime a piece, which is . . . a two hundred-dollar investment. If we sell them *two* for a quarter, we’ll be selling them at . . . at . . .” I hold the paper close, trying to read my messy handwriting.

Wilson sighs and steps in to help. “Twelve point five cents per eraser. That’s two point five cents’ profit per eraser. Which, if you multiply, gives you two hundred fifty dollars—or, specifically, a fifty-dollar profit.”

“Um, right,” I say.

She looks from Wilson to me. “Impressive,” she says at last. Then she gives a quick nod. “Very well. I’ll allow it.” In Miss McDaniels–speak, that means *What a genius idea!* I beam a smile at Wilson. This joins my other successful suggestions: the emoji stress balls in time for exam week, which everyone liked squeezing to make the emoji’s eyes bulge to the size of eggs; and the secret spy decoder pens that sold out in only two days thanks to the fifth-graders who liked the disappearing ink.

Miss McDaniels turns to me and hands over a fat roll of red tickets. “We have other, more pressing matters to discuss, anyway.”

I look at the roll. “What’s this, miss?” I ask.

“The ticket roll for the Heart Ball, of course. Valentine’s Day will be here in a few weeks. I need you to sell the dance tickets here at the Ram Depot during lunch hours starting next week.”

My stomach sinks. I hate the Heart Ball. At Seaward Pines, each grade has a special assignment to build teamwork and class spirit. Sixth-graders run the games for the carnival night. Eighth-graders go on an annual class trip to Saint Augustine. But what do we seventh-graders do? We’re in charge of the silly middle-school dance for Valentine’s Day. What kind of special treat is that?

“I thought you’d be pleased,” Miss McDaniels says. “It will drive customers to the store.”

True. But please, dancing is just not my jam, at least not in public where people can see me flailing around like a fish dying on a deck. And more important, I’ve heard rumors that some kids are planning to kiss at this thing. Just the thought of that gives me hives.

So, no gracias.

I look down at the tickets glumly.

Miss McDaniels crosses her arms. “Is there a problem?” She asks in a tone that tells me there shouldn’t be, so I stay mum.

She heaves a sigh. “Might this have something to do with what we discussed last semester?”

“Maybe, miss,” I say. “You have to admit, it would have been more fun.”

Way back at the beginning of the year, I started a petition to change the seventh-grade project. I suggested our own version of *American Ninja Warrior* right here on the quad. I provided detailed diagrams of the challenge course and everything. I got fifty signatures of kids who wanted to rappel down the science building, but still she squashed my dream flat.

“The Heart Ball is a fine Seaward Pines tradition,” she says. “It builds teamwork and social graces.”

It’s also being run by Edna Santos.

She and I have agreed to a truce, but it’s not been that easy, mostly because neither one of us has had a total personality transplant. After she got in trouble for wrecking my costume last year, she tried being a little less bossy, but it was as temporary as a wash-off tattoo. Not many people hang around with her anymore. Not even Rachel walks with her to class. But now that Edna is the Dancing Queen, she doesn’t seem to care about that. She walks around with a clipboard and won’t talk about anything except that silly dance. It’s thanks to her that every square inch of this school has been plastered with posters for the Heart Ball. They even have her picture on them! You can’t tinkle in the bathroom without her

watching you and telling you to buy tickets. Wilson claims it has made peeing at school difficult for him.

I guess my face is communicating all of this, the way Mami says it does, because Miss McDaniels zeroes in.

“Some tasks require us to put aside our past personal differences, Merci. We take them on for the general good of the school community, even if they are not our favorite thing. Wouldn’t you agree?”

No, I would not, but I keep my lip buttoned. I, for one, am *not* going to any silly dance, even if I *do* have to sell tickets. My plan is to watch an Iguanador Nation movie that night and gorge on the big box of assorted Russell Stover chocolates that Mami and Papi always give me for Valentine’s Day.

Wilson clears his throat. “Will the dance committee pay the Ram Depot a handling fee?”

Miss McDaniels looks at him over her glasses, but he stays calm. “It’s just that the store runs on a pretty slim staff, and tickets sales will take up time. Not to mention that we’re expecting a busy month in here with new merchandise, remember?”

“I have no doubt that two capable students like you will find the proper way to multitask.”

“Still, it seems fair to give us a slice,” Wilson says. “Maybe just ten percent?” He does a quick calculation.

“That’s fifty cents a ticket. We could use the funds to make improvements around here.”

I turn around and look at him, shocked at his hard-knuckle negotiating skills. Is he reading *Peterson’s*, too? And all at once, my heart sort of warms to him.

Miss McDaniels folds her hands. “Fine. If that makes it more amenable for the two of you, we’ll do that. The accounting will reflect your participation and support.”

Wilson gives me a triumphant smile as Miss McDaniels turns to the stack of cartons that Mr. Vong left for us.

“Now that we’ve settled *that*,” she says, “let’s get to these boxes. Those lizard items you ordered won’t put themselves away.”

“*What?*” I run over to the boxes. Sure enough, the delivery we’ve been waiting for has finally arrived. I grab a pair of safety scissors and pierce the tape on the first box. Then I make a snowstorm of packing peanuts as I dig through to find my treasure.

“Ooh,” I whisper as I pull out the first precious bobblehead. Those reptilian eyes. The pale green skin. Even with skinny plastic arms and a wobbly head, Captain Jake Rodrigo of the Iguanador Nation’s eastern fleet makes my heart pound. I’ve got his newest poster on my closet door so he’s the last thing I see every night. Sometimes I dream that we zip around the galaxies fighting enemies

together and planning ways to save the universe from the likes of Rotz and other villains. Maybe he'd be my first boyfriend—a good one who wouldn't tell fart jokes.

Wilson flicks his finger against Jake Rodrigo's chin to make him move. "I thought these would never get here."

He tries to ping the little captain again, but I stop him.

"Don't," I say. "You might damage him."

"What are you talking about? A bobblehead is made for bobbling, Merci. It's more or less the whole point."

I turn my back away as heat creeps up my neck. Even I know I'm being weird.

I clear my throat and turn to Miss McDaniels. "We should definitely up our price for these," I say. "The new movie tore up the box office, so everybody's going to want one. We could charge anything we want! Thirty bucks, even fifty!"

"We'll do no such thing," Miss McDaniels says primly. "They might price gouge at Poxel, but we're not here to take advantage of people."

"But, miss—" I give her an exasperated look. "What about charging what the market will bear?" She must know what I mean. Does she not see the new cars in the senior parking lot? People around here can bear a lot. "This is a business, remember?"

"Yes, and one with ethics. I think ten dollars is appro-

priate.” She holds the box toward me and motions toward the bobblehead.

Reluctantly, I drop it back in.

Meanwhile, Wilson is looking over the invoice. “Don’t worry, Merci. It says here that they cost us three dollars each. That would be a profit of about three hundred and thirty-three percent,” he says. “We can live with that.”

He’s beaming, even as I give him a withering look.
Traitor.

Miss McDaniels hands me the box. “You can start recording the new inventory and price tagging those lizard things—”

“Iguanador Nation—” I interject.

“I’ll have them featured on the morning announcements along with the Heart Ball tickets for next week,” she continues, “so we’ll need script copy for Lena and Darius to read as soon as possible.”

Wilson is taking notes as she talks. Suddenly, Miss McDaniels freezes, studying something across the cafeteria. Her next urgent priority has surfaced. I can tell by the quiver of her nostrils. I follow her gaze and see that one of the boys in the lunch line isn’t wearing his tie.

Her heels click like little chisels as she makes her way across the room.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN I GET TO EL CARIBE after school, Tía is already plugged into her earbuds as she wipes the counters clean. The snowbird lunch crowd has thinned, and it's too early for the dinner people, so my aunt is here with the regulars, who are reading the paper near the coffee bar. I take a deep breath. It's what I imagine heaven smells like: little biscuit angels floating around with the scent of vanilla and brewed coffee baked right into their wings.

I climb onto Lolo's old stool—the one with the red duct tape on the seat—and put Mami's twenty-dollar bill on the counter. She's waiting in the car, checking email about her physical therapy patients while I put in our order. I've been coming to El Caribe forever, but it's not

really the same without Lolo parked here for the afternoon the way he used to be. He always kept Tía company while she worked, drinking his favorite kind of fruit shake, batidos de mamey, on the house. Since he can't walk here on his own anymore, it's up to us to bring him his treats.

Tía doesn't notice me at first. She's smiling and has her eyes closed as she swings her hips left and right to whatever song is playing in her ears. I know she had the early shift today, so she's already been here since five a.m. But even in bright-green support socks and with swollen feet, she can't help dancing. Abuela says Tía Inés was born that way. It's a gift, like round hips from all the women on Abuela's side of the family. When she was still in Abuela's belly, Tía would squirm and kick whenever Abuela had the radio on. I guess I'm more like Mami's side of the family. Abuela says they're Gallegos, even though they're not Spanish, on account of their cement feet. Not that I mind. Twirling skirts? Shaking my colita? Please. I get my workouts on the field, thank you very much. But Tía? Her dance class at the community center on Wednesdays always fills up fast. If she could, I bet she'd teach there every day.

"Tía!" I call, waving my arms. When she doesn't notice, I hit the bell on the counter a bunch of times to get her attention. "Hello? Helloooo?"

She startles, like I've interrupted a dream, and pulls out her earbuds.

"What did I tell you about that thing?" She scoops it off the top of the display case and puts it away. "I am not a bellhop, you know."

"You couldn't hear, and Mami's waiting!"

She checks the time on her phone. "¡Ay! Four o'clock already? Where did the day go?" She tosses her rag into the sink. "The usual?"

"Yep. Plus a few pastelitos de carne for dinner. Mami doesn't want to cook."

"Which reminds me: I'm going to be late," Tía says as she starts gathering my order. "Don't wait."

I give her a look. Abuela will make us wait to eat anyway, and she knows it.

"Again?" I try not to sound too bitter, but I've had to help the twins with homework three times already this week. I don't want to circle anymore *at* words on worksheets. First grade was bad enough once. I shouldn't have to relive it.

"Yes, *again*," she says, straightening. "Berta called in sick, so I'll be here until five, at least. And it's parent conferences at the school." She walks over to the blender to mix Lolo's drink.

I heave a sigh. A school meeting means she's going

to be even later than usual. Teachers always have a lot of notes about the “experience” of having Axel and Tomás in a classroom for six long hours every day. The twins’ latest habit is hiding when it’s time to come in from recess, something that throws their teacher into a teary panic. They’ve even talked their little friends into the game, too. Last week, the school security officer had to help their teacher round up all the kids who’d seemingly vanished into thin air. They were curled inside volleyball bins and supply closets, just like Axel and Tomás told them to.

When Tía’s done getting our food, she waves at Mami through the window and hands me the box and the batido. “Just give me twelve bucks,” she says, ringing it up. “Lolo’s shake is on me.”

“Generous,” I say.

“Why break tradition?”

I stuff a dollar in the tip jar on the counter and walk outside.

“Tía’s working late again.” I buckle in and put my nose to the box of pasteles. It’s going to be hard to resist opening it. “She said not to wait.”

Mami gives me a knowing look and shakes her head. “Make yourself a sandwich to hold you off until dinner,” she says.

Then she places her phone in the stand and glances

back through the window at Tía, who's plugged into her music again while switching out the menus.

We pull away, the box of treats warming my legs as we go.

There's a ladder leaning up against our house when we get home. Papi is perched on the top step, squirting something at the rust spot on the stucco.

"At last!" Mami says. She's been complaining about a stain that looks like a map of South America on the side of our house for months, but Papi hasn't had time to do anything about it, or about the big crack in the stucco at Tía's house—compliments of the twins' recent hammer-tossing contest. The sun has faded the paint color, too, so our three houses aren't the bright pink that Las Casitas used to be.

Not that it's his fault. Seemingly everybody in South Florida needed a paint job before the holidays, so he was super busy, even with brothers Simón and Vicente helping six days a week. Papi looked beat when he came home every night, but he insisted he didn't mind. "Paid work before free, Ana," he told us every time Mami asked him about our place. "We have to eat, and pay Roli's tuition. Plus, my men need the hours."

I know he didn't have spare time for the repairs

because of my soccer games, too. This year was my first season on the school team, and let's just say it wasn't the best. I thought I was going to be a starter, but I only played left wing when Emma Harris, an eighth-grader, needed a break. And our team wasn't very good, either. I spent a lot of time wondering if I should quit and just stick to playing with Papi's team, even though Mami doesn't like it. She says it's dangerous for me to play with grown men. Ha. For them maybe. I can run circles around some of them, except maybe Vicente, who has chops.

Anyway, Papi wouldn't let me quit. He said Suárezes don't stop trying when things are bad. Instead, he showed up to every game after work, sometimes still in his painter's pants. I had to look carefully to spot him. Papi isn't a sideline yeller, for one thing. And he doesn't talk much to the other parents, either. Instead, he likes to stand in the shade of the nearest tree and watch. On the drive home, he'd tell me where he thought our strategy could improve and how not to give up even with the odds against us. When we lost, he'd toss me a Jupiña from his mini cooler, too, and tell me corny jokes to cheer me up.

Anyway, with soccer over, it looks like Las Casitas is finally getting a makeover.

"I was wondering where you two were," he says, smiling down at us.

“Where else?” I tell him. “Waiting for my eight hours of daily bondage to be over.” I hold up the bakery bag. “And picking up dinner.”

“I can smell it from here.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Did you get the papas rellenas?” Stuffed potato balls are his favorite.

“Yep.”

Mami walks over to the ladder and shields her eyes against the sun. “Looks like you’re going to be a while, though,” she says.

“Not too bad. I’ve got help.”

That’s when I notice Simón near the shed at Lolo and Abuela’s house. He’s lugging a bucket of pink paint and stir sticks. Vicente has the rollers and extension rods. Confession: I used to think Vicente was cute, a little bit like Jake Rodrigo, even. But not anymore. He’s around here a lot, and now it feels like he’s my cousin. Besides, he’s a lot older than me—almost eighteen like Roli—and he has an annoying habit of calling me his little pal.

Simón and Vicente work every day that Papi can afford to hire them. It’s not so they can pay for a car repair like last year, when the transmission in their Corolla went kaput. Now they need money for a lawyer in Miami who’s trying to convince a judge that Vicente should stay with Simón, who’s his oldest brother. I’m not allowed to ask

them about that, though. Mami says it's strictly private. "I don't understand why," I told her. "People ask me private stuff all the time. What I want to be. If I have a boyfriend. God. Nobody seems to mind their invasion of *my* privacy."

She gave me that irritated look when she thinks I've been thoughtless. "Por Dios, that's completely different, Merci. Now, give those brothers some space and respect. They have enough to worry about."

I started to argue. I mean, I have things I worry about, too. Don't they matter? But that night, I thought about how I don't have to worry about never seeing Roli again. I know he'll come home in the summer. It's different for Simón and Vicente.

I drop my backpack in the grass. "I'll give you guys a hand."

Papi stops swiping off the rust spots and looks down at me. We both know the rule. School is always first. He glances at Mami and asks what he knows she wants to hear. "Don't you have homework?"

"Only a little," I say, which is, of course, not true. I have a ton, as usual, because seventh grade is a heartless killer, especially if you have Mr. Ellis for science. "And don't I deserve a little break? You don't want me to have anxiety issues, do you?" I give Mami a knowing look. I saw those flyers she brought home from the PTA meeting

last month. It was all about the warning signs of stressed-out kids. She made me drink chamomile tea before bed for a week.

Mami softens a bit. She knows how much I like helping Papi—and I'm good. Aside from Simón, I'm his best worker.

"Fine," she says. "But only for an hour. And don't ruin another uniform blouse, please. That's the only one that still fits, and you still have five months of school to go."

My cheeks get red as I cross my arms over my chest. My growth spurt is not a topic I like talking about in front of Papi, or anybody else for that matter. I'd gladly stop growing, but everything inside of me has gone haywire. I wear a size eight shoe, which Mami tells everyone is bigger than hers, and I've started getting pimples on my forehead, even when I scrub my face at night with a washcloth until my skin shines. I guess I should be thankful I don't have it as bad as Marie Perillo, who basically had a growth explosion this year. From behind, people confuse her for a teacher all the time. Everything is full-size on her now, so much so that people whisper and sneak stares at her in the locker room after gym.

"I got her covered," Papi says quickly. He climbs down the rungs of his squeaky ladder and kisses Mami's cheek, lingering a little too long until she smiles.

“Kissing in front of me is awkward, you know,” I say.

They exchange a look before Mami heads inside. Papi rummages through the rag pile for one of his old T-shirts and tosses it to me so I can pull it on.

“You’re in charge of rust stains on the south side,” he says. “There’s more cleaning fluid in the shed, top shelf. Wear gloves.”

“Can I use the drywall stilts?” I love those things. It’s house repairs and Transformers all rolled into one.

Papi isn’t listening. He stretches his back as he watches Mami walk into the house, probably wishing he could sit down for a while and watch TV, holding hands with her the way they sometimes do when they think I’m not looking. I used to plop myself right between them to feel cozy, but not anymore. Somehow, the couch just feels too small with all three of us on it. It’s like they become Ana and Enrique, not just Mami and Papi, the way they’re supposed to be.

“Well?” I say, snapping him back. “Can I use the zancos or not, Papi?”

“Talk to Simón,” he tells me as he steps up again. “And be careful with your shirt, muchachita,” he says, “or we’re both in for it.”

“Got it.” I tie my hair up and run to Simón for the stilts.

CHAPTER 4

IT'S BEEN A WHOLE YEAR since I found out that Lolo has Alzheimer's. He takes new medicines now, so some days he's almost the same as always. Like today. When I finish helping with the house repairs, I wash up and go over to Abuela and Lolo's, where we're going to eat dinner. I find Lolo in his recliner working on a puzzle with the twins.

"Hey, Lolo," I say.

"¡Preciosa!" he says.

They've spread out the pieces on his folding snack table, trying to build the picture of a cat that looks like ours, except with two blue eyes instead of just one, like Tuerto has. The box has twenty-five pieces, so nobody gets too confused by the colors or shapes. It's one of my old ones from elementary school. That was Mami's idea. Lolo

can fit the pieces together if there aren't too many of them, and Mami says it's important for his brain to keep working things out. That's why she's always telling me to go over to play dominoes, bingo, and even my *Wheel of Fortune* app with him. I used to love playing games with Lolo, since we could be by ourselves and talk about stuff. But it's not as fun this year, to be honest. Lolo talks a lot less now, for one thing, and sometimes he forgets what I just told him, so I have to start my story all over again. And if he's having a hard day, he starts thinking about pretend stuff—and not the fun kind like when I was little and we played post office. Take last week. We were trying to play Uno, but he kept looking up from his cards, sure that someone was spying on us from the patio. “Espías,” he whispered to me, looking scared. “Hide.” We sat with the lights off and the blinds closed until he finally fell asleep in his chair. I felt afraid the whole time. Not of spies, though. Of Lolo.

“She's finally home.” Abuela comes in with the box of pastelitos from the bakery and a big salad bowl perched on top of it. Oil spots have seeped through the cardboard. We waited for Tía, just like I knew we would, no matter how many times I said I was starving.

“People get worked to death,” Abuela mutters. “If she's not careful, Inés could leave behind orphans. Then what would become of these angelitos?”

Angels? I love my cousins, but geez, that's a stretch.

"What's an orphan?" Axel asks suddenly.

Mami puts down the *Vanidades* magazine that she's reading and widens her eyes at Abuela in alarm. "Teresita!" she says. "Por Dios. You'll scare them." She hates when Abuela goes full-on drama, like the time she explained to me what could happen if Papi fell from a roof while on the job. I cried for a week dreaming of him nearly lifeless, his brain bleeding inside his skull.

Thankfully, Tía comes through the front door before Abuela starts in on the finer points of dead parents.

"Mamá!" Tomás runs to Tía and buries himself in her legs. Axel isn't far behind.

Tía looks even more worn-out than when I left her this afternoon, but she covers their heads with kisses anyway. Then she bends down to unlace her black work sneakers that are splattered with powdered sugar and oil. "Go wash your hands," she tells them. "And use soap. I'm going to sniff your palms to check."

They race down the hall, elbowing each other to see who gets to the sink first, as she kicks off her shoes and winces.

"Dios mío," she says. "I thought this day was never going to end."

My stomach gurgles loudly. “And I thought you were never going to get here.”

“You waited?” she says, looking around. “I told you not to.”

“Who listens to me, Tía?”

I try not to sound bitter, but I wish Tía didn’t work so much, either—and it’s not because I think it’s going to kill her. It’s more that it’s killing the rest of us. When she’s not around, somebody—usually yours truly—has to watch the twins and help them with homework and keep them from burning down the house or some other travesura. And now there’s Lolo to keep an eye on, too.

“Well, maybe El Señor will help us all,” Abuela says. “I’m going to play a Lotto number tonight. I dreamed some pretty digits last night. Who knows? Maybe we can become millionaires. Then no one will have to work long hours.”

Just then, Papi, Simón, and Vicente come in dragging the extra plastic chairs from the patio.

“Lottery millionaires? Where do I sign up?” Papi says.

“Imagine if we got rich! So many things would be possible.” Simón places a chair near Tía’s usual spot at the table and glances shyly at her. “Buenas noches, Inés,” he says, smiling. “It’s good to see you.”

Tía stands a little straighter when she sees him. She smooths her uniform, and her eyes flit down to her support socks with a small hole in the big toe. Her feet don't exactly smell like roses, either. "Simón," she says, really formally, like they've barely met. "I didn't know you were here this evening. ¿Qué tal?"

Oh brother. The goo between them is like hot taffy as they stand there gawking at each other. If heart bubbles could really float out of someone's head, Tía's would be going on full steam.

I cannot have it.

"I'm starving," I say loudly. "Can we please eat?"

"Síó, niña. Where are your manners?" Abuela surveys the table to make sure nothing's missing. "All right. I think we have everything. Siéntense."

The twins rush to their seats, so I click off the TV that's been on for no one in particular and get up from the couch to help Lolo, like I do almost every time we eat together. It's the only one of my chores that I don't mind. I move the snack table out of his way, so I don't disturb the puzzle they've gotten done so far. Only the tail is still missing. Then I unfold his walker and click the sides into place, the way Mami showed me.

"Ready?" I say.

My grandfather's eyes are bright behind his big, round glasses. "Ready, preciosa. Let's see if we can get this motor running."

"Scoot to the edge and lean forward like I taught you, viejo," Mami reminds him.

Lolo grips his walker and gets into what we call launch position. He looks like a swimmer hunched on the diving block, except, of course, he's starting from a recliner. I stand next to him and start our countdown as he rocks back and forth to get some momentum.

"Three, two, one . . . liftoff!"

He struggles to straighten his knees, breathing hard and wobbling a little as I hold his elbow.

I pretend I don't see how hard this has gotten for him, even with Mami's trick. *Focus on abilities*, she always reminds us, *not on what he can't do anymore*. But sometimes it's hard not to keep a list of all that's gone. Bike riding with me. Walking us to the park. Asking me about my day. It's like he's fading, vanishing from the inside out a little bit each day, even though his body is still here.

"Start eating!" Lolo tells everyone as he makes his way to the table slowly. He pulls his arm away from me. "Go sit."

Papi winks at me and motions to my seat. So, I take

my place as Lolo inches his way to the head of the table, opposite Papi.

My stomach lets out another loud gurgle.

Lolo's chest is rising and falling like he's in a race. "I said don't wait for me," he scolds.

But not even the twins reach for their forks. Hungry and tired, we all wait, hands in our laps, until he finally drops into his chair. No one starts without him. We never do.

How long, I wonder, before that disappears, too?

CHAPTER 5

“GOOD MORNING, SEAWARD PINES RAMS! Lena Cahill and Darius Ulmer here with your morning announcements. Please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.”

Wilson and I flash Lena a thumbs-up sign through the glass door of the TV studio. Then, because Miss McDaniels frowns at us, we quickly face the flagpole in the corner and put our hands on our hearts until the pledge and the moment of silence finish.

Our TV studio—WSPA, pronounced *double-u spah*—is in the front office, inside a glass cubicle right behind Miss McDaniels’s desk. It’s off-limits to anyone but the anchors, which means that Wilson and I have to watch the whole thing through the window out here in the waiting area.

We're sitting on the dark wooden benches that are usually reserved for kids who've gotten in trouble, so we're getting stares from the nosy stragglers who need late passes.

It has taken Wilson and me almost a week to come up with our ad campaign for the Heart Ball tickets, but we finally did it. Mostly it took so long because Wilson is epically stubborn. I tried to explain—nicely—that I was delegating the ad-writing duty to him.

“Nah,” he said. “Technically, you can only delegate to employees. I’m your co-manager.”

“So?”

“So, I’m delegating the job right back to you, woadie.”

We texted back and forth forever to work it out, and let me tell you, it was tough with Wilson being so ridiculously picky about everything I proposed.

He did not appreciate my first attempt:

Buy a Heart Ball ticket if you don't mind holding gemy hands with somebody you barely know

🤔 THIS is the best you can do?

I refuse to engage in deceptive advertising.

The second one didn't go any better:

Buy a Heart Ball ticket if you have absolutely nothing better to do in this sad life.

We finally compromised with the help of a book called *Jokelopedia*—a companion volume to the twins’ favorite resource, *Prankolopedia*. I found it lying on the floor of my room, which the twins have started to use as their criminal lair. Turns out, Wilson is as mad for knock-knock jokes as they are. He doesn’t care if they’re dumb; in fact, the cornier the better, he says, which is weird. Lolo used to say the same thing.

In no time we wrote some jokes for our ads that we could both live with.

Lena shuffles her notes and pushes up her new glasses. I like them. A lot of the girls in our grade got contact lenses this year. Now they just have red eyes instead of glasses. But not Lena. She went straight-up nerd with a pair of specs that make her look even smarter than usual. They match her hair, too, which she dyed a new color that would look good on TV. It’s called Hey Gurl Passion Purple No. 5. I guess I didn’t get the memo that people were changing things about themselves in seventh grade. I mean, even Hannah got bangs this year to “bring out her eyes”—who knows what that means. Anyway, all I did was ask Mami to trim my ends in the kitchen, same as always, which nobody ever notices. I’m the same Merci as always except taller. Boring.

Lena begins.

“Today is Monday, January twenty-fifth, and you know what that means, right, Darius?”

Darius sits in the chair beside her and stares straight ahead. He’s a slim white kid, with blond hair and terrified blue eyes. This whole anchor business isn’t really helping his shyness at all, if you ask me. What were his parents thinking? Maybe they’re just monster parents, the kind that pushed him into the deep end of the pool to teach him to swim. All I know is that his face is as red as his blazer, and his temples are beaded with enough sweat that I can see it through the window. He’s wrung his script cards to bits, too.

Lena gives him the slightest nudge with her elbow as she smiles steadily at the camera. “Darius?”

He swallows hard. “Y-yes,” he says. “It’s . . . It’s . . .”

Lena doesn’t rush him as he tries to form words, but it doesn’t help. Darius has once again become the rusted Tin Man with no oil in his jaw. I feel for the guy. I still shudder when I remember the time I got a singing solo in the second-grade play. I forgot all the lyrics and started to cry right there onstage, with parents snapping pictures and calling me adorable the whole time. Beasts.

Anyhow, it’s Lena to the rescue. She looks right at the camera and grins slyly. “Why, Darius! What a clever way to build suspense for . . . National Opposites Day! Thank you!”

“So *that’s* why she walked to class facing me,” Wilson whispers.

“Shh,” Miss McDaniels says.

Lena asks for sign-ups for the Earth Club’s beach cleanup this Saturday—she’s the president—and then ticks through the other news items pretty quickly. Today’s lunch menu. The basketball scores for JV. News about an upper-school SAT something-or-other that’s due. Then the weather map flashes on the green screen, and Darius manages to tell us that it will be much cooler than normal this weekend, near freezing at night, which we already know. Everyone at school is wrapped in our fifty-dollar Seaward Pines hoodies and jackets, and for once I don’t mind my itchy knee socks or wearing Roli’s hand-me-down sweatshirt. The temperature has dropped into the high forties, which hardly ever happens here in Florida. It’s almost like those other states up north that have actual seasons besides *wet* and *dry*. The downside of cold weather, though, is that Papi can’t paint outside jobs for a couple of days, in case it freezes. No work, no money—which makes him moody about stuff like socks on the floor or my bike in the driveway.

Finally, it’s time for our ads. Wilson and I exchange looks.

“And now we have a few announcements from the new and improved Ram Depot, your home for school

supplies. Ready?” She looks hopefully at Darius, but even from here, I can see that his hands are still shaking.

Don't wreck this for us, Darius! I think darkly.

Lena: Knock-knock.

Darius: Wh-who's there?

Lena: Felix.

Darius: . . .

Lena: *Felix*.

Darius: F-Felix who?

Lena: Felix-cited about Valentine's Day?

Buy your Heart Ball tickets starting next week during lunch at the Ram Depot!

She presses the sound-effects buzzer for the drum rim shot. *Ba-dum-TSSS!*

Wilson leans over to me. “Is it the green screen or does Darius look a weird color to you?”

Miss McDaniels shoots us another warning look.

Lena: Knock-knock.

Darius: Wh-wh-who . . . ?

Lena: Bob.

Darius: . . .

Lena: *Bob*.

Darius: . . .

Lena: Bob who, you ask? Why, BOBBleheads for Iguanador Nation are finally in! (*Ba-dum-TSSS!*) Ten dollars gets you one of these beauties at the Ram Depot while supplies last! Competitive prices! All sales final!

Darius's eyes are wide now and fixed on the camera. His lips quiver, and his blazer looks wet around the armpits. I remember feeling like that last year when I had the stomach flu.

Lena must notice the warning signs. She slides the wastebasket with her foot to his side of the table. Then she takes over for the rest of the broadcast, doing our last knock-knock bit on her own at lightning speed.

“Knock-knock. Who's there? Clair. Clair who? Clair-ance sale on all glitter snowflake erasers! Two-for-one, while supplies last! Hurry in during your lunch period!”

“Well, Rams, that wraps up today's news. Happy Opposites Day! And have a terrible, terrible week. This is not Lena Cahill and Darius Ulmer signing off!”

The red button flashes, and the screen goes to our school crest.

Darius reaches for the wastebasket just in time.

CHAPTER 6

THAT AFTERNOON, LENA AND I are in the seventh-grade hall waiting for Hannah, who's still finishing up her unit exam in Mr. Ellis's room. Hannah is always the last one done on tests because she likes to check her answers three times before she hands anything in. Not me, of course. What's the point of all that? The more I check, the more confused I get, especially in advanced earth science. I ran out as fast as I could after the exam. Forty multiple-choice questions weren't enough for the man. He tacked on a twenty-point essay, too, to give us "writing practice." I cracked my knuckles so much, I'm pretty sure I'll have arthritis by nightfall, just like Abuela always warns.

“The present is the key to the past.” Please explain who made this statement and how it applies to early geological science.

“What did you answer for the essay?” I ask Lena. “Was it James Hutton or John Smith?”

“Hutton,” she says. “John Smith is the Jamestown guy from social studies.”

I rest my head against my locker in disgust. “Are you positive?” She types into the search bar on her phone and shows me the screen. *James Hutton (1726–1797). Father of modern geology.*

I heave a sigh as soon as I recognize the guy’s mug from our textbook. Naturally, I panicked at the last second and changed my answer to the wrong one. Twenty points, *pfft!*

It’s turning out to be a long year in science, and we’re only about halfway through. It’s bad enough that we’ve been studying rocks for a month—for heaven’s sake, *rocks*. But the real killer is that I have Mr. Ellis. I mean, he’s one of our younger teachers, with his hair in dreads and AirPods in his pocket and fun posters on his walls. But do not be fooled! All that chill goes right out the window when you’re in his class. He’s a drill sergeant. Three pages of homework daily. Graded labs. Tests every other week. Pop quizzes whenever the spirit moves him. He even

counts spelling on the hardest scientific words. *Detritus*. *Metamorphosis*. *Speleologist*.

But worst of all is that he was Roli's teacher a few years back, not to mention his senior adviser last year. Mr. Ellis thinks my brother is "one of tomorrow's most promising scientific minds." At least, that's what he wrote on one of Roli's college recommendations.

Which means that I am a big disappointment.

"Oh, are you Rolando Suárez's little sister?"

The question froze me in terror when Mr. Ellis first asked. I'm always cooked when teachers find out I'm related to one of the biggest brains to have ever graduated from Seaward Pines Academy. Roli got a full scholarship to study biology at the University of North Carolina, where he wants to study neurology. And even though Drew Samuelson, who didn't get into UNC, told everybody that Roli got in because he's poor and Latino, I know it's because my brother is crazy smart. Anyway, Mr. Ellis called on me nonstop at first, assuming I must be a genius, too. It took him almost a month to figure out the sad truth. Before him sat an ordinary girl. A not-so-special brain. Maybe one day, Roli can figure out how to fix *that*.

Lena puts her hand on my locker to dull the sound of my head banging. "I'll bet a lot of people got that question wrong. Maybe he'll grade on a curve."

“And maybe the moon is made of cheese,” I say.

“Basalt, actually,” Lena says.

Just then, somebody shoves past me.

“Excusez-moi.” Edna Santos bumps me with her fancy red leather backpack and steps between us to get to her locker. “That test was a breeze,” she says. “N’est-ce pas?”

I glare at her as she starts working her combination. Hannah and Lena are in my science class this year, which is great. But so is Edna, and every so often we end up as lab partners, which I hold as another strike against Mr. Ellis. No one ever volunteers to be her partner, even though she’s one of the smartest kids in there. Let’s just say Edna puts a capital *E* in *Extra*. And worse, she’s taking French this year, too, which is even more annoying. It’s *bonjour* this and *au revoir* that, all day long. The one thing I haven’t heard is *merci beaucoup* for the fantastic ads Wilson and I wrote for her silly dance. *Please*, *thank you*, and *I’m sorry* are still not in her vocabulary.

When Edna opens her locker, a whiff of cinnamon hits me. It’s the car air freshener she’s got in there. She has mirrors, bookends, and even little shelves. It’s all neat as a pin, not like mine, which occasionally dissolves into an avalanche if I’m not quick with the door.

She grabs a folder covered in heart stickers and looks at me irritably. “Do you know what’s keeping Hannah?

We're going to be late for the dance committee meeting this afternoon."

"Meeting?" I say. "Hannah said she was coming over after school today. She's helping me and Lena babysit the twins."

Edna shrugs. "Well, she can't go. I've called a mandatory meeting to go over last-minute things for the Heart Ball."

"Who decided that?" I say.

"I did. I'm in charge of the dance, remember?"

"Really?" I say bitterly. "I hadn't heard."

Lena jabs me in the ribs with her elbow. She and Hannah both promised to help me with my Edna skills. I rub my side. Seriously, how could we *not* know? It's all Edna talks about these days. What she's going to wear to the Heart Ball. Who she thinks she'll ask to the Heart Ball. What songs they'll play at the Heart Ball. Who she thinks will kiss at the Heart Ball. Heart Ball, Heart Ball, Heart Ball. I'd like to free-kick the Heart Ball into outer space.

But here's what really eats at me. I don't understand why Hannah ever agreed to be on Edna's committee in the first place. Dance planning is eating up all of Hannah's spare time—specifically, the time she used to spend with me and Lena. I thought that's what best friends did: hang out with each other. Hannah and Lena are the only ones who come over to Las Casitas. I mean, you can't just invite

anyone from Seaward Pines home with you. Some moms look up your address, and if they don't like how your block looks, they invite you over instead.

But I guess I should have known Hannah was a goner as soon as Edna told her she could be in charge of decorations. Decorations means arts and crafts, Hannah's favorite thing. Her eyes got all dewy once she thought about heart-shaped balloons and disco balls and, most of all, the glitter, glitter, glitter she could use to make all that stuff.

"Come on, Edna. Hannah was supposed to come home with Lena and me today. We're going to take the twins to the park to try out Lena's new scooter. Can't she take the day off?"

Edna glances at Lena, who's holding her Razor Beast, folded, in her arms. "You can ride that thing another day."

"That's not the point. You're hogging all of Hannah's time."

She holds up her hand to stop me. "If you want a perfect event for our school like the one *I'm* organizing, you need to have every detail in place. No offense, Merci, but planning a dance for the whole middle school isn't like selling pencils and toys during lunch."

My blood boils. "And selling *Heart Ball* tickets, you mean?" I say pointedly. "You're welcome for the ads, by the way."

I get another of Lena's elbows to the ribs.

Just then, Hannah comes racing up the hallway.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!"

She's out of breath as she reaches us. Her cheeks are flushed, and her shirt is untucked. Always a nervous test taker, she's pulled the hairs on the side of her head all hour long, so now they're sticking out all over the place, and her ponytail is lopsided. She looks like she's escaped from a lion attack.

She twists the dial on her lock as fast as she can, but it won't budge when she tugs on it. She tries again. Another fail. Poor Hannah. It took her most of the fall semester to even memorize her combination.

"Agh!" she says.

"Allez!" Edna mutters in French.

"Here, I've got it," Lena says, taking over. "I know your combination." When Hannah had the flu in September, Lena and I took turns bringing home the books she needed. I even sat on her bed with a germ mask to help her study for social studies. Did Edna do that for her? No, she did not.

Hannah looks over at me and heaves a sigh. "That test was a killer," she says. "Am I right?"

"The worst," I say. "I felt my brain leaking out of my ears."

“Me too.”

“Will you two please zip it and hurry?” Edna checks her hair in her locker mirror one last time. “We start in three minutes.”

That’s when I spot the picture Edna has taped at the very back of her locker. It’s one from her mission trip to the Dominican Republic last year. She went with her dad, who’s from there, and a team of doctors and nurses. Edna helping humanity. Go figure.

I have to admit that I like this shot, even though Edna is in it. She’s under a palm tree holding a little kid, who’s sucking his thumb. The sky is bright blue all around them, puffy clouds overhead. I don’t know. Maybe it’s the expression on her face or all the color that makes me like it. What I remember most, though, is that she told us the boy’s mom had lost one of her legs to a sickness called gangrene. Her father and the other doctors were helping to keep the other leg healthy. For the life of me, I can’t imagine Edna on a trip like that. She’s a germophobe, for one thing. She won’t drink out of a water fountain here at school on even the hottest day.

Edna catches my eye in the mirror and then slams her locker closed.

“Dépêche-toi,” she tells Hannah. “We have a busy agenda!”

Hannah digs through her locker as Edna marches off. “What is she even saying through those puckered lips? All I hear is zz-zz-zz!”

Lena giggles.

“Why don’t you skip today?” I whisper to Hannah. “The Evil Dance Queen will live.”

“Merci, I made a commitment. Plus, she’s not *that* bad,” Hannah says.

I brush her words aside. “But we were going to take the twins to the park and do tricks on Lena’s scooter. Remember?”

She pauses, looking from me to Lena.

Lena smiles. “A day off isn’t so bad,” she says.

Hannah looks doubtful, and for a second I think we’ve freed her from Edna’s clutches.

But no. Hannah would rather eat dirt than let someone down or break any rules. She starts down the hall. “I wish I could, Merci, but I’m on the committee, and I still have a ton of paper flowers to make.” She walks backward a few paces.

“Wait—”

“We’ll hang out soon! Tell Axel and Tomás I said hi.”

Before I can argue, she turns and dashes down the hall after Edna, who’s already sprinting around the corner on the gangly legs that she’s gotten this year.

Lena peers through the exit that leads to the car loop. “Your mom’s here.” She holds open the door for me and lets in a chilly gust. I hitch up my backpack and follow, but my mood has fouled.

“How was school?” Mami asks as we buckle in. It’s the same question she asks every day, but right now I don’t want to answer it. What part does she mean? School was a gazillion ways. It was boring in English because we worked on grammar, and awful in science thanks to that dumb test. It was fun in PE because I hit all my layups. And it’s horrible right this second because one of my best friends in the whole world won’t come over. Who has time for a conversation about all of that?

Mami holds her eyes on me in the rearview mirror. The car engine is still humming in park. My ride is being held hostage until I communicate like a proper unstressed child.

“Good,” I mutter.

I look out the window as we pull out. It’s not a big deal, I try to tell myself. Hannah is just volunteering after school.

But there’s a little voice way inside my head, and it won’t stop taunting me.

Hannah picked Edna instead of you.

CHAPTER 7

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS AROUND our house.

If you need permission to do something even remotely fun, it pays to know who to ask. For instance, you can ask Papi to show you how to use power tools because he'll say yes. But don't bother asking him to drop you off at the mall with your friends because he'll interrogate you about who you're with and where you're going and all that. Tía Inés will let you stay up late to watch a scary movie at her place, but she hates video games and won't ever play them with you. If you want extra dessert, forget Mami; all you'll get is a boring lecture on the effects of too much sugar on your metabolism. Abuela is the one who will slip you another piece of cake and tell you it's good for you.

So, you see, it's complicated, which is why I knew

better than to wait to ask Abuela about bike riding this afternoon. I asked Mami last night and got the green light the way I knew I would. She's keen on "cardiovascular exercise."

So, I'm ready when Lena and I get to Lolo and Abuela's house to find the twins.

Lolo is on his porch glider when we get there. Even though it's chilly, he's watching Vicente power-wash the stucco as if it's a riveting TV show. Until last year, Lolo always did the power washing. I can tell by the way he's fidgeting that he'd like to be there helping now, too.

"Hey, Lolo. Hey, Vicente," I shout over the noise.

Vicente shuts off the washer and checks his phone. Girls are always texting him. Simón teases him about it all the time. Good thing his glam has worn off for me, especially since I sometimes have to step in to supervise his work for Papi. Like now.

"You're not going to spackle in this cold, are you?" I tell him. "It won't dry."

Vicente glances at Lena shyly. He doesn't like to talk in front of people he doesn't know well, especially if English is involved. "I know, chera," he says in Spanish. "I'm just finishing the prep like your dad told me. We're trying to wrap up early today. There's a game tonight in Loxahatchee. Are you playing?"

I shake my head miserably. It's a school night, and Mami has been putting her foot down.

"Not tonight," I tell him in English. "You'll have to slaughter Manny's team without me."

"My pleasure," he says in English.

Abuela comes through the screen door just then, pulling her sweater around herself tightly and shuddering. The frog thermometer outside her window reads fifty-five degrees, which is what she calls pneumonia weather. We're not in coats and gloves the way Roli has to be in North Carolina, of course, but it has been cold enough to wear pants. Personally, I love it when the weather is like this, especially since it only happens once or twice every winter. The sky is so blue that it hurts to look at it, and when the wind blows, it makes my eyes water.

Abuela feels Lolo's hands and gasps. "Practically frostbitten! You, señor, need to come inside and away from the power washer's mist. Look at that runny nose!"

"Hi, Abuela," I say.

Lolo pays her no mind. Instead, he beams a sleepy smile at Lena and me and adjusts his glasses. He's still in his windbreaker and baseball cap from the walk home from school with Abuela and the twins, but his drippy nose is bright red and his eyes look glassy from the cool

wind. Little beads of water cover his pants. Abuela might be right this one time.

“Preciosa,” he says, his voice a little froggy. Then he smiles at Lena. “And who’s this?”

My heart sinks a little. Lolo loves Lena and Hannah, but lately he thinks he’s meeting them for the first time. That’s how it is with Alzheimer’s, though. You start to forget kind of obvious stuff. Your friends’ names. The steps to getting dressed. Your address. What year it is.

Luckily, Lena is used to it. She sits down next to him on the glider. “It’s just me, Mr. Suárez. Lena Cahill.” She digs in her pocket and hands him a tissue.

He pats her spiky hair and smiles. “Pointy.” He blows his nose.

“Gracias,” she says.

“We’re here to get the twins,” I tell Abuela.

She looks relieved, even though she’d never say so. Abuela likes to sew in the afternoons when the sun is bright enough to help her see. But it’s hard to do with the twins around, not to mention the fact that she has to keep Lolo company in case he wants to wander. If she’s not careful, he walks down the street and out of view. Then the neighbors start phoning.

“Boys!” she calls.

A few seconds later, Axel and Tomás burst through the door, cookie crumbs all over their faces.

“Grrr!” Axel says, clawing his fingers up near his eyes as he approaches me.

“Hello, Axel,” I say.

“I want blood, blood, blood!” He’s got a loose front tooth that’s hanging at an angle, so he looks deranged enough that I sort of believe him.

“We’re monsters,” Tomás explains. “We’re going to eat your faces off now.”

“Oh,” I say, eyeing my cousins carefully. “Well, that’s sad. You’ll miss a chance to ride your bikes to the park.”

“The park!” Tomás shouts.

They rush at us, hooting. Tomás jumps on Lena’s back and Axel on mine.

“¡Muchachos!” Abuela says, trying to pull them off. “That’s no way to say hello! You’ll crush the girls if you squeeze them like that!”

I drag Axel off my back and bring my face close to his. His loose front tooth is barely hanging on.

“Get your jackets fast,” I tell him. “We don’t have much time before dark.”

In a flash, they’re racing each other toward Tía’s house to get their things.

Abuela’s face twists into a rag of worry as they go.

“Don’t you think it’s better to watch some TV?” she asks. “There’s a canal in that park, isn’t there?” She doesn’t add the rest of what she’s imagining. *Where they’ll drown. Where an alligator will eat them. Where they will get salmonella from a wild duck.*

“There are canals all over Florida, Abuela. Three hundred seventeen miles of them in Palm Beach County alone, according to Mr. Ellis,” I say. “We won’t go near it. Promise. We’re just going to ride bikes and scooters on the main path.”

What I don’t say is that Lena is also planning to teach me how to make sparks come off the back of her scooter when you ride it, just like Jake Rodrigo’s aeris zoom. If I do, Abuela will lecture about falls, about clothes igniting, maybe even about spontaneous human combustion like we saw on that TV show *Supernatural Science*. People exploded into flames—*pouf*—for no reason, even though Mami insists that’s nonsense.

Abuela hesitates and tries again. “But it’s too cold to be outside. The boys will get sick. Think of the doctor bills!” she says. “Why don’t I make you all hot chocolate instead?”

“Delicious!” Lolo says, smacking his lips. He loves chocolate, same as me.

I learned in science last year that we don’t catch colds from weather, but I know better than to argue. Instead, I just go for the big guns. “Mami said I could go.”

Silence.

Abuela's lips press to a thin line as I walk to the shed to get the bikes, but she doesn't go down easy.

"Make sure you take the side streets, then. People drive like maniacs," she calls to me, pulling her sweater around her even tighter.

"OK."

"And keep your eyes on the boys. Don't leave them alone for a minute. You know how they are."

"Walk faster," I whisper to Lena.

"And make them get off their bikes to cross the busy streets."

"Check!"

"And look both ways at the corner."

"Of course."

"And text—"

"—when I get to the park."

"And don't forget—"

I turn around, exasperated.

"Abuela," I say, "I'm in the seventh grade! Besides, Lolo is getting cold out here."

She frowns at me. We both know I'm not supposed to talk back to grown-ups.

"Esta juventud . . ." she says, shaking her head. Then she reaches for Lolo's chilly hand and helps him inside.



Lolo has always done the bike-riding instruction in the family, but not for the twins. That was one more thing that changed.

Last summer, Lolo and Papi called me over to the porch. They'd been watching the twins ride the path around Las Casitas, wobbling on their uneven training wheels that were already worn thin.

"I think you're the bike expert around here now," Papi told me. "Plus, you're the oldest kid at home. It's time to get those guys on two wheels."

At first the twins balked. Lolo helped cheer them on, but it was me who ran alongside them instead of Lolo. It was me who let go and picked them up when they crashed. After they got the hang of it, we all ate paletas together to celebrate, the way Roli and I did when we learned. I was happy for them, I guess. And I was proud that I'd done it. But it wasn't really the same as when Lolo was in charge.

The twins are pretty good on their two-wheelers now, if I do say so myself. The park is only a few blocks away, so it isn't too far for the twins to ride, either. It's nothing fancy like Sugar Sand Park in Boca, where we took them on their birthday last year to ride the carousel until they were dizzy. But at least we can bike here on our own when we want to get out of our yard. When Lolo used to come,

he'd bring a big bag of stale bread to feed the Muscovy ducks, even though the sign says not to. But it's been a while since he's felt strong enough to walk here. And now there's a Suárez rule that there has to be another adult with us, too. No one—not Mami, Papi, Abuela, *or* Tía—ever says yes to him going out with us by himself anymore.

A few kids are already here, hanging out on the benches near the kiddie basketball courts when we get there. They're from the neighborhood, but we're not really friends except to say hi. I don't know when it happened, but I've basically become a stranger to the kids around here. It started when Mami and Papi decided a few years ago that Roli and I needed the “wonderful educational opportunity” that Seaward Pines Academy offered in Palm Beach. So, I don't know their teachers or their mascot or anything about them now. Today I only recognize one little kid in the group—the girl in a thin windbreaker. I think she dances at the after-school center where Tía teaches.

I wave as I ride by. My bike's looking sharp as always, and they stare, which sort of makes me feel worse. At Seaward, I'd love it if kids stared at my ride, but the truth is their bikes are better than mine. Whenever I ride around here, though, someone compliments me on my bike or else they just watch me—like now. I try not to look like

I'm showing off because their bikes are mostly rusted from the salt air like my old one. Papi is always telling me to lock up my bike in the shed to keep it nice, but I still forget all the time.

I lead us all to the banyan tree on the other side of the path and park my bike.

"Let's race," Tomás says to Axel.

"Wait." I channel my new-oldest-kid-in-the-family mojo. "Stay away from the canal and ride where I can see you," I tell them.

Axel sticks his tongue out.

"I mean it."

When they take off, I watch for a minute to make sure they're doing what I said. Then Lena and I get to work on the important stuff.

"Watch first. It's pretty simple," Lena says.

She starts off on her scooter and glides smoothly along the path like she's surfing. Then she turns back toward me and pushes a few times to gain speed. Just when it looks like she's going to ram into me, she shoves her weight back, and a sweet stream of sparks flies off the back of the metal board like a meteor shower. She's right. It's almost like Jake Rodrigo when he hovers over an intergalactic criminal he's about to arrest.

"Sweet," I say. "Let me try."

I put my right foot where Lena says and push off. At first, I'm fine, but when I try to spark the brakes, I wobble and have to hop off.

"You're wiggling the handlebars," Lena calls from where she's standing. "Keep them straight, and relax your shoulders and hands."

I try again and after only one minor wobble, I'm zooming along. *High command to Captain Rodrigo*, I say to myself. *Come in, do you read me?*

Is it dumb to pretend when you're twelve? Does anybody still do that? I push and push as I steer back to Lena, imagining that I'm coasting along with Jake Rodrigo as his second-in-command. When I'm a few feet away from her, I lean back on the brake as hard as I can, just like she did. Sparks fly, and it looks like fire is streaming off the board.

"You're a beast," Lena says, grinning.

"I want another try!"

And so it goes. I don't know how long we take turns on the scooter after that. But the fun doesn't last. A bloodcurdling scream makes us turn.

It's Axel.

He's on the other side of the bike path, howling on the ground. He and Tomás have somehow both wiped out on their bikes.

I take off on foot, and Lena follows me on her scooter. By the time we reach them, Axel's face is covered in blood. Bright red streams drip from his mouth and onto his shirt. He's got a big scrape on his chin, too, and it's filled with dirt and pebbles that are going to hurt to pick clean. A big bump is rising along his cheek. Tomás looks scared, but at least he's not hurt.

My heart pounds in my chest. Blood always makes me feel faint. When kids at school get nosebleeds, I get a watery mouth and buzzy ears. At home, it's Mami who patches people up with her first-aid kit.

"What happened?" I ask, trying to look away.

But Axel can't hear me over his own screams. He slaps at my hand as I try to unclip his helmet and spits a clump of blood on the ground near my shoes. "Stop swatting at me!" I say as he bawls. "I have to look."

Lena checks out Tomás's hands and squirts water on them to wipe them clean. "Not a scratch," she says. "But I think I see what happened." She points to his handlebars, where the twins have attached their bikes using the sleeves of their jackets.

"Were you playing rancheros again?" she asks.

I look over at the evidence, exasperated. "What did I tell you about pretending to calf rope on bikes?" I yell.

Axel howls even louder. Clearly, I'm not the calming

influence that Mami is in an emergency. I take a deep breath, trying to think.

Then I spot something on the ground where Axel spit. It's a bloody incisor.

"Look, Axel. Your tooth came out when you fell." I pick it up off the ground to show him.

His chest is still heaving with hiccups, but he quiets a bit. He moves his tongue in the now-empty space.

"The Tooth Rat will come," says Lena. "You'll get money."

He's trying to calm down, but his eyes are red, and his lip is swelling larger by the second. "Ratoncito Pérez?" he says between spasms.

"I think so," she says, giving me a careful look to be sure. Her family's from the Philippines, like Lolo's father was. Pérez is just called the Tooth Rat there.

"Of *course*, Ratoncito Pérez," I say. It's amazing how fast you have to think when it comes to keeping up with all the stories for these two. I've had to explain that the Tooth Fairy, the Tooth Rat, and Ratoncito Pérez are all distant cousins who collect teeth as a team. Don't even get me started on how Santa Claus and the Three Wise Men hang out.

"He'll definitely come tonight," I say, "but only if you

stop crying. His ears are very delicate. Loud noises scare him.”

“Will he leave me something, too?” Tomás asks.

“Did *you* lose another tooth?” I ask.

He bares his teeth, but his pearly whites are all where they belong.

“Sorry, Tomás. You already got paid for your tooth when you lost it last year, remember? Pérez has strict rules.”

Instantly, I see I’ve said the wrong thing. His lip starts to quiver, and he kicks a few pebbles at Axel.

“That’s not fair,” he says.

“No kicking,” I say.

“No fair!” he says again, kicking harder. And then, he spits at my feet.

“What do you want, Tomás?” I snap. “I could loosen a few of your choppers right here and now, if you like!”

“Merci,” Lena says.

I take a deep breath, the way I’m supposed to when I want to strangle one of them. I’m not calm the way Lena always is. I’m not good with little kids like Hannah. I’m just fed up. This is when I hate being the new oldest kid in our house. How am I supposed to know what to do?

“We have to fix Axel’s busted chin, Tomás,” I say. “Ratoncito Pérez won’t like it if we leave him here bleeding.”

He scowls at me, but then Lena asks him to help her untangle the jackets from the bikes. “Let’s round up the ponies before they get away,” she says. I get Axel to his feet and prop him on the scooter, still whimpering. Then I go fetch my bike.

The walk home feels like a death march. All that’s missing is that funeral doom music by Chopin that we learned in band. Axel’s chin has ballooned. Tomás won’t quit whining. I have a big bloodstain on the only sweatshirt that still fits me.

Just wait until Abuela sees this.

CHAPTER 8

MY EARS ARE STILL RINGING.

Abuela yelled at everybody in the whole world. Me, for not watching the twins the way I was supposed to. Mami, for saying yes to letting me go to the park. Tía Inés, for working too many hours again. Even Lolo, for clapping when Axel showed him the empty spot where his tooth was. She grumbled all through dinner until Papi finally told her that going on like that was bad for everybody's digestion, especially Lolo's. "¡Basta, Mamá!" he said. "You want us all to get sick?"

Now, all these hours later, Tía Inés stares miserably into the water that's swirling in the foot spa she borrowed from Mami. If she'd been home, none of this would have

happened. I don't want to mention it, though, because Tía's toes look like Vienna sausages, and she has another long shift tomorrow.

"Maybe Abuela is right about your long hours," I tell her. "Why don't you look for another job? Like, maybe you can become a stuntwoman in Hollywood or something."

"Too dull," Tía says, smiling.

"I'm serious. What did you want to do before you worked at the bakery?"

Tía stares into the water and shakes her head. "Ay, mi amor, that was a very long time ago," she says. "I was a kid then. What did I know?"

"Kids know plenty, but whatever," I say. Does growing older kill dreams or what? I mean, I want to take over Papi's company one day. I hope I don't stop wanting that when I'm Tía's age. I can't even imagine such a thing.

She flips off the switch and sighs as the water stills. "I'd better say good night to the boys and tuck them in."

It's going to be another long night for me. Since the twins can't wake up alone, they sleep here when Tía works the early shift. Lately, that's been a lot. If I'm not careful, they're going to think Roli's old bed is theirs or, worse, that they share a room with me. ¡Dios nos ampare!

I check over my shoulder to see if they're still in the