



Merci Suárez

PLAYS IT COOL

MEG MEDINA

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

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A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

TO THE READERS WHO HAVE FOLLOWED
MERCİ FROM THE START

CHAPTER 1

“SHUT THAT SCREEN DOOR, Merci! You’re letting in mosquitoes!”

Mami’s sharp voice makes me jump as Tuerto dashes between my legs. He doesn’t even stop for a chin scratch in his race to escape the heat.

It’s early, but Mami’s already in her scrubs for work, though she’s still padding in bedroom slippers and a sloppy ponytail. Her eyebrows aren’t drawn in yet, either.

“Sorry. I was just letting him in before he got too loud,” I say, swatting at the half dozen bloodsuckers that are now darting around the kitchen.

The sun was barely up when I heard the meows. They echoed through our backyards, sounding like one of those

spirits that Abuela warns about—a tátara-something-or-other buried back in Cuba who gets testy if they think they've been forgotten by their descendants.

Anyway, when I flipped on the light, I found Tuerto glaring at me from outside, his front claws clinging high and wide against the screen like he was the victim of a stickup.

“Did that cat shred the mesh again?” Mami asks, exasperated. “Your father just fixed it last week.”

“No.” I move my body to hide the new tear near the seam. She’s not above making me pay for the repair. But can I help it if our cat is a genius? He’s learned to yowl and shake the door to let us know he wants to come in. I’ve taken videos of him doing that trick because, one, my friend Wilson and I like trading funny cat videos when we’re bored, and two, while it may be lousy door manners, we’ve seen pets on *Those Awesome Animals* on TV win the \$5,000 prize for less. Maybe we’ll get lucky.

“And anyway, you can’t blame Tuerto for wanting to come in from the heat, can you? He’s wearing a fur coat, you know, and it’s his nature to survive.” I motion at the thermometer we keep hanging on the patio. The needle is pointing at the red numbers. “It’s already ninety degrees!”

It’s the best defense I can think of, though I hope she doesn’t point out other less flattering parts of Tuerto’s

nature, namely that he's a heartless murderer. He kills everything: birds, mice, voles, lizards—even baby possums—and leaves them as grisly presents. I think back to the first time Tuerto left us a dead sparrow in Lolo's garden. I was so angry at Tuerto for killing that pretty bird. "We feed Tuerto!" I cried. "He doesn't need to kill things." But Lolo just cradled the little body in his palm and helped me bury it so its spirit could live in the flowers. "There's no stopping Mother Nature in the end, preciosa," he told me, though we tied a silver warning bell to Tuerto's collar after that.

Mami sighs and yanks the chain for the ceiling fan, trying to circulate the air-conditioning that never quite keeps up with Florida in July.

"I suppose you're right about the heat," she mutters. Then she reaches under the chipped saltshaker on the kitchen table and hands over today's List of Doom.

I try not to look bitter as I review my list of chores. I should be with Papi and Simón this morning, way out past the cane fields in the Glades. If they finish that job early, they're planning to fish on Lake Okeechobee for a little while.

Mami, however, had other ideas for my time and ruined the fun. She says chores build character.

Which is porquería.

“You have to clean your room today,” she tells me, as if I can’t read her list myself. “It’s a mess. Tuerto is nesting in sweaty underwear.”

“It’s mostly Roli’s,” I say. “Go see for yourself—if you dare.” It requires the moves of a ninja just to get past our door with Roli’s boxes from college all over the room. He hasn’t unpacked from when he came home in May.

Naturally, she ignores this. “Let him sleep,” she says.

Roli worked the graveyard shift at Walgreens again last night, so he’s out cold, snoring como si nada on the other side of the curtain that divides our room.

Mami loads the percolator with El Pico and lights the flame. “You have your summer reading, too. Don’t forget. There’s only a couple of weeks left before school starts.”

From the corner of my eye, I see the incriminating stack of library books sitting on the shelf near the back door exactly where I left them three weeks ago. I read the business book (my free choice) in two days, but I haven’t even started the other two, mostly on principle. Why should I do homework for a teacher I haven’t even met? But the not-so-secret faculty motto at Seaward Pines Academy is apparently *Work ’em till their eyes bleed*.

“It’s kind of hard to read if I have all these other chores, too,” I say. “Besides, is summer reading even legal to assign during an official vacation period?”

“Legal?”

I grab my phone from the charging station and type the word *vacation* into the dictionary. “It says right here: ‘Vacation: An extended period of leisure and recreation.’” I give her a knowing look. “We’d never get away with this kind of infringement on an employee’s personal time in the business world.” I should know since I am currently writing the Sol Painting, Inc., employee handbook for Papi. “In fact, I’m pretty sure my rights are being violated. I may have a case here.”

“Only if you mean a case of poor planning,” Mami says. “We’ve been over this, Merci. Reading is recreational.”

I give her a look. “Not with *those* books.”

“How would you know if you haven’t started them?” She peers out the kitchen window toward Abuela’s house, where the lights are on. There’s a small flash of worry in her face.

“What?” I say, walking over. The summer has been tough on my grandparents, especially Lolo. The heat seems to have melted his mind like butter in a pan—and *that* has everyone around here on edge. His new medicines were supposed to help with that, but if anything, he seems worse.

“Nada,” she tells me, although I’m not sure whether to believe her. “It just looks like they’re up already. Check in

with Abuela before you get started. She might need you to watch Lolo while she showers this morning.”

I try not to make a face at her. I hate when she calls it “watching Lolo.” It’s not like he’s a baby, or worse, like the twins, who are every babysitter’s nightmare. Lolo has always liked to walk the neighborhood, though every once in a while now, he forgets where he is, which makes Abuela jumpy. What is that like? I wonder. To suddenly not know your own block or recognize our houses or, on some days, even know your own name?

Anyway, I try not to think about that too much. And I don’t mind taking walks with Lolo, either, even if we’re moving slower these days. He’s quiet, but I can still tell Lolo anything I want and be 100 percent sure that he won’t tell anybody else.

Mami shakes a box of bran flakes into a chipped bowl. “You want some of this?”

It looks like a stack of bark shavings. “No, thank you,” I say, holding up my hand. “That stuff tastes like Styrofoam.”

She shrugs and pours milk over her cereal. “It also keeps the digestive tract moving,” she says. “I noticed you took a long time in the bathroom yesterday.”

I give her an icy stare and head to the refrigerator. It’s bad enough that my screen time is closely monitored,

that I'm required to store my phone in the kitchen overnight, that I have to do chores during my vacation. Now my bowel habits are being surveilled, too? Prison inmates probably have more privacy.

The cool blast from the freezer soothes me when I yank it open. I pull out the last two packets of blueberry toaster waffles I hid at the very back. At least Roli hasn't devoured these yet. Maybe he read the sticky note that I taped on the box, the one with the skull and crossbones I drew: *Hands off the stash, Bro*. These waffles are Lolo's favorite, and mine, too, even though Mami and Abuela claim they're not "real food."

"Where are you going?" Mami says as I head past her and down the hall with my breakfast.

"To attend to my digestive tract," I say, trying not to sound too snarky. "And then to check on Abuela."

CHAPTER 2

IT'S BEEN WEEKS SINCE I've seen anybody from Seaward Pines. Once summer started, we all went our own ways. Wilson spends all of July with his dad and cousins in New Orleans. Hannah is away at a prisoner-type summer camp in Georgia, where they don't allow phones except for calling home once a week. Lena and her dad left on an RV trip to the Badlands in South Dakota to photograph bison. So, it's been lonely. I'd even be happy to hear from Edna Santos, who can pluck my last nerve at times, but she's been away, too, sunbathing on some island near Boston called Nantucket.

And where have I been? Right here at Las Casitas, of course, same as every single summer since I've been alive.

I haven't even had a chance to hang out with Roli much since he's working all the time. If he's not at the pharmacy, he's helping Papi.

I pull open Abuela's screen door and step into her kitchen, which is just as hot and steamy as ours. She's at the stove, scrambling eggs and frying ham steaks, and the smell is heavenly. The house is already loud, too, with cartoons blaring from the TV and the crash of dominoes coming from the next room, where Axel and Tomás, still in their pajamas, are hanging out with Lolo. They hate to wait for Tía to wake up and make them breakfast, so sometimes they ditch their place and come next door to Abuela and Lolo's instead.

"You're early!" Abuela says, glancing at the clock on the wall. It's 7:45 a.m. "Lolo and the boys haven't eaten yet."

"I know, but I was up already, and I thought Lolo and I could take a walk before it gets even hotter out there."

She flips the sliced meat around in the frying pan with her long fork and gives me a stern look when she sees me put the frozen waffles I brought over in the toaster.

"You'll spoil his appetite," she says.

I press down the lever and watch the coils turn bright orange. "But he'll need more energy to take a walk with me, Abuela," I say. "It's just a pre-breakfast treat."

She *tsks* her tongue and slides the eggs and ham onto

dishes that she carries to the table. “Go get them while I rinse out these pans, then.”

I wait for the waffles to pop up and take them with me to the living room. Their scent of berries is irresistible.

“Breakfast is ready,” I say, making my way to Lolo’s chair. The twins have set up long, curving courses of dominoes that start at his feet and reach all the way around the coffee table. Abuela made this an electronics-free zone, except for TV, so they have to get old school and creative when they come here. Lolo and I used to play the same way when I was little, too. We called it Caracól because of the snail shape we set in motion when we made them collapse.

But nobody answers me. The twins are too busy, of course. And Lolo, I see now, is asleep in his chair despite the blaring TV. He’s been falling into lots of naps this summer. On the porch rocker. In his chair. I click off the remote and walk closer to wake him up with a whiff of blueberry.

“Lolo?” I say, louder. “I brought you something.”

I move the waffle under his nose, but he doesn’t stir. His hands have gone slack around the tin in his lap, and his chin hangs down to his chest. I shake him gently.

“Lolo, wake up.”

That’s when he keels to one side.

A chill rises along my back, and I drop the waffles. The air in the room seems to change around us instantly. The twins look up from their construction and stare. Tomás slides his two middle fingers into his mouth, a habit Tía has been trying to break, now that they're almost seven. Axel wraps his arms around his knees, watching.

I take a tiny step back, knocking over their fichas. The *click-click-clack* of the chain reaction sounds loud in my ears as I wait for Lolo to wake up. *Please*, I think. *Please wake up*.

But something is very wrong.

“Abuela!” I manage to call out. “Come quick!”

The seconds drag through mud as I listen to the slap of her chancletas getting closer. She comes to the doorway drying her hands on a dishrag, frowning the way she does when she has to break up another squabble between me and the twins.

“¿Qué hay? The breakfast is getting cold!” She looks around at the dominoes. “And who’s going to pick all this up?”

I stand next to Lolo, my tongue thick in my mouth. Though a million words are running through my mind, none cuts loose. All I can do is point at Lolo in his chair.

In a flash, Abuela’s face changes. She moves toward us faster than I’ve seen her go in a long while. “¡Viejol!” she

says as she reaches his chair. “¿Qué te pasa?” She swats her dishrag at him, tries to shake Lolo awake, like he’s having a bad dream. His eyes flutter open, but he doesn’t seem to see her. Instead, a long string of saliva drips from the corner of his mouth. “Leopoldo!” She says it louder, firmer, like he’s just needing some discipline.

He still doesn’t answer. His skin looks gray, like recycled paper.

“Quickly, Merci.” Her breath is raspy and heavy, the same huffing sound she makes after she finishes bathing him, getting him dressed, tying his shoes. “Find your mother,” she tells me, “or Inés—anyone!”

Tomás’s and Axel’s eyes are wide and scared. I can’t leave them here to see this, so I drag them off to the kitchen.

“What’s wrong with Lolo?” Tomás asks.

“Why won’t he wake up?” Axel says.

“I don’t know, but I’m getting help,” I tell them. “Sit down and don’t move.”

Then I’m out the back door, racing along toward my aunt’s house.

I poke my head in her side door and call out. “Tía! Come quick! We need you!” I shout again, even louder. “Tía!”

The shower is running. I don’t wait.

I do an about-face and tear toward my house at the other end of the path, just as Mami's car lumbers down the driveway toward the street. I run toward her, waving my arms.

"STOP!" I shout at the top of my voice when I reach the car. I bang my fists down hard on her trunk, and the sound makes her slam on the brakes.

Mami glares at me in the rearview mirror and rolls down her window.

"What —"

"It's an emergency," I say, trying to catch my breath in gulps. "Lolo."

She turns off the car and leaves it right where it is as she grabs her medical bag from the back seat. Then we run back along the path. By now, Tía Inés is out in the yard, too, tying a robe around her waist, her hair dripping as she hurries toward us.

"I heard yelling," she says, clutching the lapels to cover herself.

"Your father," Mami tells her without stopping.

The twins are still at the kitchen table when we get there. They make a beeline for Tía as soon as they see her, trying to wrap themselves around her waist.

"Lolo won't talk," Axel tells her.

"His eyes look weird," Tomás adds.

“Shh,” she tells them, stopping at the threshold with me as Mami charges in.

Mami lowers Lolo to the floor. Then she grabs a stethoscope from her bag and listens to his heart. She takes his pulse, then starts on his blood pressure.

“How long has he been like this?” she asks as she waits for the reading.

Abuela looks to me.

How long? I shake my head.

“Call 911, just in case,” Mami tells Tía quietly. She slides a cushion from the sofa under Lolo’s legs and turns to me. “I need a cold washcloth.”

I grab Abuela’s dishrag from the floor and run to the bathroom to soak it under the stream of water, cursing the fact that it never gets too cold. When I come back, I press it against Lolo’s forehead myself, exactly the way Mami shows me. He still looks blank and pale, but he’s blinking now, alive. I slip my hand into his and give it three small squeezes, the signal he used to give me whenever I felt shy about trying something new. *It’s OK. You can do this, preciosa.*

Meanwhile, Tía is on the phone giving information to 911. It feels like a long time, but eventually sirens grow louder from somewhere in the distance.

And then everything happens choppy and fast.

The sound of tires on our gravel as the ambulance

maneuvers around Mami's abandoned car. Rescue workers in gear that makes them look too big for the room, like the wrong-size dolls in a playhouse. I drop Lolo's hand as Tía pulls me back toward the kitchen.

Roli barrels in the back door, barefoot and shirtless, his hair a mess. "What's going on?" he says. "Why are the EMTs here?"

Two workers crouch on the ground, where they're strapping Lolo onto a flat gurney. A few seconds later, they lift the steel legs that unfold like that scissor lift Papi sometimes uses when he has to paint a high spot. And then Lolo gets wheeled away.

The ambulance pulls out of our driveway, sirens wailing, as I stare after it from the open door. A man walking his dog has stopped to gawk. Across the street, a few of the condo residents are out on their balconies looking into our yard, too.

"Roli, throw some clothes on while I get the car." Mami says. She turns to Abuela. "Gather the medical records from his last checkup at the doctor—and get the current medicine list, too. They were in that yellow envelope, *acuérdate*." She talks over my head as she reaches the door. "Inés, meet me at JFK when you're dressed. And call Enrique, please. Tell him what's happened."

"I'll call Papi," I say, interrupting.

Mami glances at me and then at Tía, who's still holding her robe closed, the twins clinging to her waist. She nods at me. "Tell him JFK Medical Center. Will you remember?"

"Yes," I say.

"JFK," she repeats, like I'm a baby. "He should meet us there."

"I heard you, Mami," I snap.

"Come on, boys," Tía says. "We need to get dressed. Hurry."

Everyone scatters.

I stare at the dirty footprints from the rescue workers' boots on Abuela's normally spotless tile floor. Blueberry waffles have been ground to pieces everywhere.

Outside, Mami starts her car, beeps for my brother to hurry. I can hear Abuela in her bedroom, opening the sticky drawer where she keeps her important papers.

My brain feels flooded, like I'm moving underwater as I walk to the kitchen and sit down at the table. The yolks from Lolo's uneaten breakfast are orange and congealed now. The smell of cold eggs makes me light-headed.

I manage to tap Papi's contact with shaky fingers.

He answers on the fifth ring.

"¿Y esto? A call instead of a text?" Papi says. "I'll bet you butt-dialed me by mistake!"

I stare out at the mess of dominoes on the living room floor. My throat has closed into a fist.

“¿Me oyes? Do we have a bad connection?” His voice gets serious. “Merci? Is there something wrong?”

“You have to come home,” I blurt out.

And that’s all I can manage before I finally start to cry.

CHAPTER 3

WEIRD FACT: I'VE NEVER really been alone at Las Casitas. There's always an adult around here, even if I can't see them. Abuela's sewing machine makes that rapid-fire sound that lets you know she's stitching something in her back room. Tía pulls the squeaky laundry line as she pins our clothes on, tugging the next length with her fast rhythm. Mami's voice carries too loud when she's talking on the phone to her patients, especially the ones who are hard of hearing. Papi's van squeaks when it lumbers up the driveway at the end of the day.

I used to hear Lolo, too, mostly his humming as he weeded the garden or his laughter when I told him a funny story from school. I heard those silly arguments

he used to have with Abuela about getting too much sun, too. But lately, it's the rattling of his walker that tells me he's near; even with those tennis balls at the bottom of the legs to help it slide, you can still hear it clicking as he slowly makes his way around. I don't like his new sound as much. It tells me it's the new Lolo, the unsteady one, the one who can't remember, Lolo with Alzheimer's—not the Lolo I miss.

But now, I wish I could hear any of those sounds, especially Lolo's walker. The quiet feels all wrong. It's been five hours and twenty-six minutes since everyone left me here with Axel and Tomás, and as each hour ticks by, Las Casitas feels lonelier, like there aren't enough of us to fill the space the right way. There's only the engine sounds of the twins playing an old race-car video game on Roli's tablet, even though they're not supposed to touch his things. I gave them permission, though. How else could I keep them from asking their million questions? *Why did he look like that? Why can't he talk? Why is he at the hospital? When is he coming back?* And the worst one, *Is Lolo going to die?* Which made me say, "God, Axel, shut up already."

I know everything living dies one day. I'm not stupid. But I can't bring myself to think that might mean Lolo, too. Just thinking about him dying scares me, not to mention how mad it makes me at God, if that's who's making

the arrangements. Why does somebody good like Lolo have to die when there are plenty of horrible people in the world who could go instead? People who make wars or burn villages down or plant bombs.

It's totally unfair.

I'm just settling into the book I've been trying to read when my phone finally buzzes. The sound makes me jump so hard that I drop it. I've called Mami five times today, and each time it has gone to voice mail, so I've hung up. Who leaves messages anymore? Roli and Tía have been ghosting me, too, ignoring my texts. Is it because Lolo has died? I've typed the question and deleted it half a dozen times.

But it's not anybody from my family. Instead, it's Wilson Bellevue from school, who is still in New Orleans.

Check it. Albalacerdu on the loose!

He's sent along a picture of himself with two younger boys—his cousins, I guess—standing near an enormous white alligator. Wilson is mugging for the camera, making a fake-scared face.

I can't help smiling. Albalacerdu is a new character that will be introduced to the Iguanador Nation universe this fall, according to *Fleet*, the newsletter we both get as members of the Iguanador Nation Fan Club. Albalacerdu stands twelve feet tall and is a hybrid human and albino

reptile, who eats live pigs and other livestock to survive. (This does not earn him friends.) For now, no one knows for sure whether he's going to be an ally to Captain Jake Rodrigo—despite his wacko digestive needs—or just another villain mucking up the galaxies. Wilson and I like to trade theories and make bets. I smell a bad guy.

I stare at Wilson's goofy expression and get that weird tingle in my stomach. I miss him, although I'd never say so, of course. I mean, who else would admit to being in the fan club except him? We both know it's kind of corny, but we still like it. Plus, he's fun to hang out with, even long distance the way we do. Twice this summer, we plugged into our favorite movies in the series and texted comments to each other while we watched at the same time. Nobody can spot clues for what might be a plot spin-off like Wilson.

I take a deep breath, my thumbs paused over my keypad. Should I tell him about Lolo? I want to, but maybe that's just an awkward downer, especially since it looks like he's having so much fun. What kind of pal throws a wet blanket on your good time? Maybe I'll tell him later.

Cool. Glad you didn't get eaten, especially acting like such a ham.

Ha ha. Still alive. And coming back to Florida next week. What's up there?

My stomach zings again, and not just because it's going to be nice to have him back around. What do I say? *Lolo got rushed to the emergency room this morning.* And then, what I don't want to tell him. *I'm scared.*

But just then, I hear a car coming up the driveway. I hurry up and attach a thumbs-up icon to his message.

Gotta run! More later.

I pocket my phone and rush to the bedroom window. Roli is behind the wheel of Mami's car. No one else is with him.

"Quick, shut that game off and go to the kitchen," I tell the twins, who barely react.

"NOW!"

They get off the bed and toss the tablet back inside one of Roli's boxes. Then we dash through the house. Luckily, it still takes Roli a while to park a car properly, even if it's just pulling straight into the driveway. I wait patiently as he tries not to sideswipe the carport posts again like he did the last time he drove Mami's car. You can still see her car's paint on them. When he finally stops the engine, I call out, "What's going on? Is Lolo OK?"

Roli climbs out, looking just as disheveled as he did when he drove off with Mami all those hours ago.

"Well?" I ask again as I trail him into the kitchen. The

twins look up innocently from the table, pretending to read Papi's newspaper. Geez. Not suspicious at all.

Roli narrows his eyes for a second, but then he turns to the sink. "From the evidence, they've concluded that he experienced a syncope," he says.

"What do you mean he peed?" Tomás asks, appalled.

"I said *syncope*," Roli says.

I shake my head. A year away at college has crammed even bigger words in that science brain of his. It's exasperating.

"Speak plain, will you?" I say.

Roli turns on the faucet and washes his hands to his elbows, even scrubbing his nails with the vegetable brush like a surgeon. The twins watch, transfixed, as his arm hair turns bubbly.

"In a word," he says, "Lolo fainted."

In my mind, I can still see Lolo limp in his chair, the saliva in long drips from his mouth. I shudder to clear it away. Not even Abuela has ever mentioned sitting in a recliner as a fainting hazard—and she frets about every possible combination of health dangers, including death by sudden fright and electrocution by toothbrush.

"That can't be right," I say. "He was just sitting in a chair."

“Being seated has nothing to do with it. Syncope is very common in older adults, especially in cases of polypharmacy.” He dries his hands and starts down the hall to our room.

I follow close behind. “Poly-*what*?” I ask.

He pulls off his sweaty shirt and tosses it near our nightstand, along with the rest of his smelly laundry. “Don’t they teach prefixes anymore? Poly means many . . . as in polymeric, polyandrous, polyethylene—”

“ROLI!”

He sighs. “The mix of *many* medicines he’s taking,” he says. “Sometimes drugs interact differently in older people, and they cause trouble instead of helping.”

“Then why bother taking them?” I think of Lolo’s pillbox that Tía fills with medicines every week, each compartment marked for the day of the week and the time of day he’s supposed to take it. There’s a blue-and-yellow tablet in the morning. A pink one with an *M* on it in the afternoon. Two white ones at bedtime. And of course, all his vitamins. I knew all those pills he takes were creepy. If it’s not fruity and chewable, it’s suspect in my book.

Roli grabs the curtain that divides our room. “Benefits versus risks. It’s always a balance in medical treatments. Now, do you mind? I have to get to work by four.”

“Again?” I say. Roli’s been working nonstop this

summer at the twenty-four-hour Walgreens, where he rings up customers and announces the bonus points coupons over the loudspeaker in English and español. The job he really wanted was as a research assistant on campus this summer, but he didn't get it. Believe it or not, the professor passed on his talents. The position went to a graduate student with an even bigger brain than Roli's, apparently, which is hard to imagine. Honestly, I think Roli is in shock. He's not built for failures like I am; they're more or less a feature of my daily life. Still, I feel sorry for him. He needs the money for school—*bad*. He found out that his college scholarship was going to be a lot smaller this year, and Mami and Papi don't have much spare cash to help. Now he's going to have to take a semester off and take classes at the community college so he doesn't fall too far behind. Plenty of people get degrees that way, but Roli had other ideas for himself.

We all tried to cheer him up.

Abuela said, "Qué bueno, you'll be able to eat real food again and won't look so skinny anymore!"

Papi said, "I can really use your help with some jobs in the summer and fall."

Mami reminded him that a semester goes fast and that working in a drugstore would give him some real-life experience with people and medicine.

Roli didn't argue, but you could tell he was, and is, pretty bummed. He wanted more than telling people what aisle they could find the aspirin in.

He doesn't answer me from behind the curtain, so I decide to retreat to my side of our room. I'm almost to my bed when I accidentally step on a charger he's left lying around. The metal prongs get jammed between my toes, slicing off some skin.

The pain is immediate and so is my scream. "Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

"What's the matter?" Roli peeks around the curtain to see what's wrong.

My little toe is already ballooning as blood pools around the cuticle. Now it's me who's going to faint. I hate blood, mine or anybody else's. "I've been amputated!"

I hop the rest of the way to my bed to assess the full damage.

"Is my toe hanging off? Can you see bone?"

"Wash that scrape out and get ice for your toe," he says after a quick look. "And watch my stuff, please. It's delicate." Then he disappears behind the curtain again to finish changing.

"*That's* your medical advice? What kind of doctor are you going to be?"

“Probably a very old one by the time I’m through,” he mutters.

I lie back on my bed, trying to bend my crushed toe. Sharing a room with Roli again is a challenge. For starters, he’s blind to the blue painter’s tape that I ran down the middle of our room to mark our sides. Still, I have to admit that I’m a little glad he’s staying home, even though it’s not what he wants.

Anyway, I’m not crossing the land mines again to get ice. Instead, I reach for the jumbo-size Iguanador Nation tumbler I keep on my nightstand for when I get thirsty at night. There’s still plenty of water in it, so I put it on the floor. Then I point my toes like a ballerina and slide my foot in carefully. I close my eyes as soon as I notice the water getting pink.

When the sting starts to subside, I call out to him. “Is it the all-night shift?” I ask. When he works overnight, it means no snoring to bug me, but also no Roli to keep me company. I like when I have somebody to talk to if I can’t sleep. I can ask him stuff about Lolo and he tells me the truth.

He sighs. “That’s tomorrow.”

I don’t ask any more. He’s prickly these days since all his friends are getting ready to go back to campus. They

have parents who can pay for their dorms and food and all the things they need, I guess.

He throws open the curtain and adjusts the plastic name tag on his work shirt.

“Did the twins eat?” Axel and Tomás are still in the kitchen, but we can hear them from here, opening and closing cupboards.

“They had chips and stuff,” I mumble, checking my toe. I guess I just forgot the sustenance part. I don’t mention that they never ate their breakfast either.

“Weakening those two through starvation, are we?” he says. “Feed them something, Merci.”

“But I’m injured.” I pull my dripping foot from the cup as proof.

“Uh-huh.” He glances at the box nearest his bed and frowns. “And don’t let them play with my stuff unless I’m here. I thought we agreed.” He grabs his tablet and moves it to a different box.

Then he walks to the door.

“When is everybody coming home?” I ask.

“When the doctor signs discharge papers to spring him.”

“So, he’s going to be all right?”

He turns to me before he leaves. The shirt is too boxy on him somehow. His name tag is crooked, too. “You know he’s not all right, Merci,” he says quietly.

I think about our recent nighttime talks about body systems, about how the heart, brain, and lungs are all connected. About how things break down until . . .

“For now?” I insist. “It’s not all broken right now, right?”

He sighs and gives me one of those long looks.

“Roli?”

“Right.” He motions to the kitchen with his chin. “Now, get those two some food before they decide to cook something for themselves and torch the place.”

Sadly, my only culinary expertise is for something called a Dog Cruncher, which Hannah and I invented last year in the cafeteria by accident, when she discovered that Justin Aldrich had crushed her bag of chips to powder when she wasn’t looking. Anyway, it’s a hot dog split down the middle and stuffed with half a bag of crushed potato chips and the contents of one ketchup packet. It’s scrumptious. So good, in fact, that Wilson and I even tried to sell a few at the school store last year. We would have made a killing, too, except Chef—who’s running a cafeteria monopoly—reported us to Miss McDaniels. She shut down DC Xpress in a flash, though not before she enjoyed one herself.

Anyway, I haven’t shared that particular treat at home. Mami only buys fake soy cylinders called Not Dogs, and

let's face it, the magic of a Dog Cruncher would be lost if we used those. So, I'm standing on one foot at the stove, figuring out how to make one last grilled cheese sandwich without burning the bread black, when the rest of our family finally comes home. The twins hear the cars first and shoot out the door, leaving their burnt sandwiches on the table.

Papi pulls up in the van, Lolo riding shotgun in the front seat, the way he used to when he still went along on jobs. Tía, Abuela, and Mami are following in Tía's car.

The twins sprint across the yard.

"Lolo!" they yell when they see him, awake and smiling.

"Take it easy, you two," Papi tells them as they clamor around the passenger side. "Give him some room to get out." He sets up Lolo's walker and opens the door for him. "Vamos, viejo," he says quietly. "Llegamos."

The twins crowd around anyway, ignoring most of what Papi said. Maybe relief is washing through them, the way it is for me.

"Roli said you synch-oh-peed," Axel tells Lolo.

Tomás nods in agreement and slides his hand into Lolo's. "We can finish Caracól."

"Sí, claro," Lolo tells them quietly.

I guess now isn't the time to explain that I put all the dominoes away this morning, even the ones that had scattered under the sofa and behind the planters.

"Tomorrow, muchachos," Papi says. "Lolo has to rest today. Doctor's orders. There's been a lot of excitement."

By now, Abuela and Tía have gotten out of their car, too. You'd think it was Abuela who fainted for how pale and frazzled she looks. She's holding another big envelope and using it as a fan. This one has a big JFK Medical Center logo in the middle.

"Come on, boys. Your tío's right," Tía says, walking over. "It's been a long day. We'll play tomorrow." She looks over her shoulder at me. "Thanks for watching them, Merci."

Then she reaches for Lolo and helps him to his feet.

Maybe it's my sore toe. Maybe it's the walker that's hard to work around. But I'm nervous as I step forward and slide my arms around his soft middle. I take a deep breath against his chest as I hug him. There's a faint smell of rubbing alcohol in his shirt that shouldn't be there. It's the scent of a doctor's office, of shots and scary needles. I listen there for his heartbeat and his breathing.

"You OK now, Lolo?" I whisper. *You scared me. I thought bad things.*

He takes my face in his hands and smiles at me. I know that look. It says that I'm the only girl, the nieta, the special one, la preciosa.

"Sí, claro," he repeats, and then he chuckles a little, although I don't know at what.

I hug him again and then watch him amble down the path between Tía and Abuela, the twins already racing ahead. Papi slips his arm over my shoulder as we turn to go, but it's not a comfort somehow. I want to shake him off along with this uneasy feeling that won't settle even though Lolo is home, right here in front of my eyes. *He is all right, just like Roli said*, I tell myself. He just fainted, that's all. A syncope.

"You OK?" Papi asks quietly.

"Fine," I lie. Nothing about today feels fine, though.

I slip away from Papi and go inside.

CHAPTER 4

WE DON'T OWN a swimming pool, like some kids at school. But that doesn't mean I don't ever go swimming. That's because Papi's friend Gustavo, who manages the condos across the street, lets us use theirs whenever we want. It's a trade-off for all the times Papi has painted vacant units over there for cheap. It's just a bean-shaped pool, and there's no diving allowed since it's only six feet at the deepest part, but it's better than roasting, especially on a day like today.

Hannah, Lena, and Edna are coming over at lunchtime, so I'm trying to hurry through my chores today. They're all finally home, so we're going to spend the whole day together catching up.

Mami went on overdrive with today's to-do list, but for once I'm trying to get to everything so the place looks as good as possible. Hannah and Lena have visited plenty of times, so I'm not worried about them. But this is the first time Edna is coming over to hang out, and it makes me nervous. Edna has always been the kind of girl who notices everything you don't want her to, and there's plenty of that around here. Toys in the yard. Ladders with broken rungs, old paint buckets. Lolo and Abuela's garden in dusty ruins. I've never been to Edna's house, but I can pretty much imagine it. She has her own room with matching everything, I'll bet, not to mention Diamond, her miniature terrier that wears nail polish.

Anyway, so far, I've wiped down the kitchen counters with bleach, brought in Abuela and Lolo's mail, emptied the trash, and set out the recycling bin for pickup. But I still have a load of things left to do, like hose off these chairs and read a few more chapters from that infernal reading list before school starts next week. I swear, it's like being Cinderella, except without the fairy godmother to do me any favors.

I guess I can't really complain, though. Roli has an even worse job than I do—for once. Mami asked him to help Abuela bathe Lolo before he leaves for work. He told

me last night after he got home. We were talking in the dark, the way we sometimes do.

“The summer just keeps getting better,” he grumbled.

“God,” I said, staring up at our ceiling. “That means you’re going to have to see his privates. All wrinkled and stuff.”

“Thank you, Merci,” he said. “Just what I want to dream about.”

I’m wrestling the hose across the yard when Roli finally appears at our patio table wearing the gym shorts and T-shirt he slept in. Mami is long gone to see her new rehab patient, Papi’s out on a job, and Tía and the twins are at the dance studio, so it’s just the two of us. He pulls out a chair and hunches over his fried-egg sandwich as he scrolls through his phone. It takes him a few seconds to notice that I’m pointing the hose at him like a gun.

He stops chewing. “Don’t even think about it,” he says.

I hold my aim steady, two-handed. “Then move,” I say, not bothering with manners. “I have to wash the spiderwebs off the chairs before my friends get here, which is any minute.”

He scoops up his plate and stands just inside the door to watch me work.

But when I squeeze the grip, I get blasted in the face

with a spray instead. Sputtering, I drop the hose, water dripping off my glasses.

Roli lets out a snort.

My hair has puffed to enormous proportions in this humidity, and now I'm drenched. My temper boils over like rice out of a pot.

"It's not funny!"

"Oh, it absolutely is," he says, still laughing. He puts down his sandwich and walks over to inspect the nozzle. "Gimme that. I suspect sabotage."

"What do you mean?" I'm still dripping.

"Didn't you tell the twins they couldn't stay home to swim today? What did you expect?"

I think back to the morning guiltily. It's true. They asked and I said no because if the twins were there, they'd be hanging all over my friends, butting in and listening in on our conversations. Shouldn't I be able to have my friends all to myself?

He fastens the grip back on the metal threads and does a test squirt to make sure it's on right. "There you go."

Just then a shiny SUV comes up the driveway slowly. BTS's newest song is playing from inside. They're Hannah's current obsession.

"Oh no. They're here." I look like a swamp creature. The patio still needs to be hosed off. Dirty spiderwebs

dangle from the screen door and the chairs. “I’m not done with Mami’s dumb list.”

Roli heaves a sigh. “Go,” he says. “I got this.”

“You’re going to do chores for me?” I ask, suspicious. “What’s the catch?”

“They’re waiting,” he says.

“I owe you.” I turn to go and then hesitate. “I don’t suppose you’d like to read two novels and do a book report for each of them, too?”

He squirts a jet of water at my feet. “Get out of here before I change my mind,” he says.

He doesn’t have to tell me again. I run down the driveway to where Hannah, Lena, and Edna are climbing out of the back seat. Hannah is lugging a gigantic cooler with the lunch stuff she offered to bring. Lena has both their backpacks, one slung on each shoulder. Edna steps out and looks around, more or less like she’s landed on the moon. When Lena and Hannah see me, though, they drop everything, and the three of us run at each other, screaming for joy. Edna watches for a second before she saunters over, grinning.

Then there’s a weird moment when we all just stare at one another. How can we all look so different in just a few weeks? Edna is suntanned to a deeper brown and has her hair gathered in a slick ponytail. Lena is rocking red

cat-eye sunglasses, and there's new hair color in her spikes to match. She's wearing turquoise earrings, too. Hannah has gotten taller than us—by a lot.

“Snap!” I say. “Did they put you on a stretching rack at that camp?”

Hannah grins and waits patiently as Lena, Edna, and I run our fingers across the tops of our heads to see how tall we are in comparison to her. None of us reaches past the middle of Hannah's forehead now.

“You're a good height for modeling,” Edna says.

Mrs. Kim turns off the music and steps out of the car. She's in a linen blouse and perfectly pressed walking shorts.

“Hello, Merci,” she says. “How was your summer?”

I tug self-consciously on the wet shorts that are riding a little too high and pulling across these new hips I've gotten. “Fine, thanks,” I say, even though I know Mrs. Kim isn't really listening. She's too busy glancing around and politely snooping.

“Your parents are well?”

“Mami and Papi are at work already,” I tell her, offering up the intel I know she's after.

“Oh.” She darts a glance at Hannah, who I'm guessing didn't mention that my parents wouldn't be home today.

“My grandparents are here, though,” I say.

“Lolo!” Lena says. She really likes him. “Is he feeling better?”

I shift on my feet. “Yes, he’s fine.”

Mrs. Kim glances at their house. “That’s right. Hannah mentioned he’d been under the weather,” she says. “Such a lovely man.”

The thing is, everybody loves Lolo. Papi calls it “the Suárez man charm,” which Mami calls “the corny joke-telling gene.” I don’t know how much of it is left, though. Lolo has been quieter since he got back from the hospital. And though it’s been a week since his fainting spell, he still looks a little pale. I don’t want Mrs. Kim to see that. She might decide there are no competent adults here to watch us. So, to head her off, I point toward the backyard in desperation. “And my older brother is home until he goes to work later. You remember Roli? The genius?”

It’s a stretch, but having Roli around is usually the golden ticket for parents. Mrs. Kim is a tough case, though. She turns toward the patio and waves at Roli, who’s hosing off the table and chairs like a pro. I can see from her frown that she’s not entirely happy. Hannah’s mom is super cautious, especially about what she calls “teenage males,” which she puts in the same category as werewolves and other dangerous creatures. I guess that

includes Roli since he's not twenty yet. But what could *he* possibly do? Bore us to death with scientific notations? Besides, he's going to be busy bathing Lolo—not that I can tell her that.

"It's fine, Mom," Hannah says. "We all know how to swim. And I have my phone."

"I'm CPR certified," Edna adds. She's looking around, seeming kind of bored. "Since I was, like, ten."

Mrs. Kim seems unsure. "Well, why don't I at least drive you girls to the pool and get you settled in?" she says.

"Mom," Hannah whines. "I told you, it's right across the street. We can walk."

"That's true," I say.

"But it's so hot today," she says, pleasantly. "If I drive, you won't have to carry all these heavy coolers and bags in the heat."

We all know Mrs. Kim doesn't care one bit about us lugging stuff. How many times has she made us haul boxes for one of her PTA events? We're practically her pack mules. No, she wants to walk us over so she can scope out where we're going to hang out. She is no joke when it comes to keeping tabs on Hannah. I'm never sure what she's scared of since Hannah *never* gets in trouble on purpose. Still, Mrs. Kim always has to know the exact details about

where we're going, how long we'll be there, what we're going to do and all that. Even my parents think Mrs. Kim is overprotective—and that's saying something for people who consider sleepovers at a friend's house a risky activity.

Hannah gives us a shame-faced look, but then Edna pipes up.

"I'll take the ride. I mean, it is pretty steamy." She puts her sunglasses on top of her head to reveal what I hope is waterproof mascara.

Lena shrugs. "Besides, we'll be able to compare schedules faster." She reaches into one of the backpacks and pulls out her school envelope to tempt us. I look at Hannah and we break into a smile. Our schedules came this week, but we all promised not to open them until we were together so we could see what classes we share. Eighth grade, here we come!

"Then it's settled," Mrs. Kim says, turning to me again. "I'll wait in the car. She takes in my drenched shirt and frizzy hair. "Come find me when you get cleaned up."

Hannah looks like she wants the earth to swallow her up as her mom walks away.

"Will I ever breathe free?" she grumbles under her breath. Her shoulders slump her down almost to her old size.

“Probably not,” Edna says. Then she looks at me. “Pedal to the metal, Merci. I’m melting.”

“Wait here,” I tell them, and hurry inside to get my things.

A little while later, we’re at the Palm Villa condominium pool. I punch in the code and let us all through the pool gate, looking around in case any other residents are here. Gustavo always says we should say we’re visiting a relative if anybody asks.

Luckily, the coast is clear today.

I pick a spot at the best table under one of the palm trees and try not to think about what Edna is thinking as she looks around. Edna’s family lives up in Jupiter, and I know she has her own pool, her own room, her own everything. Hannah’s been there. She says when you visit Edna, you have to stop at a gate where a guy named Edmund takes down your license plate and calls the house to see if she’s expecting you—which Hannah’s mom loves for the safety aspect alone. I also hear that if you get bored at Edna’s pool, you can go to another pool, the one that the community shares. That one has an exercise studio, a hot tub, a ballroom (for parties), and even a tiki bar where you can get fruit, waters, or sodas—*for free*.

I'm still waiting for my invitation, but whatever.

Here, things are different, of course. Nobody is teaching Zumba to moms. Instead, the big game is shuffleboard, even though the courts are buckled and faded. The fiberglass furniture is chipped and unsteady, which is why, on gusty days, the umbrellas are the source of Abuela's dire warnings. She's sure they'll come loose and go off like giant discs to decapitate somebody.

Edna walks over to the clubhouse and cups her hands against the sliding glass doors to peer inside. Not much to see, I want to say. Just the exercise bikes that are older than we are and a few folding tables stacked against the wall. I hold my breath until she walks back to us. I've got to wonder why she agreed to come today when her pool options are so much nicer.

"Stay in the shade," Mrs. Kim tells Hannah as she presses the remote ignition to get her car started. Then she opens the squeaky gate to let herself out. "Reapply your sunscreen in an hour and keep that hat on in the water, too, Hannah Kim," she calls out. "You've cooked your skin quite enough at camp, and you don't need heat stroke, either."

Hannah doesn't look up from under the brim of her baseball cap. Her SPF 90 sunblock is already thick as caulking on her neck. I can smell it from here.

“Bye, Mom,” she says.

We all watch Mrs. Kim through the shrubs as she finally gets in her car and pulls away.

Hannah lets out a heavy sigh.

“What’s next for you?” Edna says as the car disappears around the corner. “Installing a locator chip under your skin?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Hannah says.

Edna reaches into her bag and pulls out a pack of gum that she holds out to each of us. “Are there rules about gum on the pool deck here?” She looks around at the globs of bird poop and everything else on the pavement. “I guess not.”

“Forget all that mom stuff!” Lena says, folding a stick of gum inside her mouth. “We’ve got more important things to do. Like figuring out our schedules!” She pulls us over to where she’s arranged four chaises, side by side. Edna frowns at the unsteady one with tiny mold stains on the straps. They’re my guests, so I take that one.

Then we all dig in our bags for our identical Seaward Pines Academy envelopes.

“On the count of three,” Lena says, and then, on cue, we rip them open.

It’s a big computer printout. I run my finger down the grid. “I’m in homeroom 810,” I announce.

Hannah shakes her head. “Crud. I’m in 812 with Mr. Kowal. How about you, Lena?”

“I’m in 812, too,” says Lena, happily.

“Ditto,” Edna says.

“What?” I blurt out. “I’m by myself?”

“Don’t worry, Merci,” Lena says. “It’s next door, and it’s just homeroom. How about first period?”

“I’ve got English first with Tibbetts,” Hannah says.

Lena fist bumps her. “Yes!” she says. “Ms. Tibbetts lets you choose the books you read.”

But I find that my first period slot doesn’t match theirs either. “I’ve got Mrs. Watson for science first hour.”

“How about civics, then, with Ms. Donner, for second period?” Edna says.

We go on like that through our whole schedule, class by class, twice, but in the end, the horror sets in. They’re in several classes together, but I’m in exactly *none* of the same ones.

I’m stunned.

“I hate my schedule,” I say, trying not to let the panic show in my voice. “All we have together are lunch and PE. How am I supposed to live with that?”

“What’s the big deal?” Edna says. “Have your mom write a note to Miss McDaniels to change you into one of our classes. My mom does that all the time.”

“Not mine.” I lie back on my chaise and stare hard into the bright sky, trying to disguise the fact that my eyes are watering. Mami isn’t like Mrs. Santos, who donates money and volunteers for everything, and then cashes in on the favors she does for our school. Mami will just say something dumb, like how middle school is the time to expand my horizons and make new friends and all the rest of those lies. It’s like she doesn’t understand the basic facts of life: It is never a good thing when you are separated from your herd in the wild.

So, I stay quiet and let the sun shrink the skin on my cheeks while Lena, Edna, and Hannah keep comparing notes on the classes they have together and what they know about this teacher or that. Their happiness is a hot-air balloon rising while I’m here shriveling in the sun. I’m trying not to be mad at them for it, but it’s not fair that they’ll be together without me. Couldn’t they at least be a little more upset?

Finally, Edna looks over at me. “Are you going to sulk? This is supposed to be fun, you know.”

“Edna,” Lena says.

Edna heaves a sigh and reaches for her phone. Soon, her thumbs are flying over the screen.

“What are you doing?” Hannah asks.

“Hello? Basic reconnaissance.” She scrolls and swipes like a pro to reveal different people’s socials. After a couple of minutes, she looks up at me. “Avery Sanders and Mackenzie Lewis are in your homeroom, according to Insta. Didn’t you play soccer with them?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there you go.”

I scoot closer to look over her shoulder at a picture of Avery and Mackenzie together at soccer camp this summer. People are leaving zillions of comments about how cute they look and all that. One of the posts has little applause icons and mentions my same homeroom. Avery was our center forward last year, and Mackenzie and I subbed in as the attackers flanking her. We played off each other pretty well. The thing is, though, that they don’t really get too chummy with me, unless we’re on the soccer field.

“It’s not the same as you guys,” I say.

“Obviously,” Edna says. “But it’s something. And even if they ignore you, at least you know you’re not in a loser homeroom where they’ve thrown all the outcasts.” She looks at me sheepishly and then mumbles, “Not that you’re an outcast.”

I don’t even bristle. I mean, I’ve never been especially

popular, but it's Edna who really knows what it's like to be tossed to the curb. It wasn't that long ago that her old friends shut her out of the A-list. Avery and Mackenzie aren't mean girls, but they're still the opposite of outcasts. They're those girls who are good at everything and nice enough, to boot. They make it feel like a big deal if they say hi to you in the hall.

Edna tosses her phone in the bag. "So now that we fixed that, let's swim," she says. "It's way too hot."

I look at the water half-heartedly and shrug. Hannah nudges me with her toe.

"Edna's right, Merci. Cheer up. Even if your mom doesn't fix your classes, we'll have lunch together every single day."

"And don't forget, we have the eighth-grade sleepaway trip this year," Lena adds. "We'll definitely be roommates for that." She wiggles her eyebrows and breaks into a huge grin, until I do the same. The trip is a Seaward Pines middle-school tradition, and it's always fun. Three days in Saint Augustine during October, with none of our parents to bug us.

Lena puts her schedule away and pulls off her T-shirt and her glasses. "So what we should do now is . . . have a cannonball contest!" She runs for the deep end of the pool and jumps high, pointing her toes like a gymnast as she

curls up her knees. Her splash makes a perfect arc of water that drenches the pool deck, almost to where we're sitting.

"Wait for me!" Hannah says. She tosses off her hat and goes chasing after Lena, the glitter on her suit making her look like a beautiful mermaid. There's another perfect splash, and then they're bobbing at the surface, laughing together in the pool.

"Come on, guys! Get in!" Hannah yells.

Edna is next, but she doesn't run. She more or less slinks to the pool edge and looks at the surface one last time, probably checking to make sure it's clean enough before jumping in.

I back up to get a running start toward the water, ignoring the pain in my toe that's still healing. I grit my teeth and let the pavement singe the bottoms of my feet as I race toward the deep end. I leap as high as I can, trying to make my own glorious splash. But I lean back a hair too far and then—*smack!*—I've only done a back slap.

The world goes quiet as I let myself go all the way to the bottom like a bag of sand. Above me, I can see the three of them treading water. They'll be together a lot this year, and I'll be stuck mostly alone. I wait as long as I can below, sullen and watching them through the ripples, until finally, I have no choice but to push back to the surface to breathe.

CHAPTER 5

ROLI AND I ARE dressed in our Sol Painting T-shirts and caps the next morning, waiting for Papi to finish his shower so we can leave for the job. Normally, I'd be psyched. I mean, Roli and I haven't done a paint job together in a long while, and today's a good one. We're heading over to Loxahatchee. Gustavo's wife, Zenaida, works as a housekeeper there and got us the job. She says there are horses and everything.

Even so, I'm barely awake as I pick at my waffles. I don't know what made sleep harder: my sunburned shoulders or worrying about who I'm going to talk to in any of my classes. I spent all night rubbing aloe cuttings on my skin and checking people's stories to see if anyone else was

mentioning their schedules. It's exhausting to do all this spying. I wish you could just ask outright without looking desperate. But no, you can't, and after all that work, so far, all I know for sure is that I have a couple of classes with Avery and Mackenzie.

I'm trying to decide if we're going to get friendlier. Being on the same team with them means I have a temporary pass inside their social club, which is kind of cool, since Avery is always thinking of fun things to do, like putting looped clips of her favorite moments from the National Women's Soccer League games on her feed or organizing us to decorate our lockers before games. But after we hang up our cleats, things change. Avery and Mackenzie have a closed group of friends that the rest of us can watch but not join. People notice what that group wears and where they hang out and what shows they talk about at lunch. They have boyfriends and girlfriends. They go to parties and sometimes invite each other on family vacations.

Anyway, it's not that Avery or Mackenzie has ever been snotty, like girls in some of the other biodomes around here. They're nice to me, especially during the season, when I've heard Avery say things like "Sure-foot Suárez" in front of her other friends at the locker, when she's describing one of my good moves. It's just that after the season

is over, so is our closeness. Coach Cameron was always lecturing our team about thinking of ourselves as a soccer team “family,” but it never really took hold. Maybe Avery doesn’t think of family the way I think of it. Whatever the reason, after the season, we were all on our own and back to our own groups.

Roli leans into the refrigerator, planning his breakfast raid.

“Leave me the string cheese,” I warn. He’ll suck up everything in sight if I’m not careful.

“Oh,” he says. When he straightens, I see he’s got my last mozzarella stick hanging from his lips like a cigar. “Sorry.”

He comes back to the table also carrying the tub of arroz con leche that Abuela sent over yesterday. It’s Roli’s favorite dessert, and I’ll bet she made it to thank him for having to see Lolo desnudo. Whatever the reason, there’s enough rice pudding for an army. Still, he grabs his spoon and starts digging through the cinnamon top all by himself.

“Save me some of that. I like it too, you know,” I say. “And Abuela said to share.”

He ignores me. “Aren’t you done with those yet?” he asks, motioning to the books I’m stuffing in my backpack for the ride.

I scrunch my nose at him, wincing a little from the sunburn. Tiny blisters have formed at the tip of my nose, but they don't sting as much as his comment. He knows I'm a slower reader than he is. And slower at math, and slower at science . . . and you name it. "I still say summer work shouldn't even be allowed," I mutter.

He takes a heaping spoonful and doesn't answer. I can see that he aims to finish the whole bowl unless I stop him, so I put my things down and go in search of a spoon from the drawer. My back is turned for just a few seconds, but when I come back, I find him scrolling through my phone without permission.

"Hey!" I say. His signature sneaky move this summer has been snapping dumb pictures of himself—like a close-up of his eyeballs—and making them my home screen when I'm not looking. "I don't need your mug on my screen again."

He swivels in his chair and squirms out of reach. "Hang on, will you? This will only take a second."

I hear my text message ping as he's working. "Roli, I mean it. Give it back or I'll scream." My cheeks are flaming now—and not from the sun. What if it's something private, like Wilson texting me? I don't want Roli to know.

"What is with you?" he asks, getting to his feet. "Just wait."

He towers over me now, of course. With his back turned, it's easy for him to block me from grabbing my phone while he works at something on the screen. Finally, he hands it back. "Here you go."

"What did you do?" I ask.

"Provided the answer to your suffering," he says.

I look to see what he means. The covers of the books on my reading list fill my screen. When I scroll, I realize he's downloaded the files from the library's audiobook collection.

A tiny bubble of hope flutters inside me. Why didn't I think of this before? I hold my breath, staring at the phone and fighting the urge to kiss his stubbly face.

"It will take you exactly twenty-one hours, give or take for bathroom breaks. You can start listening while you're painting today."

"Is this allowed?" I whisper in case Papi is still lurking. He'd be one to think audiobooks are cheating since there is less suffering involved. And who knows if my new teacher will think like that, too?

"Too late to worry about that. You start school on Monday. You want a zero on the first day?" He scrapes the sides of the bowl and savors the last morsel without me. Then he heads for the door just as Simón is pulling into the driveway.

“I’m going to help Simón start packing the van,” he says from the doorway. Then he grins and adds in a sing-song voice, “By the way, *Wilson* says he’s home.”

Simón, who’s riding shotgun with Papi, slides down his sunglasses and whistles as we pull up to the job. He’s Papi’s best guy—and now Tía Inés’s, too, if you know what I mean. I don’t really like to think about adults’ love lives, but as gross ideas go, those two aren’t bad. And the twins really like Simón. He plays with them. He laughs at their dumb jokes.

“Look at the size of this place!” he says. “These people must have a huge family to fill all the rooms.”

Papi stares through the windshield. “I think it’s just the lady and her husband.”

I squeeze in between their seats to see for myself. The house is enormous. “If we were painting all of it, we’d be making a boatload of money, Papi!”

“¡Cabal!” says Simón.

“If only,” Papi says, shrugging. “La señora just wants us to paint two rooms.”

“Better than nothing, hermano,” Simón adds, shrugging.

We pull around to the back of the house on a long driveway that opens to a yard big enough to be a park. It’s been cleared except for tall pines here and there. Beyond

the trees, two horses graze in a white-fenced paddock. It looks like a painting, especially this early when the grass is dewy and the sun still feels gentle.

Zenaida is at the back door, waving us in.

“¡Buen día!” she calls out.

It’s weird to see Gustavo’s wife here, instead of back home at the condo. It’s like she’s a different person. She’s dressed in navy blue pants and a collared shirt, like she’s going to a doctor appointment or something. At home, she’s always in flip-flops and colorful sundresses, wandering around the condo walkways to check in on residents, which is her favorite pastime. Abuela says that if it weren’t for Zenaida, the ancianos over there wouldn’t have anybody to talk to all day long.

“Los pobres. If they didn’t have you, their tongues would dry up in their mouths,” Abuela told her the other day when Zenaida dropped off a roscón from the bakery, the kind she knows Abuela likes.

Anyway, I’ll bet Zenaida’s job as housekeeper here keeps her plenty busy, too—and not just making conversation or snacking on guava-filled treats. What’s the chore list on a place like this? It must take hours and hours to clean it.

“This way,” she tells Papi and Simón as she opens the door for us. Then she sees Roli and me. “I see you brought

your best assistants, too!” She smiles wide and kisses us on the cheeks, glancing at our shoes to make sure they’re clean. We know the drill, though, so we all slip on our paper booties and follow her inside.

Almost as soon as I step into the kitchen behind her, I feel like Alice in Wonderland after she shrinks. The room is wide open with lots of stainless steel and dark wood cabinets. Strangely, not a single thing is on any of the counters. At our house everything is out in the open. Bags of crackers. A fruit basket. The old coffee can Mami keeps near the stove for draining the used cooking oil.

“¿Quieren agua?” Zenaida asks. The refrigerator door has a small see-through compartment filled with bottled waters. “It’s going to be another hot one.”

Papi says no since we bring our own drinks in a cooler. Then she asks how Lolo is feeling, and they make small talk in Spanish. I try not to eavesdrop since I know what’s coming. It’s like our whole neighborhood sort of knows that Lolo isn’t himself these days. I hate it. The worried looks, the sighs, the times when people say things like “qué lástima.”

Roli and Simón go out to the van to bring in the paints we picked up at the store this morning. I unfold the tarp and drape the kitchen table and upholstered chairs in plastic, taking extra care to cover everything. If we drip

anything on this stuff by mistake, we'll never be able to pay for it.

I'm taping down the ends when I hear sneakers squeaking against the tile, and then a tall lady appears. She's about Mami's age, with short hair and very tan legs, like the runners on our school track team. She's in a pressed golf shirt and matching earrings. Even from here, I can smell some sort of perfume.

"I thought I heard voices," she says. "Good morning."

Roli and Simón nod a hello. Zenaida stops talking with Papi midsentence and switches all at once to English.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ransome. I was just letting in the painters." She smiles at her boss and gives us a curt nod before heading out. Just like that, it's as if she doesn't know us anymore, like she's never stood at Abuela's window, chatting in the shade.

Mrs. Ransome turns back to us and smiles brightly. "You're right on time, Mr. Sol. I like that," she tells Papi.

"It's Suárez," Papi says. "Enrique Suárez. Sol is the company name."

"Like the sun," I say, motioning to the logo on our shirts.

She peers over at me.

"These are my children, Rolando and Mercedes," Papi says, using our full names, like all the extra letters in them

make us more important. “And my assistant Simón. All excellent workers.”

I won't lie: it feels good that Papi says I do good work, but I can see that Mrs. Ransome doesn't look too convinced, so I try to stand a little taller. *Go ahead*, I think. *Ask me the difference between satin finish and flat. See if I can estimate how much paint you'll need to cover the wall square footage of this room.* I'll bet she doesn't think that I put Roli to shame with a roller, to say nothing of my freehand edging skills on trim.

“Well, let me show you the space. It's this room, of course,” she says, motioning around the kitchen, “but also the den. Follow me, please.”

“A den?” I whisper to Roli. “Like bears?”

“Shh,” he says.

We follow her down the sunny hall and into another room that opens with double doors. It's even more immense than the kitchen, with tall ceilings and wood beams overhead that make the place look like both a church and a farmhouse at the same time. One wall is made entirely of tinted windows that overlook the paddock, too. The horses, I notice, are still grazing.

“I'll need you to take extra care around those beams,” she says, pointing at the ceiling. “They're cedar.”

Simón pockets his hands and glances up the height of

the room. Then he takes a step toward the bookcases and squints to admire a framed diploma beside it.

“Mira, Roli,” he whispers, elbowing him. “Isn’t that where you study?”

Papi turns to look. Then he grins proudly. “My son is studying to be a doctor,” he tells Mrs. Ransome. He taps his head to show he means that Roli’s got brains. “Smart, like his mother.”

Roli’s ears become tomatoes as he pretends to study the wall surface, running his hands along the paint. I feel for him instantly. Public parental adulation. Ouch.

Mrs. Ransome turns to my brother, surprised. “Really? A doctor?”

Geez. *Yes, really.* All anyone would have to do is talk to Roli for five minutes to know it. Who else would use words like *amyloid plaque* and *subthalamic nucleus* in casual conversation? If you ask any of his old teachers, they’ll tell you that Roli was pretty much college-ready the day he finished kindergarten. I think back to his valedictorian speech at his graduation last year. When he got to the podium, all the honor-society bling around his neck made him look like a nerdy rapper at the mic. He talked about having purpose and helping others and a bunch of other stuff that made Mami and Papi get weepy in their seats.

Afterward, our headmaster, Dr. Newman, pumped Roli's hand like my brother had already cured cancer. "I know you'll do big things in this world, Rolando," he said.

Maybe Mrs. Ransome can't imagine Roli as a doctor since he's in his uniform right now. A doctor's coat and coveralls are both white uniforms, but they are not the same at all. People look at you differently, even if you're the same person wearing both. I wonder, though, what *do* future doctors look like, if not like Roli?

He turns to her. "I'm in the biology program right now," he says quietly. "I'd like to specialize in neurology one day." He doesn't mention Lolo or why he wants to learn how to fix people's brains.

Mrs. Ransome's eyebrows shoot up even higher. "My goodness, that's impressive! When do you graduate?"

I steal a glance at Roli, who slides his hands inside his pockets, just like Simón. It's a simple question, but it's got a gnarly answer that depends on so many things—but mostly, as usual, on money.

"I'm not sure." Then he turns to Papi. "Where do you want us to start?" he asks.

Papi nods and gives Roli's shoulder a squeeze. "Right," he says. "Let's prep the kitchen, mijo."

Out in the hallway, Zenaida has been listening. She

catches my eye and smiles as we walk by, but she keeps dusting without a word. We're supposed to be "the painters" here, I guess, and not friends and neighbors. I get it.

So, I put in my earbuds, make my face blank, and call up my first book as we start.

CHAPTER 6

ON THE RIDE HOME, I send Wilson a picture of Mrs. Ransome's horses and add "Welcome back" in multi-colored letters. I took the shots at lunchtime, when we all ate at a picnic table near the paddock. I caught them in dappled sunlight, which makes them look magical with the filter I used.

Zenaida brought some snacks so I could feed the horses treats, but at first neither one came over.

"Horses can be shy," Simón told me. "Give them time." He knows because his grandfather had a farm in El Salvador when he was a kid, so he grew up around them.

So, I waited until Jack, the brown one, finally came over to the fence to see what I had in my hand. He

lowered his silky muzzle, sniffing around, and lifted the carrot away from my palm with his big yellow teeth. He let me pat him a few times on his neck, too. Then he trotted back to his friend in the field. I guess horses can be a lot like people, a little nervous and unsure if they don't know you. Weird, since they're so big. It's like they have no idea of their own power.

As soon as I send the picture, Wilson tags it with a thumbs-up.

See you Monday.

School starts next week.

I pause over the keypad. Should I ask about his schedule? I haven't seen him post anything about it, but it would be great if Wilson were in at least one of my classes. That way, I'd at least have *somebody* to talk to. Then again, that could be trouble. It might be weird to sit next to each other. People would start rumors, which is the worst. What would we do then?

So, I just text back some confetti and a party hat.

See you Monday. Eighth grade!

I stare out the window, thinking about school and trying to look on the bright side. I've been making a mental list of things I've been looking forward to, now that we're the oldest grade in the middle school. Eighth-graders are usually the starters on the middle school soccer team, so I