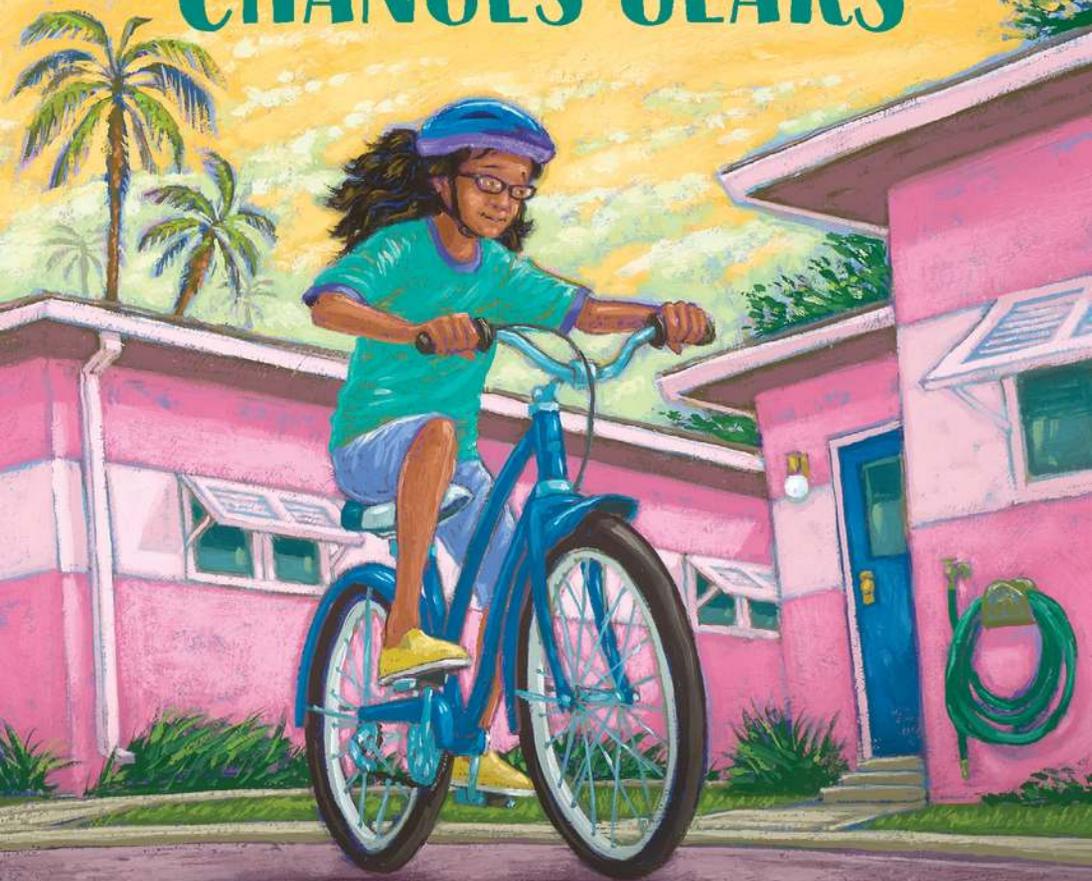


"Meg Medina is the Judy Blume for a new generation."

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# MERCI SUÁREZ CHANGES GEARS



PURA BELPRÉ AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
MEG MEDINA

MERCI SUÁREZ  
CHANGES GEARS



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MEG MEDINA



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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IN MEMORY OF DIEGO CRUZ SR.



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# CHAPTER 1

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TO THINK, ONLY YESTERDAY I was in chancletas, sipping lemonade and watching my twin cousins run through the sprinkler in the yard. Now, I'm here in Mr. Patchett's class, sweating in my polyester school blazer and waiting for this torture to be over.

We're only halfway through health and PE when he adjusts his tight collar and says, "Time to go."

I stand up and push in my chair, like we're always supposed to, grateful that picture day means that class ends early. At least we won't have to start reading the first chapter in the textbook: "I'm OK, You're OK: On Differences as We Develop."

Gross.

“Coming, Miss Suárez?” he asks me as he flips off the lights.

That’s when I realize I’m the only one still waiting for him to tell us to line up. Everyone else has already headed out the door.

This is *sixth* grade, so there won’t be one of the PTA moms walking us down to the photographer. Last year, our escort pumped us up by gushing the whole way about how handsome and beautiful we all looked on the first day of school, which was a stretch since a few of us had mouthfuls of braces or big gaps between our front teeth.

But that’s over now. Here at Seaward Pines Academy, sixth-graders don’t have the same teacher all day, like Miss Miller in the fifth grade. Now we have homerooms and lockers. We switch classes. We can finally try out for sports teams.

And we know how to get ourselves down to picture day just fine—or at least the rest of my class does. I grab my new book bag and hurry out to join the others.

It’s a wall of heat out here. It won’t be a far walk, but August in Florida is brutal, so it doesn’t take long for my glasses to fog up and the curls at my temples to spring into tight coils. I try my best to stick to the shade near the building, but it’s hopeless. The slate path that winds to the front of the gym cuts right across the quad, where there’s

not a single scrawny palm tree to shield us. It makes me wish we had one of those thatch-roof walkways that my grandfather Lolo can build out of fronds.

“How do I look?” someone asks.

I dry my lenses on my shirttail and glance over. We’re all in the same uniform, but some of the girls got special hairdos for the occasion, I notice. A few were even flat-ironed; you can tell from the little burns on their necks. Too bad they don’t have some of my curls. Not that everyone appreciates them, of course. Last year, a kid named Dillon said I look like a lion, which was fine with me, since I love those big cats. Mami is always nagging me about keeping it out of my eyes, but she doesn’t know that hiding behind it is the best part. This morning, she slapped a school-issue headband on me. All it’s done so far is give me a headache and make my glasses sit crooked.

“Hey,” I say. “It’s a broiler out here. I know a shortcut.”

The girls stop in a glob and look at me. The path I’m pointing to is clearly marked with a sign.

MAINTENANCE CREWS ONLY.

NO STUDENTS BEYOND THIS POINT.

No one in this crowd is much for breaking rules, but sweat is already beading above their glossed lips, so maybe they’ll be sensible. They’re looking to one another, but mostly to Edna Santos.

“Come on, Edna,” I say, deciding to go straight to the top. “It’s faster, and we’re melting out here.”

She frowns at me, considering the options. She may be a teacher’s pet, but I’ve seen Edna bend a rule or two. Making faces outside our classroom if she’s on a bathroom pass. Changing an answer for a friend when we’re self-checking a quiz. How much worse can this be?

I take a step closer. Is she taller than me now? I pull back my shoulders just in case. She looks older somehow than she did in June, when we were in the same class. Maybe it’s the blush on her cheeks or the mascara that’s making little raccoon circles under her eyes? I try not to stare and just go for the big guns.

“You want to look sweaty in your picture?” I say.

*Cha-ching.*

In no time, I’m leading the pack of us along the gravel path. We cross the maintenance parking lot, dodging debris. Back here is where Seaward hides the riding mowers and all the other untidy equipment they need to make the campus look like the brochures. Papi and I parked here last summer when we did some painting as a trade for our book fees. I don’t tell anyone that, though, because Mami says it’s “a private matter.” But mostly, I keep quiet because I’m trying to erase the memory. Seaward’s gym is ginormous, so it took us three whole days to paint it. Plus,

our school colors are fire-engine red and gray. You know what happens when you stare at bright red too long? You start to see green balls in front of your eyes every time you look away. *Hmpf*. Try doing detail work in *that* blinded condition. For all that, the school should give me and my brother, Roli, a whole library, not just a few measly textbooks. Papi had other ideas, of course. “Do a good job in here,” he insisted, “so they know we’re serious people.” I hate when he says that. Do people think we’re clowns? It’s like we’ve always got to prove something.

Anyway, we make it to the gym in half the time. The back door is propped open, the way I knew it would be. The head custodian keeps a milk crate jammed in the door frame so he can read his paper in peace when no one’s looking.

“This way,” I say, using my take-charge voice. I’ve been trying to perfect it, since it’s never too early to work on your corporate leadership skills, according to the manual Papi got in the mail from the chamber of commerce, along with the what-to-do-in-a-hurricane guidelines.

So far, it’s working. I walk us along back rooms and even past the boys’ locker room, which smells like bleach and dirty socks. When we reach a set of double doors, I pull them open proudly. I’ve saved us all from that awful trudge through the heat.

“Ta-da,” I say.

Unfortunately, as soon as we step inside, it’s obvious that I’ve landed us all in hostile territory.

The older grades have gathered on this side of the gym for picture day, and the door’s loud squeak has made everyone turn in our direction to stare. They don’t look happy to have “the little kids” in their midst. My mouth goes dry. They’re a lot bigger than we are, for one thing. Ninth-graders at least. I look around for my brother, hoping for some cover, but then I remember that Roli got *his* fancy senior portraits taken in July at a nice air-conditioned studio at the mall. He won’t be in here at all today. He’ll be helping in the science lab, as usual, and working on all his college applications in between.

So here we are, trapped thanks to me.

“Oh my God, they’re so cute,” a tall girl says, like we’re kittens or something. She even steps forward and pats the top of my head. I look at my shoes, my cheeks burning.

Edna pushes past me as if we’re not surrounded. With a flip of her black hair, she takes over, the way she always does. “Follow me,” she says.

This is no time to be picky. I stay close behind her as she marches us toward the other side of the gym.

Thankfully, Miss McDaniels, our school secretary, doesn’t notice that we came in the wrong door. She’s

usually a stickler for rules, but she's too busy collecting payment envelopes for the sixth-graders and running crowd control. Still, she *does* notice that we're all snorting and giggling the way you do after surviving an especially scary roller-coaster ride.

"Quiet please, girls," she snaps, without looking up from her clipboard as we reach her. "Ladies to the left. Gentlemen over here. Shirts tucked, please. Have your forms and money ready."

I get in line behind a girl named Lena, who's reading while she waits, and try hard not to look at Miss McDaniels as she checks everyone's selections. Mami only marked the cheapo basic package, and I happen to know (because it said so in gigantic font on the letter we got at home this summer) that picture day at Seaward is one of our biggest school fundraisers. You're supposed to buy a lot, like for your family in Ohio that barely knows you and whatnot. But my family mostly lives on the same block, one house next to the other. We see one another every single day.

Besides, my portraits don't ever turn out so great. It's my left eye that's the trouble. It still strays sometimes, pulling out as if it wants to see something far off, all on its own. When I was little, I wore a pirate patch on my good eye to make the muscles in the bad one get stronger. And when that didn't help, I had a surgery to straighten it. But

even now, my eye still gives me trouble when I least want it to.

Like picture day.

If only Miss McDaniels would let me take my own picture instead. The camera in my phone is awesome. Plus, I downloaded PicQT, so it's fun to edit the pictures I take. My favorite thing is turning people into their favorite animal. Puppies, alligators, ducks, bears, you name it—even better than on Snapchat. Now *those* would be good yearbook photos. I glance over at Rachel, who's behind me. With her big eyes and tiny nose, she'd make an awesome owl.

I move up in the line and scope out the photographer's setup. There's a screen background, sheets on the floor, and those big umbrellas to filter the light. She looks sort of grumpy, but who can blame her? It's just point and shoot all day long, no fun. When she dreamed of being a photographer, she couldn't have meant *this*. I mean, if *I* were a photographer, I'd be on safari somewhere, perched on top of a jeep and shooting rhinos for *National Geographic*. Not here in a hot (though expertly painted) gym.

"Next," she says.

Miss McDaniels motions to Edna, who, in no time flat, starts posing easily on the stool like some sort of school-portrait supermodel. I glance over at Edna's order

form on the table. Just as I suspected, her envelope says “Gold Package Supreme.” I sigh and shift on my feet. It’s going to take a while for the photographer to take five poses with different backgrounds. In the end, Edna will get pictures in every size, too, including enough wallet photos to make sure everybody at this school has one. I swear, all that’s missing from that package is a billboard. What’s even crazier is that it costs a hundred bucks. For that kind of money, I could have half the deposit for a new bike.

“You’ll be there tomorrow morning, Merci?”

Miss McDaniels’s voice startles me. I turn around to find that she’s next to me, watching Edna, too. I can tell she’s pleased. Edna is just the kind of portrait customer the administration lives for.

“Yes, miss. I’ll be there.”

My stomach knots up even as I say it. Sunshine Buddies is having its first meeting tomorrow, and I most definitely do *not* want to go. I was a mandatory member last year when I changed schools. New students are paired with buddies (aka fake friends) from August to December while they get used to things at Seaward. Miss McDaniels, our club sponsor, expects me to “pay it forward” and be a buddy for someone who’s new this year. I suppose it’s fine if you get a good buddy, but it takes a lot of time, and I

want to try out for soccer this year. All this friendliness is going to cut into after-school practice.

Anyway, all day I've been trying to think of a way of getting out of it, and now here she is, cornering me before I've nailed down an excuse.

"Seven forty-five sharp," she says. "And be prompt. We have a lot to cover."

"Yes, miss."

"Next," the photographer calls.

Edna stands up, but just as she's about to surrender the stool, she takes one look at Hannah Kim and stops.

"One minute," she tells the photographer. She whips out a travel-size bottle of hairspray from her backpack and spritzes a tissue. Then she taps down the hairs that always stick up like antennae along Hannah's part. "That's how you get rid of those fly aways," she says.

Hannah holds still, looking grateful.

I sneak out my camera and snap a shot of Hannah as the photographer positions her. With two clicks I stretch her neck and turn her into an adorable giraffe, complete with head knobs. Hannah wrote a report on giraffes last year when we were studying the African plains. They're graceful and gentle—and a little knobby-kneed—just like Hannah.

*Smile*, I write underneath, and press send to her phone number. A second later, I hear her backpack vibrate.

“*Merci Suárez.*”

I slip my phone out of view just as Miss McDaniels looks up from her clipboard. She keeps a whole collection of the stuff she confiscates, and I don’t want my phone to be part of it. My heart races and my cheeks get blotchy as I step forward. Luckily, she’s only calling my turn. The boys in our class start making faces and flaring their nostrils to try to make me laugh. Normally, I wouldn’t care, especially since no one can make faces better than I can. Last year, we used to have contests at lunch, and I always won. My best face is when I push up my nose with my pinkies at the same time that I pull down on my lower eyelids with my index fingers. I call it the Phantom.

But Jamie, who’s behind me, shakes her head at the boys and sighs. “Idiots,” she says.

I ignore them as best I can and take my turn.

I sit on the stool exactly the way the photographer says: Ankles crossed. Torso swiveled to the left and leaning forward. Hands in lap. Head tilted like a confused puppy. Who sits like this, ever? I look like a victim of taxidermy.

“*Smile,*” the photographer says, without an ounce of joy in her voice.

Just as I'm trying to decide whether to show teeth, a huge flash goes off and blinds me.

"Wait. I wasn't ready," I say.

She ignores me and reviews her shots. It must be really bad for her to hold up the line this way. Do-overs mean time, and everyone in business knows that time is money.

"Let's try again," she says, adjusting my glasses. "Chin up this time."

Chin? Who is she kidding? I already know that's not the problem. My eye is fluttering, and I can feel the soft pull to the left.

"Look *at the camera*, honey," the photographer says.

I blink hard and fix both my eyes on her lens, which always makes me look angry, but it's the best I can do. She shoots again and again in an explosion of shutter clicks. I must look as awkward as I feel, because I can hear the boys snickering.

When it's over, I jump off the stool and head for the bleachers, where the others are sitting. My head is pounding from this dumb headband. I yank it off and let my hair hang down in my face.

Edna moves down as I take a seat to wait for the dismissal bell.

"Shut it," she tells the boys behind us, smiling at them anyway.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

She glances at me and shrugs. “Don’t worry about the pictures,” she says. “You probably didn’t buy many anyway.”

The final bell rings, and everyone scatters.

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# CHAPTER 2

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ROLI HAS ONLY HAD HIS license for a few weeks and already we've lost a mailbox and two recycling bins to his skills behind the wheel. Even our cat, Tuerto, has learned to hide when he hears the jingle of car keys. Still, Mami has promised to let Roli drive us to and from school every day so he can practice. But today, as Roli lurches around the puddles in our driveway, I see there's even bigger trouble at home.

A police cruiser is parked in front of Abuela's house.

"Stop the car," Mami orders.

He slams on the brakes, startling the ibises that are digging for worms in the soggy grass. Mami doesn't even

shut the door behind her as she hurries out to see what's the matter.

My heart squeezes into a fist. The last time cops came to our block, it was because Doña Rosa from across the street had died. I glance around nervously, but I don't see an ambulance anywhere.

“What's wrong?” I ask Roli.

“Zip it, amoeba. I'm trying to hear.” He motions with his chin at Abuela and a policeman, who are talking near our banyan tree. Abuela's face is twisted in worry, although that's not unusual on its own. She's the manager of the Catastrophic Concerns Department in our family, after all, so it's pretty much her resting face. If you want to know all the ways you can be tragically hurt in everyday life, just talk to Abuela. She keeps a long list—and she doesn't mind sharing details.

“Get back from the canal,” she yells whenever one of us kids wanders too close to the fence behind our house. “An alligator will close its jaws on you and drag you to the bottom!”

“Put shoes on!” she'll say whenever I'm barefoot. “You'll get worms in your belly the size of spaghetti.”

She can't watch anyone climb a ladder without mentioning a neck-breaking fall. Or sharpen the knives without recalling a fulana de tal who sliced off a thumb. And

forget poor Lolo. She's after our grandfather nonstop for one thing or another—a fall, heatstroke, even a *pata-tús*, whatever that is.

“Is there a problem, officer?” Mami says when she reaches them. Her voice is extra polite, and she tugs nervously on her work scrubs. Roli and I are out of the car by now, watching, too. That's when I notice that Lolo is in the back seat of the cruiser.

Was Abuela right about something bad happening to him after all? The idea sets my heart racing again.

“No, ma'am. We've just had a little confusion during dismissal time for kindergarten at the elementary school—that's all. I thought it best to bring your sons and their grandfather home.”

“*That* is my son,” Mami says, pointing back at Roli, who stands up a little straighter and waves. “If you mean the twins, they're my nephews.”

*Good move, Mami*, I think. Cute as they are, it's never safe to claim those two until you have the full report. Even the friendly librarians downtown have banned them from storytime unless they come with two escorts—and harnesses.

Still, I don't see how this could involve Lolo—or why he's in the cop car. What could have gone wrong on a walk home from school? It's only five blocks. If you stand

at the end of the driveway, you can even see the flagpole. Plus, for as long as I can remember, Lolo has been in charge of walking us home. He did it for Roli and for me. In fact, it used to be my favorite part of the day when I was still at Manatee Elementary. We'd stroll, nice and slow, so I could tell him all that had happened each day, especially the highlights from recess. Then we'd stop to get a snack, even though Mami said it ruined my appetite. I only quit walking home with him in the third grade because that's when everyone in my class started to ride bikes to school. Only babies were walkers after that.

"You think Lolo's taking the rap for something the twins did?" I whisper to Roli. I crane my neck for a better look. It's not that far-fetched. Lolo loves all of us grandkids like crazy. He calls me *preciosa* — precious one — and Roli and the twins his *compadres del alma*. Lolo would never let anything happen to the twins. A full day of school would have given my cousins plenty of time to unleash trouble, as everyone around here knows. Maybe he's trying to save them from starting their careers in the state penitentiary early.

"Shh," Roli says, giving me a sharp look. That's what everybody says around here when I ask too many questions, like I'm still a little kid.

The cop checks his clipboard and looks up and down

the pebble walkway that connects all three of our houses. “But your nephews live here, with you?”

“Yes . . . well, no,” Mami says.

How we live confuses some people, so Mami starts her usual explanation. Our three flat-top houses are exact pink triplets, and they sit side by side here on Sixth Street. The one on the left, with the Sol Painting van parked out front, is ours. The one in the middle, with the flower beds, is where Abuela and Lolo live. The one on the right, with the explosion of toys in the dirt, belongs to Tía Inés and the twins. Roli calls it the Suárez Compound, but Mami hates that name. She says it sounds like we’re the kind of people who collect canned food and wait for the end of the world any minute. She’s named it Las Casitas instead. The little houses. I just call it home.

I creep closer to the cruiser as Mami talks, being careful not to make any sudden moves the whole way. Cops are community helpers and all that, but a billy club and gun don’t ever look very friendly. In fact, they make me feel prickly all over.

He spots me, though, and I freeze, my eyes darting over to Lolo, who *still* hasn’t gotten out of the car. Whatever it is, he needs my help.

“Can we have a word in private?” the policeman says to

Mami, motioning her to join him and Abuela in the shade. I lean toward them, trying to listen, but Mami turns and gives me that stone-cold look.

“Merci, this is an adult conversation,” she says. “Keep an eye on the twins, please. They’ve gone inside. I’ll be right there.”

I feel my cheeks turn the color of my blazer. I’m in the sixth grade, am I not? I’m old enough to babysit the twins, clean Abuela’s sewing room, start dinner, and save up for stuff that I want. But suddenly I’m too young to know why my own grandfather has been busted? Go figure.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Roli whispers importantly as I walk past.

“Seventeen is *not* adult,” I say, but he pretends he can’t hear and doesn’t respond.

I know I should go check on the twins, but I walk around the cruiser instead. I lean in the open door. Lolo’s hands are folded in his lap, and his white hair is sticking up funny, the way it does on a windy day.

“What did they do, Lolo?” I whisper. “You can tell me. Did they pull a fire alarm? Start a food fight? Tie up the teacher?”

Lolo looks at me and shakes his head. “Merci. Such ideas! Those angelitos are innocent,” he says. “I swear it.”

Love is blind, as they say, but why argue? I study the blinking contraptions that are bolted to the dashboard, my mind racing. “Then why are you sitting in a cop car?”

There’s a long pause. “Nada,” he says finally. “It was a little misunderstanding.”

Nada? Everybody knows the police are like teachers. They don’t call your family about misunderstandings or to say what a great job you’re doing.

“Lolo,” I say.

He pulls off his wire-frame glasses and wipes them on his T-shirt. “Fine. It’s these glasses!” he says in disgust. “They’re terrible! I’ve been telling Abuela to schedule me another appointment with the optometrist. Maybe now she’ll listen.”

“What do glasses have to do with anything?” I say. “You’re not making any sense!”

Lolo looks at me sheepishly. “No, I suppose I’m not.” He turns his head away from me to stare out the window. “That’s the trouble,” he mumbles.

I peer over the roof of the squad car. Mami and Abuela are still talking to the officer; Roli is standing nearby, quietly observing like the scientist he is. Abuela, on the other hand, is glaring at our neighbors who’ve come into their yards to stare. This is her worst nightmare—gossip about us. Lolo’s going to be in trouble with her later, for

sure. Maybe *that's* why he's not budging from this spot. Last week Abuela made a fuss because Lolo lost his wallet again. He was sure he'd been pickpocketed at the bakery, and even called Tía Inés to warn her about common criminals eating at the luncheonette where she works. "Keep an eye out for thieves," he told her. "The world has changed; trust no one!" Turns out, he wasn't pickpocketed at all. When Abuela found his billfold in the bed of lantana he'd been weeding that afternoon—¡Ay-ay-ay! ¡Qué escándalo! Her volume button got stuck on high, and the whole block could hear her yelling about how he had to pay more attention.

The twins barrel out the back door just then in their play clothes. In a flash, they're pressing their noses against the steamed window of the cruiser to make twin pig snouts. Son la candela, as usual. Tomás is also eyeing the mobile radio system on the dashboard. I stop him just as he yanks open the door to make a grab for the transmitter.

"Quit it," I say, pulling him out by the waist, "and tell me what happened."

He shrugs me off as soon as I put him back on the ground. "We rode in the police car!" he says.

"So I hear. But why?"

Axel butts in with the rest. "Lolo tried to take the other twins home by accident, the ones in Miss Henderson's

class. They didn't like it. They yelled loud like we're supposed to."

"No! Go! Yell! Tell!" Tomás shouts at the top of his voice.

I recognize that chant right away. It's what our old teachers taught us to do if ever someone tried to snatch us. We had assemblies about it and everything.

"Shhh," I hiss, but too late. Abuela and Mami have already heard them.

"Merci, I told you to watch the boys. We're busy here," Mami snaps. "Just a few more minutes."

I turn back to Lolo. "Is that true? You took the wrong twins at dismissal?" I know exactly who those kids are, of course. They were in the same preschool as Axel and Tomás and were generally known as "the good ones." They're also Vietnamese. How could he mistake them for ours? I stare at Lolo's glasses, wondering if he's right about the prescription.

Lolo won't meet my eye. He stares out the other window, his cheeks bright red. "All that yelling for a simple mistake," he mutters. "And then the parents were pointing and pulling them from me as if I were a criminal. There's no respect for an anciano anymore. What's this country coming to?"

“They called the cops!” Tomás adds excitedly. “Eric’s mom took a movie with her phone!”

The air is thick and hot, and I realize that I’m sweating again in this silly uniform, even with my blazer tied at my waist. Overhead, the afternoon clouds are gathering into their usual black popcorn. Any minute, we’ll have our daily rainstorm, which will cool off exactly nothing.

“Why don’t you come inside for a snack with us, Lolo?” I say. “Your head is getting shiny with sweat.” I lower my voice. “I want to tell you how school went. You’re not the only one who had a tough go. It was picture day today.”

If anyone can make me feel better, it will be him. Lolo and I always talk after school. We share Danish cookies from the tin he keeps hidden in the toolshed. And when I talk, Lolo isn’t like Mami, who says things like *give it a chance* or *look on the bright side* or *learn to ignore small things* and all that basura that makes me feel like it’s my fault that my day was a hunk of smelly cheese.

But right now, Lolo doesn’t seem that interested in what happened to me today. Instead, he shakes his head. “I’m not very hungry, Merci. You go on, preciosa.”

“Merci!” Mami calls again. She tosses me an exasperated look and points at the twins, who are poking a fire-ant mound with a stick, practically begging to get swarmed.

I go off in their direction, and they race away from me so I chase them, pretending everything is OK.

When I get to our screen door, I turn around, hoping Lolo has changed his mind. Maybe he'll say, "Wait, Merci," and ask me to share my pudding at the kitchen table, tell me how he made such a strange mistake, ask about my day the way he's supposed to so that I can breathe easy again.

But no. Maybe talking in the afternoon is something we won't do anymore, like when we stopped walking to school.

A rumble of thunder shakes the ground, and a gust rattles the palm fronds like shells. Inside, Tuerto is up on the counter, meowing for his food. The twins are shrieking with fear and fun, doing God-knows-what. As the first drops of rain start to fall, Roli jogs toward our car to roll up the windows.

And even as Mami and Abuela coax him, Lolo still sits in the hot cruiser, his eyes fixed on something in the distance that I can't see.

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# CHAPTER 3

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SEAWARD PINES ACADEMY, established MCMLVII, has always reminded me of a cemetery, even though it's a fancy private school. It was the first thing I noticed about the place when I started here last year in the fifth grade. Seaward has a big stone entrance and all those perfectly planted begonias like the ones at Our Lady Queen of Peace on Southern Boulevard. And there's always that big vase with fresh flowers in the front office, too, with a smell that gives me the creeps. It's just like the scent of Doña Rosa's funeral, where it was wall-to-wall with stinky carnation wreaths all over the place. Doña Rosa died in her house across the street from us, watching *Wheel of Fortune*,

like she did every night. Abuela and I used to go over and watch with her sometimes to keep her company, since her niece lived down in Miami and didn't visit much. Doña Rosa didn't speak enough English to be good at solving the puzzles; mostly, she just liked Vanna White's gowns and the prizes. Anyway, I guess we were busy that week and didn't think to go. It was three whole days before anyone called the police and found her in her chair. To this day, Abuela makes the sign of the cross when we go by the condo, just in case Doña Rosa is still mad that it took us so long to notice. Papi repainted her place for nothing so her niece could sell it, but you never know. "Rosa was always one for grudges," Abuela says.

Roli drives slowly past the entrance gate, waving at his science teacher, who's on duty directing traffic.

"Good morning," she calls out to us.

Roli swivels around to smile in a classic display of distracted driving, which is his downfall every time. Mami dives for the wheel (again), this time to spare the lady's feet from being flattened by our tires. The crutches and orthopedic boots Mami keeps for her rehab patients clatter to the car floor, along with her file folders that were stacked beside me. I don't know why she let him have the wheel this morning. *Practice makes perfect*, Mami always says, but I can see this is going to take a while.

“Can you step on it, please?” I say, pointing at the speedometer. The needle is hovering at seven miles per hour. “I can walk faster than this.”

“False,” he says, glancing at the dash. “The average human walks at about 3.5 miles per hour.”

My phone says it’s 7:41 a.m. My message reminder keeps blinking that my meeting with Miss McDaniels is in exactly four minutes. I can’t be late; her number-one peeve is tardiness. Not that it stops there. Uniform length, gum chewing, loudness of your voice—you name it, she monitors it better than our headmaster, Dr. Newman. I should know. Last year, when I didn’t know any better, Miss McDaniels gave me a detention for wearing my lucky sneakers instead of the regulation loafers.

“Hurry, Roli. I’m going to be late!”

Roli glares at me in the rearview mirror. “Talk to Tía about it. It was her idea that we drop off the twins,” he says. “And take that thing off your head, will you please? You look stupid.”

“Absolutely not.” He doesn’t like that I’m wearing my bike helmet in the car with him, but you just can’t be too careful.

“Enough, both of you,” Mami says. “We’re trying to work out other morning arrangements for the twins, but you’ll need to be patient until then.”

I roll my eyes without letting her see. Since the mess with Lolo yesterday—and all the time it took to get Abuela calmed down—Mami’s been a little crabby and impatient, too. This morning I asked her for my consent form for soccer tryouts and she didn’t have it, even though I put it right on the refrigerator so she wouldn’t miss it.

“I can’t think about that right now,” she said, shooing me out of the room.

Mami turns to me now and frowns as she changes the subject. “And why didn’t you mention your meeting with Miss McDaniels, anyway?” She narrows her eyes in suspicion, probably thinking back to my contraband footwear incident. Since that day, I have been forbidden from causing any more phone calls home unless I am burning alive with a fever or projectile vomiting.

I shrug. “We have some business to discuss,” I say vaguely.

“Business.”

“Yes.”

“About?”

“She gave out our community service assignments yesterday.”

“And?”

I slouch in the back seat. We have a strict policy in our family about always telling the truth, so I have no

choice but to say it. “And my assignment is the Sunshine Buddies Club.”

Roli meets my eye in the rearview mirror and snorts. “Friends of the friendless!” he says.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Mami says. “It was useful for you last year, wasn’t it?”

I stare out the window. Mami’s blind enthusiasm is one of her more predictable and annoying qualities.

“Not really,” I say. The truth is, I hated it, but only Roli knows that. Mami was so excited that I’d been accepted at Seaward, she wouldn’t have listened to my complaints. Instead, I would have gotten pep talks.

Like now.

Mami sighs. “You know, Merci, a good attitude goes a long way. Half my patients would never walk again if they didn’t think positive.” She turns back around. “And this family could really use some upbeat thinking these days.”

“Why?” I say. “What’s wrong with our thinking?”

She doesn’t answer.

Instead, she points to the sign for the drop-off loop. “That way, Roli,” she says. “And watch for the younger kids.”

I lean back and look out the window as we roll past the lower school. I wonder when Seaward is going to start to feel like home? A lot of kids in my class started

school here in kindergarten, like these little kids, but not Roli and me. He came when he started middle school, and I joined him last year because a spot finally opened up in the fifth-grade class when a kid moved away over the summer. Mami almost fainted with joy when the office called to tell us. She is all about getting a good education, no matter what. She wants Roli to apply to the best colleges and for every scholarship. And when I complain about homework—even a little bit—she reminds me how Papi took on extra lawn jobs so she could go to college at night. She went for three extra years while I was a baby so she could become a physical therapist. Because of her job, we were able to buy Las Casitas, even when Papi's paint business wasn't doing so great. That's why I have a new phone and Roli has a laptop. That's why we can help Tía or Abuela and Lolo if they need a little extra money sometimes, too.

Which all means that Mami doesn't think community service is a big deal *at all* if it means I get to attend Seaward. She's the one who agreed to the scholarship without even asking me if I minded. "It's a golden opportunity!" she said, and inked her name without reading the fine print. It turns out Roli and I have to do sixty whole hours of free labor every year, while keeping up a B-plus average. That's twenty hours more than the other kids.

Plus, it makes it hard to do all your homework, which was one of the hardest parts of coming here last year. There was suddenly a lot more work than I'd ever had at my old school, and no matter how much I studied, I wasn't quick enough. I didn't have the answer to the math problem as fast as the kid next to me, or I hadn't read as far as everyone else in the book we were reading in class. "Be patient," Miss Miller told me when I got teary after I got a D on a quiz. "You're settling in." And I did settle in, I guess, because I didn't get kicked out. But this year, with new teachers and changing classes, it's all supposed to get even harder.

Roli doesn't have this problem, of course. He's never seen a B stain his spotless report card in his whole life, not even here at Seaward, where we get worked to death. That kind of genius status means that he gets a cushy job working in the science lab as a teacher's assistant for his community service. He may be a terrible driver, but I can't deny that he's a brain—a very, very big brain—which is why he's been getting invitations to apply to colleges for years. In fact, he's probably smarter than anyone in Seaward's history. Just check out the glass display case outside the front office. The biggest trophy in there is for the science fair project he did in his freshman year. It was about how to make plastic from banana peels instead of

petroleum. You can practically smell the future Nobel Prize on him.

Finally, the drop-off area comes into view.

“Brake,” Mami warns, but it’s too late. I have no choice but to brace for impact.

One of our front tires scrapes the curb before Roli manages a full stop. I toss off my helmet and hop out fast in case he forgets to throw the gear into park like last time.

“Gotta dash!”

Mami looks a little pale as she switches back into the driver’s seat. Her patient notes flutter out to the sidewalk. “Pull up your socks!” she calls after me.

But who’s got time to worry about saggy socks, even if it is a uniform violation? I have to make a run for it if I’m going to get to Miss McDaniels’s meeting on time. She can’t stand excuses. You’re supposed to plan for setbacks, she always tells people, not react to them. Lateness is a symptom of poor planning and all that.

Luckily, I’m up to the challenge. I didn’t win every field-day footrace back in elementary school for nothing. I dodge through the sea of red blazers like a running back, my arms pumping, head tucked. It doesn’t take long for me to feel drenched in the armpit region thanks to the heat, even at this hour. I can’t even remember if I put on

deodorant, and now it's too late to worry about it. Tía Inés will have a fit if I come home smelly again, though. She's the one who does the laundry for the whole family and is always complaining about my stinky stuff. This summer she made a big deal of taking me shopping at Walgreens because Roli made repeated complaints about my so-called bromhidrosis. (It means BO, if we're speaking, you know, like ordinary people.) Thanks to him, the very next day, Tía Inés dragged me up and down the drugstore aisles as she filled a plastic basket with sprays and powders for places I didn't even know needed them. Meanwhile, the twins were in the candy aisle sampling their favorites.

"You're not supposed to smell good when you're playing outside," I grumbled, but Tía Inés wouldn't listen. She dumped the whole basket of powders, razors, and deodorants at the cashier's counter just the same.

"Merci, a young lady takes care of herself," she said, handing over her two-for-one coupons. "Like it or not, it's time."

*Time for what, exactly?* I wanted to know, but I didn't dare ask.

I round the corner and charge toward the front office. It's exactly seven forty-five when I reach the door nearest the bike racks. I suck in gulps of air to ease the

stitch in my side, but I still feel like I'm being knifed. My socks are puddled down around my loafers, and my headband has slipped back on my head. It is very apparent that, no, I did not use the frizz tamer that Tia bought me.

That's when I hear a familiar voice in my ear.

"Move it, please, Merci."

Edna straddles her flashy bike, obviously waiting to park in the spot that I'm blocking. I can't help gawking at her ride in admiration. She's on a hot-pink Electra with brightly colored stencils on the fenders that remind me of one of the modern art paintings we saw on our class trip to the Norton Museum last year. Edna's bike has hand brakes, a silver headlight, and whitewall tires, like those old-fashioned Cadillacs Lolo loves so much. I hate how much I love it. My bike at home is a heap. It's Roli's old ten-speed, which is (unfortunately) just my size now and in working order, thanks (or not) to Lolo, who can fix anything, even our old washing machine from 1996. The handlebars are speckled with rust (ferric oxide, per Roli) and stuffing flies from the seat when I pedal hard. The twins say that it looks like I'm farting cotton.

Edna's eyes trail over me. She takes in everything from my hair all the way down to my scuffed shoes. It's like I'm getting a primer coat of ugly for the day.

“No offense, Merci, but you’re a wreck.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to let my eye stray. It’s only Edna being Edna. I should be used to it by now. *No offense*, Merci, but you’re singing off-key. *No offense*, Merci, but I want to study my spelling words with somebody else. It took me a while to figure Edna out last year, but I finally got wise. *No offense* is what Edna says right before she takes a hatchet to your feelings.

“Give me a break. I just ran across campus,” I say between gasps.

But she doesn’t seem moved.

Edna swings her leg over her seat and slips her bike past me to get into an empty slot. Jamie is with her, too, and—surprise—she has almost the exact same bike, only hers is pale yellow and the stencils are paisley. It’s Edna’s mojo again, I suppose, that dark magic that can turn perfectly ordinary people into mirrors. Jamie always gets bewitched. If Edna wears her hair in a high bun, Jamie wears one, too. If Edna gets mad, Jamie tosses in an ugly look as backup. If Edna is going somewhere, Jamie is always invited, even if no one else is. Last year, when Edna got the flu and was absent for a week, I thought there was some hope to break the spell. Jamie sat next to me and Hannah at lunch and played kickball on my team

at recess. I thought we were becoming friends. But when Edna came back a few days later, pale and chapped at the nose, it was the same old same old. “Move over, please, Merci,” Jamie said. “Edna wants to sit there.”

Thank goodness Lolo gave me an azabache to protect me. Mami says mal de ojo is nonsense, that no one can hurt people with just an evil eye. But I believe. The world isn't all logic the way she and Roli think. It's got mystery the way Lolo says. So I wear my protection on a chain next to the gold cross I got for Holy Communion. It may look like an ordinary black rock, but who knows what would have happened to me at Edna's hands without it? Lolo says no evil gets past it.

I decide to ignore her and walk toward the glass doors, but just as I start to open them, Edna reaches for the handle, too, and she and Jamie barge in ahead of me. There's no time to argue, of course. A group of kids—the other Sunshine Buddies, I guess—has already gathered around Miss McDaniels's desk. The office is a beehive all around. Teachers are signing in. Kids wait to get new schedules, and a few parents who've signed up for tour appointments are chatting on the sofas while they wait. Kids apply a whole year in advance to go here, so people are always touring, even on the first week of school.

The flower stench socks me in the nose so hard that I start breathing through my mouth. I wander around to find a spot that's far from the vase.

"Good," Miss McDaniels says over the din. "The Sunshine Buddies for the sixth grade have arrived at last, so we can get started." Her voice is sharp, like high heels clicking on tile floors.

Edna snaps her head in my direction. Jamie turns, too. I swear it's like I can see the thought bubble forming over their heads, clear as day.

"You're a Sunshine Buddy this year?" Edna asks.

Miss McDaniels steps in. "Indeed, she is. What better kind of buddy than someone who knows what it's like to be new at our school?"

I may not want to be part of this club, but it's almost worth staying a member just to see the look on Edna's face. If only I could whip out my phone camera right now to capture Edna's mouth hanging open. I'd find a face filter to turn her into a green chameleon with its fleshy pink mouth wide open in shock.

Luckily, Miss McDaniels stays mum about how it's part of my required community service. That's all I'd need—another reason for Edna to think she's better than me. She isn't here on scholarship, of course. *Her* dad is a

podiatrist, not a paint contractor like Papi, and she never lets us forget it. “My-dad-the-doctor *this*. My-dad-who-saved-a-guy’s-toe *that*.” I’m pretty sure he mostly clears up athlete’s foot and plantar warts. Why is that so great? I mean, Mami helps people learn how to walk again after they’ve had strokes or terrible accidents. I mentioned that to Edna once, but she wasn’t impressed. “No offense,” she said, “but she’s still not a doctor.”

Miss McDaniels hands bright red folders to everyone.

“I trust that you all had a fine first day back yesterday, and that you’re ready for a productive school year, especially as part of the Sunshine Buddies program.” She glances at me and, if I’m not imagining things, frowns a little. I straighten my skirt, noticing that the seam got turned.

“Inside these folders, you’ll find your buddies’ schedules, as well as a paragraph with a little bit about the person assigned to you. I’d like you to make your first contact this week, please. You’ll need to check in every Friday for the remainder of the semester to give me updates on how things are going. Remember, you are ambassadors for this school. It’s your job to make our new students feel welcome and comfortable in their surroundings.”

Just then, the phone rings, and Miss McDaniels turns to answer it. “Excuse me.”

Everyone opens their folders. I shouldn’t even care

because I've already decided that I'm going to ask Miss McDaniels to switch me to some other community service. I'm barely comfortable at this school myself. How can I help anybody else? Still, I can't help being curious. I mean, does Miss McDaniels really know what she's doing with this matching stuff? For starters, Edna is going to be someone's buddy again, which is like pairing a baby mouse with a boa constrictor. I should know. She was my buddy last year.

I still remember our first day. At lunch, she told me stories about her family's cruise to Newport, Rhode Island, and how she slept in a real lighthouse where they told scary ghost stories and everything. "Where do you vacation?" she wanted to know. "North or south?"

I could have told her the truth. We don't vacation. But I'd been watching Roli go to school here for a while, so even as a newbie I knew that wasn't the right answer, not at Seaward. "East," I said, dressing up our day trips to the beach. I told her about our favorite bonfire at Lake Worth, where we go on spring and summer nights after Papi gets off work.

"Oh," she said. "We don't go to that beach."

We ate at the same lunch table for a while. Our cubbies were near each other. We were in the same class all day long. But somehow, we didn't start to share secrets or

do sleepovers the way she does with Jamie. Which makes me wonder: maybe this matching business is a sham? It could be sort of like that dating service that introduced Tía Inés to the guy with the pinkie rings and toupee. It might have looked good on paper, but—¡Ay, chihuahua!—what a mess.

Edna and Jamie start reading about their new buddies. I don't want to raise suspicions, so I fish through my papers and read the name inside. It says Michael Clark. Well, now I'm positive that Miss McDaniels doesn't know what she's doing. He's the new kid from Minnesota, a cold place—and I hate the cold. He likes ice fishing. He has no favorite color (suspicious). We only have social studies and PE together. Absolutely nothing about him makes a good match to me, except both our names start with M.

A hand snatches my paper. Before I can stop her, Edna is reading my stuff and grinning stupidly.

“Gimme it,” I say.

She arches her eyebrow. “Ooooh . . . you have Michael Clark.”

“You got paired with a *boy*?” Jamie asks.

“No offense,” Edna says, handing back my sheet, “but that's awkward.”

I could tell her that I'm probably not going to pal

around at all, but I'm still enjoying her shock over the fact that I've been chosen.

"What's the big deal?" I say. "We play with boys at recess all the time, don't we?"

Edna gives me a look of pity. "This is sixth grade, Merci," she says, as if I don't know. "We don't have recess anymore like in the lower school." *Baby*, she wants to say, and just like that my eyelid starts to feel heavy, and I feel the drift.

Miss McDaniels hangs up the phone and turns back to all of us. "So. Where were we? Are there any questions or concerns?"

No one says anything, but I can feel Edna watching me, like a not-so-friendly dare.

"All right, then; if there's nothing else, you're dismissed." Miss McDaniels checks her watch. "First bell is in exactly three minutes, and I have no plans whatsoever to write tardy slips for any of you. Good day."

Everyone hurries out, but my feet have somehow turned to deadweight. I stare at the walls and baseboards, noticing that they'll need a fresh coat soon, especially that scuffed spot near the copier. Maybe I could do paint for community service on a Saturday when no one is here.

I wait for the others to leave before I inch a little closer

to her desk. It takes a second for Miss McDaniels to look up from her paperwork to see me still standing there. She peers at me over her half-moon glasses. “Yes, Merci? Is there a problem?”

I try not to breathe through my nose. The stink of dying flowers is making me queasy. My mind spins with all the ways I could answer her. Roli says you should always build a case carefully, cool and logical, like a Vulcan. So I take a deep breath and start slowly, the way I’ve been practicing.

“There are so many problems, Miss McDaniels,” I say, trying to warm up. “Word problems, social problems, money problems . . .”

She crosses her arms and gives me a stern look. Miss McDaniels doesn’t like nonsense. Not one bit. There’s never any time for nonsense.

“Merci Suárez, take your fingers off your nose and tell me why you are still standing here.”

I have no choice but to knuckle right down on the tough negotiations. I put the folder on her desk. “I’d like another community service assignment, please,” I say.

“I see.”

“Something that will take less time during soccer season. Maybe some painting or . . .” My eyes slide over to the wicker basket in the corner. Last year, I helped clear

out the lost-and-found bin after every quarter. Quick and easy. That's how I scored several unclaimed gel pens and a necklace that I gave Abuela for her birthday, too.

She cocks her head. "Are you aware that it's an honor to be selected as a Sunshine Buddy ambassador?"

"So you'll have no trouble filling my spot," I tell her, smiling. "That's good."

She shakes her head. "It's not everyone who is lucky enough to be picked to represent our school in this way," she says.

I feel my cheeks getting red. Lucky? Is that how I should feel? I think back to Edna on the first day we met. "You're lucky to be here," she'd said, showing me around the cafeteria's salad bar. Matching chairs were arranged around maple-colored tables in the middle. "You could be at a school that has a drug dog and smells like mold." She made a face and giggled.

And it was true: I could have been, which is always what worried Mami and Papi, too, especially after what happened at the middle school that I was zoned for. A boy brought a knife because another kid liked his girlfriend. Luckily, somebody saw it in his locker and told before anybody got hurt, but the story made the evening news.

Still. It would be easier to go to school right down the street, and plenty of the kids from my old elementary

school go there and they're just fine. Mold couldn't smell any worse than rotting flowers.

And, most important, no one would tease me about being Sunshine Buddies with a boy.

The warning bell startles me. I don't have much time.

"It's not that I'm not grateful," I begin. "I am. For everything."

Miss McDaniels eyes me and considers things. "I should think so. Let's give this a few days. Check in with me on Friday after you've interacted a bit. We can make any necessary adjustments after that."

She sits down and gets back to work to let me know that the conversation is over. When I don't move, she taps her watch and frowns.

I'm down to a minute and a half by the time I tuck the folder in my backpack and walk outside. Everyone has scattered to the four winds, as Lolo says. I hurry toward language arts class, reading the names in the bricks as I go past the girls' restroom. Our family name is not there, of course. You've got to give a lot of money to be chiseled into something permanent around here.

I try to think of some non-dorky way of officially introducing myself to Michael later. Maybe I'll take a picture of myself and send it to the phone number listed in his folder.

*Hi, I'm your fake friend for a couple of weeks.*

*Hi, I'm here to make sure you don't barf because no one is talking to you.*

*Hi, did you go to a moldy school in Minnesota?*

Unfortunately, I don't get far before I hear giggling right behind me. Someone has stepped out of the girls' bathroom.

*"Ooooh, Michael, let's be buddies."*

I don't turn around. I already know who it is.

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# CHAPTER 4

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LOLO'S NEW GLASSES ARE ROUND and enormous, but they seem to have cheered him up. He got them this morning with Tía Inés, who's still mad that she had to get time off work again to take him. It was Papi's turn to drive Lolo to an appointment, she claims, which is one of their favorite sibling arguments. I don't get it. If it were up to me, I'd take off every chance I got to hang out with Lolo. But with them, it's always a fight.

Anyway, the thick lenses magnify Lolo's eyes, so they look really big and green from some angles.

"You like them?" he asks.

His voice sounds so peppy that I don't have the heart to say the truth.

“Circles are my favorite shape,” I say.

“He insisted on getting the largest pair in the shop,” Tía Inés says, as if he isn’t sitting right there at the luncheonette counter she’s wiping down. “It’s the exact same prescription as last time, but he swears that he sees better.”

“And I do,” Lolo says. “Nothing is going to get past me now. You’ll see.” He takes another loud slurp of the tropical smoothie he’s drinking. The pineapple chunk from the rim of the glass has already been reduced to rind. “Sit down and have a snack, Merci,” he says.

I climb up on the stool next to Lolo, who is perched at his usual spot in the corner, acting more or less like himself again, thank goodness.

I biked over to El Caribe as soon as I got home from school. It’s peaceful in here today, nothing like Sunday mornings, when the line snakes all the way out the door and people shout out their orders to Tía for takeout coffee, pastelitos, and warm loaves of bread. Everybody knows this is the best bakery between Miami and Tampa, so it gets crazy.

Tía Inés is busy refilling the cups of toothpicks that are decorated with mini Cuban flags. “She can’t stay long, viejo,” she tells Lolo. “Merci has to help Abuela with the boys today.”

We both stare at her.

“Oh, she needs help, does she?” Lolo says. He’s still bitter about the new arrangements. Abuela is going to be walking the twins to and from school, too. She bought new kicks at Foot Locker just for the job, white Chucks that I may have to borrow from time to time when she’s not looking.

But he’s not the only one annoyed.

I should mention here that 1) no one ever *asks* me if I want to babysit the twins, 2) Roli almost always gets out of it thanks to his tutoring job and working on his college applications, and 3) I get paid exactly zero for keeping them from swallowing pennies and running blindly into traffic. How am I supposed to buy a bike when nobody pays me for anything?

“I wish you’d find somebody else, Tía,” I say. “There are kids at school who took that Red Cross class and actually want to babysit. I can get you names. Hire them. I won’t be able to watch them once soccer season starts, anyway.”

She frowns at me. “Who in their right mind would hire a stranger to watch their kids when they have relatives around?”

I sigh. It’s no use fighting. When it comes to helping, the motto around here is *family or bust*.

“Can’t I at least have a snack before I go?” I say. “I’ve