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Being an Oreo: A Novel

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Being an Oreo

A Novel

by Lauren Gabrielle Funtanilla

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield College

27 May 2011

Approved by *Signature redacted*

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Being an Oreo

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Introduction —

At an early age my parents introduced me to the world of books and stories and fairytales. I loved reading, and I always knew I liked writing. I don't know when I decided I wanted to write for a living. Or when I wanted to earn a degree in written communication. Or even when I decided that I didn't just want to write books, but I wanted to write books for young adults.

If someone asked me how I would save the world, I would say give a child a book and teach her how to read. In many ways, I want to save the world by getting children interested in reading and to exercise their imagination. I want a child to let her imagination grow wild, so when she grows up, she'll allow her childhood dreams to become a reality. It would be nice to know that something I created helped play a part, however small, in nurturing the doctor who will cure cancer, the teacher who will end illiteracy, the sociologist who will end poverty, or the foreign diplomat who will bring peace to other parts of our world.

The story of Sophía Annalicia Maria Martin, or Sam, as she likes to be called, is a coming of age novel. Being an Oreó focuses on the lessons Sam learns in the summer she turns thirteen. She begins *her* story by telling readers the story about her loud and boisterous Mexican family. She introduces readers to a colorful set of characters and their wild antics, and how she often finds herself stuck in the middle of them. The sensation of being “stuck in the middle” is a phenomenon that Sam faces throughout the book. Readers watch as she struggles to navigate through issues the novel presents in its pages, such as becoming a teenage girl, interracial marriages, racism, eating disorders,

alcoholism, self-identity, cultural identity, love, friendship and most importantly, the meaning of family.

It would be silly, and it would be a disservice to the lives that touched my life, to say that many of my childhood memories and upbringing did not influence the evolution of the characters in this story. I revisited my own childhood, and the awkward age of twelve, by exploring Sam and her family's mishaps, confusion and triumphs. But that is not to say that the writing process and a writer's imagination did not do what it is so great at accomplishing – taking real life-experiences and twisting, reshaping and converging them into a pieces of fiction. I say this only to ease the conscience of my family who may be reading this novel, and I hope many of them do. I ask that they not spend a taxing amount of time questioning what character they are supposed to embody in this story because the answer is none, and all.

I wrote this story, almost from beginning to end, in January of this year. I spent a good portion of my days in my apartment pounding away at my computer from eleven in the morning to five in the evening. I had the luxury, and curse, to be a writer for a month and to divulge all my attention to one piece of work. My goal was to write. And to keep writing. Even if most of what I wrote was re-edited or thrown away later. It was a hard regiment, and I certainly struggled to meet my inner dictator's demands for 10 pages-a-day. And there were days when I didn't write. And I read instead. Or took a walk. Or spent time in a coffee shop. And it was okay.

In writing this story, I struggled to find Sam's voice, among all the other voices in the story, and to let her desires and motivations come through. I don't know if I succeeded. I

also know I left a lot of room for improvement. I'm definitely not finished with this novel, but it is a good start, and I happy with what I have tried to accomplish.

Being an Oreo is a story I started imagining since the summer after my first year of college. But I believe this story has been with me, and a part of me, much longer than that. These characters and their stories have been taking shape in my mind for a long time, and it feels immensely good to finally craft their identities into a solidified story.

A special thank you to my family, friends, professors, mentors and all those who have touched my life in a multitude of ways. Thank you for encouraging me to question the world and to find my place in it.

Chapter One – My name is Sam, not Sophía

Changing my name didn't happen overnight. It didn't even happen over a week or a month. Instead, it happened over a summer – the summer I turned thirteen. But then again, a lot of things changed that summer.

It all started on a Sunday. Two days into my summer vacation, I found myself looking into my bedroom mirror, and all I saw was pink – a Popsicle pink. The kind they sell at our softball games. I turned to the side and looked over my shoulder. Wait. Make that a pink-lemonade Popsicle with two extra sticks for arms.

Today wasn't the first time I looked in a mirror and was disappointed. I was supposed to be getting ready for my cousin's baptism, and I had waited to try the new dress my mom left in my closet. Now I know, I waited for a good reason.

I turned around in the mirror again. I ran my hands over my sides, but they only slipped right past my "hips" to my legs, just like every other dress my mom bought me.

This morning the dress had looked promising on the hanger. It had decent size straps that matched the tan lines made by my softball uniform. It was long, an immediate plus. I could do without the ruffles across the bottom. But I couldn't remove them as easily as I discarded the daisy-chain belt, which was now hidden beneath a pile of clothes I forgot to put away. My mom said the belt was supposed to enhance a woman's curves. The problem was there was nothing for the belt to enhance.

For a girl who was turning thirteen in two months and 28 days, my hands followed a straight arrow path from my stomach to my legs. My body failed to resemble anything like the girls in my best friend Joanna's magazines. The kind of girls with rounded hips attached to slim legs and shirts low enough that you could tell she had outgrown elastic and upgraded for wire on what my younger brother Julio called, "Upperwear."

Staring in the mirror only reminded me more and more of the pink medicine my mom gave my brother Ray when he ate too many of Grandma's *enchiladas* – the real *picoso* ones.

My mom kept telling me that I shouldn't worry so much about my body, and that she was a late bloomer too. She said my aunts and uncles teased her relentlessly when she

was growing up. They still sometimes called her, “*Patito Fea*,” which in English, roughly meant, “The ugly duckling.” But I still had my doubts.

“Sophía! ¡*Vamonos!* We’re going to be late.”

No, I wasn’t worried, I thought.

Joanna could obsess about following the magazine’s guide to wearing the right color to complement your skin tone. Or questioning whether or not, she should start buying bigger shirts in preparation for what was to come. No, there were more important things to worry about. Like how my name is Sam, not Sophía. A fact my mom always forgot. Or like winning the softball championship game this summer.

Last summer, we lost to the two-time championship team: The Ravens. My team, the Phoenixes, slowly worked its way to the finals last season, but we lost to the Ravens in double overtime. One of their players, Lexi Shorts, hit a home run with only three minutes left in the game. Two players slid into home plate making the final score: 8-7. Then again, maybe I should start worrying about starting seventh grade at Lakecrest Jr. High in September.

I heard my mom yelling at my brothers to hurry up. I heard their bedroom door down the hall slam shut, followed by Julio’s voice, “Hey Ray! Give it back!”

Yes. There were more important things to worry about than having no hips. Like how I was going make it through Mass without Ray’s jeers for wearing a dress.

Chapter Two – Five names are better than two or three

“Sophía! Now!”

I stuck my tongue at my reflection before grabbing my black windbreaker from off the floor and running out my door.

My dad stood at the base of the stairs. His hand stood waiting on the open doorknob.

“Come on, kiddo. Your Mom forgot she needed to be at the church five-minutes ago.”

My dad ran his fingers through his sandy-brown hair, the same color as mine, as he hurried to the car. It was a habit. Whenever he was tired or nervous or when my mother was upset. My guess was that it was for the last one this morning.

My brothers were already in the car and only left the middle seat open. Julio was still arguing with Ray to give it back, whatever *it* was. Stuck in the middle again, his shouts to Ray went through me as my dad pulled out of our driveway.

My brother Raymond is two years older than me, but everyone calls him Ray. His full name is Raymond Roberto Ramirez Martin. My mom named him after my Uncle Robert, well, sort of. My mom said it's part of our *Mexican* culture to use both names of our grandparents. I never really understood why you would need more than one name. I guess four names aren't as bad as my cousin Carmen, who had to learn how to write six.

My younger brother Julio is eight. His full name is Julian Juan Ramirez Martin. My mom calls him, "*La Sombra*," because he used to follow Ray around everywhere, and like a parrot mimicked everything Ray said, even the stupid stuff. Julio still follows Ray around like a puppy dog. Or more like a lost, puppy dog, I think. That is, when they aren't fighting. And lately, it seemed like that's all they did.

We made it to the church in less than half the time that it usually takes. My dad doesn't like to speed, but I had seen the look my mom gave him when he protested about following the law and to avoid getting into an accident.

"There is only God's law. And God will forgive you," she said.

Sometimes I don't think God really works like my mom seems to think. But like my dad, I wasn't going to be the one to disagree with my mother.

At the church, we were still early enough that the rest of my family crowded around the church doors. Ray and Julio jumped out of the car to join our cousins before my dad had even turned off the ignition. My mom followed them. A lady in a bright, yellow wide-brimmed hat that covered most of her face exclaimed,

"¡*Aye Dios!* Praise God! It is about time you showed up."

"¡*Si!* We were about to tell the priest that Lena was the new godmother. And you know what that would have been like. "

The second voice belonged to my Aunt Cynthia, my mom's oldest sister, in addition to being the oldest in the Ramirez family. My Aunt Sonya wore the wide-

brimmed hat that covered most of her face. She also wore a pale-yellow dress with bold white-polka dots to match. She was holding my newborn cousin, Matthew, who was dressed, almost as ridiculously, in a long, satin-white gown. Aunt Sonya had a thing or two for following American fashion trends, or at least trying to. If you looked in her purse, you were guaranteed to find a fashion magazine inside and heavily dog-eared. I think her and Joanna would get along, although I didn't plan on Joanna ever meeting Aunt Sonya, or really any of my family.

Dad and I made our way up the stone steps of the church where everyone else lingered.

“Oh, Sam,” Aunt Sonya said, looking at me as I reached the top step. “*No seas malita* and hold your cousin for me.”

Before I could reply, she handed Matthew to me. My mother shot Aunt Sonya a look for calling me Sam. But my aunt either didn't see it or chose to ignore it. My mom didn't like that our family called me Sam. She said it was a *stupido* game I played.

Juggling Matthew in my arms, I felt like I was cradling a small watermelon and losing. Because even though my cousin Matthew was only two- months old, he was a big baby. And dressed in the white baptismal gown made him slippery.

I finally managed to get a firm hold on his rocking body as my mom and her sisters slipped through the church doors to speak with the priest before Mass started and to square away the final details of the baptism that followed Mass.

Looking at Matthew, I carefully pushed back the bill of his white cap that Aunt Sonya had dressed him in.

“She sure is fond of ugly hats – uh?” I said, tickling him under his chin. He giggled. Or what sounded like a giggle but could also be called blubbering.

It was still early, but standing outside, I could tell it was going to be a warm day. My dad and brothers, who had been joined by my Uncle Emilio and Aunt Virginia and their three boys: Eduardo, Jose and Ricardo. They were all clustered together by the railing.

Eddie and Ricki were the same ages as Ray and Julio. They often came over to our house or Ray and Julio went over to theirs. It was like having four annoying brothers instead of two. Jose would come over sometimes too, but because he was two years

younger than I was, which was four years too young for Eddie and Ricki and two years too old to hang out with Julio and Ricki, he often stayed home. Or spent time with our other cousin, Isabella, whose dad was Uncle Robert, and the same age as Jose. Out of our entire family, they were the only ones who didn't draw attention to themselves. And even together, it was almost like they weren't in the room with us.

A familiar car drove past. It parked, and *Grammita* and *Papí* stepped out. Followed by my Uncle Miguel and Aunt Lena from the back seat.

“¡Hola Sophía!”

My grandmother was the only one I allowed to call me by my real name. She came up the steps and kissed my cheek.

“Where is your mother?”

“She's inside with Aunt Sonya, Uncle Antonio and Aunt Cynthia. They're talking with Father Ignacio.”

But *Grammita* didn't seem to hear me.

“¡Hola muchacho!”

She leaned down to tickle baby Matthew's feet that were stuffed into slippers made in the same white-satin material as his gown. *Grammita* and I were almost the same height, although she did have a small frame. I could see over her curly grey head as she bent over to play with my cousin's toes. I could tell that in a couple of months –at the rate I was growing these days – I would soon outgrow her.

“Here,” she said, holding out her hands. “Give him to me.” She continued to make sounds in unintelligible Spanish.

By now other people were arriving for Mass, and the stairs were getting crowded as families piled out of cars, up the steps and through the doors. *Grammita* knew most, if not everyone, and for the next few minutes, she stopped to chat with one of her friends who cooed over the baby. But as the people entering trickled down, she turned to the rest of our family who were still congregated at the rail.

“What are you all doing out here like a herd of sinners?”

She said it to the group but looked directly at my dad.

“Get inside before Mass starts. ¡Rápido!”

My dad, aunt, uncle, brothers and cousins immediately trooped inside the church doors. They didn't need *Grammita* to tell them twice.

I watched as *Grammita* shooed my family through the big, oak-paneled doors with baby Matthew still in her arms. I imagined he experienced something similar to a tidal wave effect from *Grammita's* rapid arm movements.

"*Buenos Dias, Sam.*"

I turned to see my Aunt Lena walk up the steps.

Of all my mom's sisters, Lena was my favorite. She was just so...cool. Lena was the youngest in the family and the wildest. She wore her dark hair short making it curlier. But it wasn't the frizzy, poofy kind of curls. The kind of curls that make me say a special thank you to God for making my brown hair, if boring and stick-straight, at least manageable. No, Lena had ringlet curls that sprung right out from her head, in a way that only looked good on Lena. She also had the best clothes. Lena didn't spend time with her nose in fashion magazines like my Aunt Sonya, but I always imagined that editors of fashion magazines must ask Lena for her opinion on what's fashionable and what isn't because Lena always seemed to know the answers, intuitively.

She wore a purple and yellow patterned dress that clung to all the right places. I would bet on us winning the Junior League Softball Championship that my aunt never looked like a pink Popsicle in a dress. I pulled my black windbreaker over my dress tighter, even though it was getting warmer.

"Hi, Lena."

I always called Lena by her name and nothing more. She preferred it. And since Lena was only twenty-five, it made me feel like we were more like friends than just aunt and niece.

I noticed that she also wore large pink and flashy earrings in the shape of electric guitars and detailed with silver and black and somehow matched her dress. She wore a lot of green eye makeup that matched her eyes. My mom, Lena and me were the only ones in our family who had the same green colored eyes.

When I was younger my mom and Lena were really close. Although they were seven years apart, they were still close. Lena came over to our house a lot while my dad was at work to hang out. She would help my mom with chores around the house, cooking or taking care of us. But most days, they would just sit in the kitchen and talk in Spanish. Mostly, it was Lena who did the talking, either about school or something *Papí* did that made her mad. Or she was laughing. Lena had a great laugh. It was the kind that started at the bottom of her stomach and then, bubbled up through her body, to erupt out of her open mouth in a cascade. If you could bottle the color of Skittles, the sound of a river at the beginning of spring and the heat from the sun warming your skin, then that was what my aunt's laugh sounded like.

But for the last few months, Lena stopped coming over to our house after she and my mom argued about my Uncle Miguel. He was older than Lena but younger than my mom. Him and Lena were very close, second to Lena's and my mom's relationship, well, before they had a fight. I didn't know then what exactly they argued about because whenever I walked into a room where my mom and her sisters were talking about something I wasn't supposed to hear, they stopped talking or switched to Spanish. But that was back in the spring, and it was the first week of June. Although my mom and Lena were talking again, they haven't been the same since. And Lena doesn't come over to our house like before.

She hugged me, and she smelled like lilies.

"Lena! *Sophía*! What are you two still doing out here?"

Grammita's head stuck out of the church door, but she quickly moved to the side as a man in a black suit, who wasn't paying attention, walked up to the other door and tried to open it.

"Oh, *perdon, Señora.*"

Lena and I laughed, but the scowl on *Grammita's* face made us hurry inside the church. Like I said, we didn't need a second telling from my grandmother to enter a church.

Chapter Three – Stickier than split tomatoes

The story of how Antonio came to be my uncle is a strange one. Around last September, we were at *Grammita's* house for a final barbeque before the cold weather set in. My cousins and I were all playing outside in the yard when we heard *Grammita* shout, “¡¡*Ave maria purisima!!*”

There was a crash, and I recognized my mother's voice shouting, “Lena! Hurry! Get a glass of water.”

The next thing we heard was the sound of the front door slamming and the sound of *Papí's* old Chevy rev up followed by the squeal of rubber tires. All of us looked at each other because we all knew that whenever *Grammita* shouts those words something really bad has happened or will happen soon, and you don't want to be around when it does.

Although we all knew that *Grammita* could be overly dramatic, or as my mom would say, “*No seas tan escandalosa,*” the fact that *Papí* had driven off in his old Chevy meant that something worse than serious had happened. The kind of serious that meant trouble.

Standing in the yard, we looked at each other, and we all had the same thought: “What did I do in the last twenty-four hours that made *Grammita* shout and *Papí* drive off in his truck?”

There was still a lot of noise coming from the kitchen, and none of us dared to go inside to see what was what. Instead, we did the next best thing. We all ran to the garden that was underneath the big kitchen window and climbed on top of the overturned pots and crates. Eva and I got to the window first, so we shared a pot. We balanced with one foot each while holding on tightly to each other and the widow ledge. The other two spots were fought over, which meant that Ray and Eddie each got a crate, leaving Isabella, Jose, Ricki and Julio stuck asking questions from the ground.

The scene we saw through the window that September was the strangest sight I had ever seen in *Grammita's* kitchen. And I had seen some pretty weird things.

Aunt Cynthia, Aunt Rosalinda and my mom crowded around the middle of the wooden floorboards. Their backs faced us, and they were bent over looking at something that was lying in the middle of the kitchen. Aunt Sonya was sitting on a kitchen chair that

was part of the dining room set *Papi* built for *Grammita* as a tenth wedding anniversary present. Aunt Sonya was sobbing while Uncle Miguel stood behind her and did a poor job of trying to stop her tears.

I pushed myself up on my right foot's tiptoes to see Uncle Robert kneeling on the floor obviously focused on whatever my aunts and my mom were huddled around. He was shouting in Spanish and waving his arms to push my mom and aunts back. Then I saw Lena come hurrying forward with a glass of water. Uncle Robert managed to finally push my aunts and mom back far enough so that we could see that the thing lying on the floor was *Grammita*. Uncle Robert turned to say something to Lena, but I don't know if she understood what he had said because we watched as she threw the glass of water on my grandmother's face.

I gasped and lost my balance. Eva tried to steady me with her hand that was wrapped around my waist, but we both tumbled off the crate and landed hard in the dirt and on top of the dying tomato plants. Isabella and Jose, who had been pushed aside in the scuffle, scurried to take our place.

"What happened? What happened?"

"Is *Grammita* still on the ground?" I asked, rubbing the back of my head where I had hit a rotten zucchini.

"Why is *Grammita* on the ground?" Julio asked.

"I can't see her," Isabella said, standing on her tiptoes.

"I can't see her either," Ray said, his face pressed to the glass. "I couldn't hear what they said after you and Eva fell. You guys sounded like two elephants."

"Ow!"

Ray turned from the window and rubbed the back of his head. "Hey! What the—"

Eva and I started laughing when Ray looked at his hand. It was covered with red goop and seeds from an overripe tomato Eva found lying in the garden.

"Aw, sick! This is so gross!"

"Be quiet! I can't hear anything!" Eddie shouted at us, but Eva and I kept laughing, clutching our stomachs and rolling around in the dirt. "Hey! Where did Uncle Miguel go?"

Then we heard the screen door from the patio open.

“What are you guys doing up there?!”

“Oh, crap.”

“Move out Jose!”

“Ow! That was my foot.”

“Ow! That was my foot, jerk!”

“Hey! Watch it!”

Laughing, we all managed to run past Uncle Miguel and escape to the woods behind *Papí*'s barn. And our uncle didn't follow us.

After awhile, we decided it was safe to walk back after having given our aunts, uncles and parents enough time to forget about being mad at us for eavesdropping. Trekking back to the house, Eva and I snickered in our hands when we saw that the tomato guts had dried in Ray's hair.

We later learned that *Grammita* had fainted because Aunt Sonya had just announced that she was pregnant. Normally, *Grammita* is thrilled at the news of another grandbaby to spoil, but Aunt Sonya was not married nor was she planning on getting married to the father of the baby, which in *Grammita* and *Papí*'s eyes was a big, fat NO.

When my dad picked us up from *Grammita*'s house, I faked being asleep on the drive back home to listen to my mom tell my dad the news. My mom said that Aunt Sonya told *Papí* that she was pregnant and not going to get married. My mom said when Aunt Sonya tried convincing *Grammita* that it was possible to raise the baby by herself and that a lot of modern American women were doing it, *Grammita* fainted then and there.

My mom said that the good news was that after they revived *Grammita*, *Papí* returned. Only he wasn't alone. When we heard his tires squealing, he had left the house to track down the guy who got my Aunt Sonya in so much trouble. His name was Antonio Mendoza, and he worked at a car shop in town for his uncle. My mom said that *Papí* brought Antonio into the house by holding onto the collar of his shirt, which was his work uniform because *Papí* had picked him up right out of the shop. His shirt was streaked with oil stains, and *Dios*, only knows what else, my mom said. And right there in

the kitchen, she told my dad, he proposed to Sonya. With prodding from my grandfather, of course.

“*Aye*, Michael,” she said, crossing herself. “I pray to Mary and Joseph that everything turns out alright.”

My mom’s prayers must have been answered because four months later, Father Ignacio married my Aunt Sonya to Antonio Mendoza. My grandparents finally warmed to Uncle Antonio after they saw that he was going to do the right thing by my Aunt Sonya. “And by God,” *Grammita* had said, pointing at the ceiling. After the church ceremony, they threw Aunt Sonya and Uncle Antonio a party to celebrate at my their house where everyone stayed past two in the morning.

And that is the story of how five months later my cousin Matthew James Martin Mendoza was born.

Chapter Four – A baptism with an unexpected splash

My family had piled into three pews in the church, but we were all scattered. My brothers were, thankfully, sitting with Eddie, Jose and Ricki. My Uncle Robert and Aunt Rosalinda, who we called Rosa, had finally arrived with Eva and Isabella. They walked up the aisle during Father Ignacio’s welcome greeting. Although I wanted to sit next to Eva, who was my same age and my best friend, I was already squeezed between my grandmother and Lena. Uncle Robert and his family made their way to the empty pew in front of us. *Grammita* shot him a look. Which all of us had seen before, and we knew meant: “*¿Por qué llegaste tarde?* What could you be doing that you are late to Mass? And look, now you have interrupted the Father’s greeting!”

I don’t know how my grandmother does it, but one look from her, and you know exactly what she would say to you if given the chance. Even Father Ignacio, who had continued with the prayers but had glanced discreetly over the Bible the altar boy held up for him, seemed to notice the scathing look my grandmother gave my uncle.

My uncle shrugged his shoulders sheepishly and tried to mouth, “Traffic,” to Aunt Lena but that didn’t please my grandmother. When he followed Aunt Rosa, Eva and Isabella into the pew, my grandmother smacked the back of his head.

“*Aye Mama,*” he whispered, rubbing his head.

“Shush!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lena quickly raise a hand over her mouth.

My cousin Eva turned and gave me a quick wave before turning around in her seat. I didn’t dare wave back. I had seen what my grandmother did to Uncle Robert right in front of Jesus hanging on the cross, and he was sitting a pew away while I was sitting right next to her.

But things settled down after Uncle Robert’s arrival. Father Ignacio began the familiar prayers, and we recited the familiar responses. At the end of Mass, Father Ignacio gave his final blessing and then dismissed us by waving his hand over the congregation. Up, down, left, right.

Everyone else filed out of the doors with the organ playing and choir singing while me and my family moved over to the right wing of the church that held the baptismal font. It was time for Baby Matthew’s baptism.

I can’t say I remember my own baptism. There are pictures of Ray, Julio and my baptism that my mom keeps stored in her closet, along with all are other baby pictures. In my picture, I wore a gown like Matthew’s, except on me it made more sense. *Grammita* held me, and my mouth was wide open like I was in pain. The priest, not Father Ignacio, hadn’t even poured the Holy Water over my head yet. I like to think that even then, I didn’t like being forced to wear an ugly dress.

I really can’t remember my baptism since I was only three-months old. *Grammita* believed that three-months was the golden age that my family should baptize each new baby, although sometimes my cousins were younger. Julio was baptized when he was only one-month old. But then, Ricki was the last Ramirez grandchild to be baptized and was six-months old. *Grammita* would never let my Uncle Emilio forget it either.

My grandmother was somewhat superstitious. She always made the sign of the cross on Ricki’s forehead. That is whenever she managed to make him stand still. Which wasn’t often because Ricki was like the Energizer Bunny who’s eaten a Pixie Stick, the size of yardstick. It made me tired just watching him run around like a robber without chains.

For *Grammita*, it was like an extra prayer I guess. Some type of repentance for Uncle Emilio's laziness. I never really understood why three months was the golden age. My friend, Rachael Parker, from school was baptized when she was eight. Then again, she goes to the Church of Latter Day Saints. My mom says they have strange practices in their religion and weren't really *Cristiano*. But Rachael was always nice to me, and not weird, so I figure nothing *too* bad happens to you if you aren't baptized by three-months. But maybe, the earlier you are baptized, the better spot you have in heaven.

But Aunt Sonya learned from Uncle Emilio's mistake and was sure to schedule Matthew's baptism, exactly three months to the date of Matthew's birthday. We circled around the font where Aunt Sonya, carrying a sleeping Matthew, and Uncle Antonio stood. My mom was Matthew's godmother and Uncle Antonio's brother, Eric, was the godfather. They both moved into the middle of the ring to stand next to Aunt Sonya and Uncle Antonio. And the selection of Matthew's godfather is another family story.

A month before the baptism, my mom and Aunt Sonya got in a fight about who was going to be Matthew's godfather. She had come to visit my mom, and they started talking about details of the baptism. I was trying to play with Matthew, but he was falling asleep in his cat seat carrier on the dining-room table.

"I told Father Ignacio that you were a godmother already, but Eric's new and might need some extra lessons—"

"¿*Qué*?! Sonya, who's Eric?"

"He's Antonio's younger brother."

"But you asked me *and* Michael to be Matthew's godparents." My mother had put down the coffee mug she had been drinking, and her eyes were flashing.

"Maria Ella," my aunt said, carefully, "I thought you knew that I only asked you, not Michael, to be —"

"Fine," my mom said. "Then ask Michael to be the godfather now."

"I – I can't," she said. "We already asked Eric, and he said yes."

My mother's eyes got darker. I know my aunts knew my mother's warning signs as well as I did.

She stuttered, “*Maria Ella, por favor*, I didn’t think Michael was interested in being Matthew’s godfather. I mean he’s not even Catholic —”

“Yes, he is!” My mom slammed her hand on the kitchen countertop.

Matthew jumped in his seat and let out a small cry.

“*Si, si, disculpama*, I know,” Aunt Sonya hurried. “*Pero*, he hasn’t been part of the church for very long and —”

“Three years isn’t long enough?”

“Well yes...but Antonio and I want someone who —”

“Someone what? Some who isn’t a *Gringo*?”

The sound of raised voices caused Matthew to start crying.

“*Aye pos como sea*, Sonya. Then find someone else to be Matthew’s godmother because I can’t do it anymore.”

My mother started gathering up the cups she and Aunt Sonya had been drinking. And as if she finally heard Matthew’s cries, my mom turned to me, “*Sophía* take Matthew upstairs and calm him down please.”

“But —”

“Now!”

“*Maria Ella*, you can’t do that!” Aunt Sonya said, panic in her voice. “Who am I am going to find and ask in a month?”

“*No se*,” my mom said. She started to clean off the rest of the counter as I picked Matthew up from his seat, rocking him to try to stop his crying. “But I am tired of my sisters forgetting about my husband simply because he is not— ”

I didn’t hear the end of the conversation because Matthew screams drowned out my mother’s voice and the rest of her and Aunt Sonya’s argument.

Aunt Sonya and my mom did make up eventually, although it took some prodding on *Grammita*’s part. And when that didn’t work, *Papí* forced them to speak to each other. But seeing my mom, who was holding the squeamish Matthew and standing next to Antonio’s brother Eric, she looked happy. Down the circle, my dad also smiled. He sure didn’t look like someone who was upset for not being asked to be Matthew’s godfather.

Father Ignacio finally came over to the sacramental font followed by two altar servers who had stayed behind to help Father with the baptism.

I started to doze off as Father Ignacio began reciting the prayers while holding his open palm over the top of Matthew's head until I noticed that Ray, Eddie, Julio and Ricki were pushing each other around in the back of the circle. No one paid them any attention because everyone's attention was focused in the center where my mom was holding Matthew's head over the large stone bowl, filled with Holy Water, and welded to the stone pillar.

Father Ignacio lifted up a golden pitcher that was much fancier than the ones in our kitchen cabinets at home. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ricki take something that looked like a small ball, but in his eight-year-old hands looked as big as his fist, from Ray's hand. But Ricki pulled the object away from Ray with such force that he lost his balance. I watched him tumble back onto Julio causing both of them to fall with a thud to the floor and with a yelp from Julio, just as the object flew out of Ricki's hand.

Watching a multicolored ball fly in the air, I realized the object was Julio's bouncy ball that he received for his birthday last week. It was also the object Julio had fought with Ray to give back earlier that morning.

The ball hit the ground in front of the boys hard before springing up in the air and then falling back down again, full force, directly into the stone basin where Father Ignacio stood, tilting the gold pitcher over the top of Matthew's head to wash my little cousin clean and free from sin.

But before Father Ignacio could save the little Matthew's soul in the name of our Catholic faith, the ball landed with such force in the water basin that it caused a geyser of Holy Water to splash on Father Ignacio, my mom, Eric and Matthew, baptizing them all in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

It took a moment for my family to understand what had happened, but once they did, they all reacted at once. *Grammita* fell to her knees thinking that a miracle had happened, or it was an act of God that made the water rise up from the basin the way it did. Father Ignacio looked dazed and wet while my mother shook the water from her hair and eyes before seeing Julio's ball lying dead center in the font.

She looked over at Julio who was still on the ground underneath Ricki and sent my dad a look. Immediately him and my Uncle Emilio grabbed the four boys and pushed them toward the church doors. Matthew, quiet from the shock, finally started to wail. My mom handed him over to Aunt Sonya, who tried drying both him and his tears. Lena bent down and was trying to explain to *Grammita*, who was still prostrate on the ground, that what happened wasn't a miracle, but a misfired bouncy ball. But seeing the look on *Grammita's* face as she rose to her feet in hearing the truth, for my brothers' and cousins' sake, I preferred that she believed the waterfall was an act of God.

My mom fished out the ball from the basin and tried to explain what had happened to Father Ignacio.

"Father, I am so sorry. My sons — I didn't realize— if you could please just go on with the baptism —"

Seeing my mother plead with the priest made me think that we would never be welcomed back to the church again, no matter how much Father Ignacio loved my *Grammita's* tamales. I started thinking that maybe we wouldn't have to get up early every Sunday anymore when Father Ignacio started to laugh. My mother looked shocked. So did I. I had never seen a priest laugh before. I always assumed priests weren't supposed to laugh, especially not like Father's big bellowing laugh.

"Continue the baptism?" he said, between laughs. "I think the child has been doused in enough Holy Water to last him the rest of his life."

"*Pero, Padre,*" *Grammita* started to protest.

But Lena, who had her arms around her, whispered, "Shhh, Mama. It is okay."

"Bring the babe here."

Aunt Sonya walked over to Father Ignacio with Matthew. Uncle Antonio had his arm around the both of them. Matthew had stopped crying but was now hiccupping loudly. Father Ignacio placed a palm on Matthew's head, he said a final prayer under his breath and made the sign of the cross with his thumb. Aunt Sonya and Uncle Antonio also crossed themselves.

"Thank you, Father."

"Oscar."

The alter server, who had stayed behind to help, hurried over to Father Ignacio.

“This baptism is over. It’s time for you to go home. Your *Madre* must be waiting for you.”

I saw Oscar turn back around and hurry to the back of the church to change out of his dress.

“*And* I need to get out of these wet robes.” Before he turned to head up the aisle, he placed a hand on *Grammita’s* shoulder.

“Don’t be too hard on those boys, *Señora* Ramirez.”

He winked at Lena and me before walking toward the back of the church with tiny droplets of Holy Water trailing behind him.

Chapter Five – A car ride where dancing is a sport

Coming out of the church, I saw my dad and Uncle Emilio standing against the rail while Eddie, Ray, Julio and Ricki sat on the steps. Ray and Eddie’s heads were down while Julio and Ricki just looked frightened. But *Grammita* only walked past them down the steps and toward the car.

“Everyone head over to Mama’s okay?” Aunt Sonya called, as everyone made their way down the steps and toward the only cars left in the parking lot. After the baptism, Aunt Sonya had planned a small party at *Grammita’s* house to celebrate.

“Hey, Sam!”

Eva waved at me from the front of her family’s car.

“Dad said you could come with us!”

My mom joined my dad at the rail. Since she had been holding Matthew, she was soaked by the waterfall. The entire right side of her dress was wet, and she certainly didn’t look very happy.

“I am going to go to *Grammita’s* with Eva!” I said.

I didn’t wait for a response and took the steps two at a time. The last place I wanted to be was in a confined space with my mother who was wet and angry.

Before I even got into Uncle Robert’s car, Eva started talking. We hadn’t seen each other since school got out last week.

“*Hola*, Sam,” Aunt Rosalinda said from the front seat.

“Hi Aunt Rosa! Hi Uncle Robert. Hi Isabella.”

Isabella said hi back and squeezed in next to Eva.

“How was school, Sam?” Aunt Rosalinda asked, as Uncle Robert started the car.

I didn’t a chance to respond because Eva started telling me about her last day at school, the boy in her class, who was sent to the principal’s office because he threw water balloons at first graders during recess, and all the things we were going to do this summer.

Eva’s my best friend. I don’t know if your best friend can also be your cousin. But if you borrow your cousin’s Cherry-Cola chap stick and lose it, they still have to love you. *Papí* says that is just what families do. Eva and Isabella live on the south side of the Lakecrest, so we’ve never gone to the same school. Which is why Joanna is also my best friend. *Papí* never said anything about friends always staying friends, so I don’t know what would happed if I lost Joanna’s chap stick. I don’t know if having two best friends is against the rules or something, but I didn’t think that Joanna or Eva would ever meet.

“You still playing softball this summer, Sam?” Uncle Robert looked at me in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah! I think we really have a chance of creaming the Ravens this year!”

The whole car laughed.

“Your dad’s lucky he has a daughter who likes to play a sport.”

“Dad, how many times do I have tell you that dancing *is* a sport,” Eva complained. “I work just as hard as Sam does.”

My uncle is really into sports. Baseball, basketball and soccer, you name it, he watches it. Soccer is his favorite, and he always is complaining that America doesn’t have a *bueno* team. Dancing, on the other hand, does not use a ball, which for Uncle Robert is a key factor for a sport to be a sport.

“Right, Sam?”

Although, I didn’t particularly like dancing – I had two left feet – I did admire the dedication Eva had for dance. She’s been dancing since we were three. Much longer than I’ve been playing softball. She’s trained in ballet and jazz, but her favorite is ballet. I’ve gone to some of her recitals, and she is really good.

I knew my uncle wanted me to convince Eva differently, but I couldn't let Eva down. I nodded my head. "Yeah, Uncle Robert. Dancing is a sport."

"See, Dad." Eva stuck her tongue out at the back of his head. "At least Sam knows what's what."

But my uncle just winked at me in the mirror before he and my aunt started about something else talking in Spanish. Eva turned toward me.

"I think my dad wishes that me or Bella was a boy instead," she said, keeping her voice quiet. "Then he'd have someone to play catch with. Sometimes, I think he'd swap me for you."

I laughed, uneasily. "Whatever."

"I'm serious," she said. "He always gets excited to talk about softball with you."

Before Uncle Robert married Aunt Rosa, he used to play in a small baseball league. Whenever I spent the night at Eva's house, Uncle Robert and I would start talking about batting stance or catching techniques. Sometimes we could spend hours talking about the game, if Eva didn't pull me away to paint each other's nails or for her to put rollers in my hair. Both of which, I'd rather not do, although I never told her that.

"Yeah, but I've seen him at your dance recitals, and he looks pretty proud to me."

She pulled her arm free from being looped with mine and leaned back against her seat.

"Yeah, I guess you are right."

Only four months apart, I'd seen Eva get the same clouded look in her eyes before. It usually meant something else was on her mind besides my uncle's obsession with baseball. Only I didn't have time to ask because we had arrived at *Grammita's*.

Chapter Six – The Ramirez Family Tree is born

Uncle Robert pulled into the gravel driveway behind Uncle Antonio's black-station wagon. Anyone that came to *Grammita's* house parked wherever they could find room, which often meant the streets. Most days there wasn't enough room in the gravel driveway running along the left side of the house. Our car was missing, so I guess my

mom was still changing out of her wet clothes, or Ray and Julio were getting a long talk, or both.

Grammita's house was the redbrick house at the top of low hill. It was the last house on a dead-end street. *Papí* always told us the story of how he and *Grammita* bought the house on Maple Street.

He said that when they first came to America, the first meal they had was at a diner. It had faded pink benches etched with grey lines. The diner was run-down and ended up closing a few years later, but for my grandparents, the chipped ceramic tabletops and padded seats were a luxury, even if the stuffing was coming out at the seams. They bought their first American meal with their earnings from picking in the fields that week. *Papí* had steak and potatoes. But *Grammita* ordered pancakes. *Papí* said *Grammita* fell so in love with the pancakes and the brown, sticky syrup drizzled on top, that when they found the house for sale on Maple Street, she wouldn't let *Papí* look anywhere else.

There were only three other houses on Maple Street. But I never met anyone who lived in them. And since we never saw any other kids on Maple Street, my cousins and I didn't bother finding out if anyone else lived there either.

Once, Ray dared me to ring the doorbell of the grey house down the street with blue shutters that hung from their hinges. He said he bet a ghost lived inside, and that I would be too chicken to see if it was true. I don't believe in ghosts, but I knew that I was no chicken. So I rang the bell and ran like lightning across the street. I didn't see if anybody answered, but I did proudly collect Ray's five dollars that day.

Most days it seemed like my family was the only family living on Maple Street. *Papí* said he liked it that way. No neighbors meant we could have big, crazy *fiestas* like they did in *Mexico*.

Grammita's house itself was kind of large. It had to be because it often held as many as twenty people at a time. But it was also oddly shaped. From the outside, it looked like a bunch of squares mashed together, haphazardly, and in no real order. My mom said the house didn't always look the way it did. When she was growing up, she

said their house was a lot smaller, and she and all her sisters shared one room and one bed. It wasn't until she was twelve that *Papí* and her brothers added on to the back of the house. They made *Grammita* a bigger kitchen and an extra living room. They also built a red barn out behind the house, just where the edge of the yard fed into the trees. *Papí* didn't own the property behind us, but that didn't stop him from naming the small creek: The Ramirez River. He even painted a sign attached to a wooden stake and placed it at the edge of the yard. It said, *Aquí no hay pase al menos que seas Ramiro*. That meant, you were only allowed to enter if you're a Ramirez.

I guess now would be a good time to say that I have a big family. At least on my mom's side. *Grammita* and *Papí*, whose real names are Miguel and Maria, except everyone calls her Maya, are from *Puebla, Mexico*.

Grammita was born and raised in a small village called *Morelos*. *Papí* lived three villages away and was friends with one of *Grammita's* cousins, which is how he met my grandmother. He was invited to my grandmother's cousin's birthday party, and he says he fell in love with my grandmother the moment he saw her. They married soon after and decided to immigrate to the United States when my mom was a baby.

My mother, whose full name is Maria Ella Racquel Ramirez, has three brothers and three sisters. Aunt Cynthia is the oldest. She married my Uncle Pablo when she was only eighteen. She had my cousin Carmen who I don't get to see much because she goes to college in the city. Then, there is my Uncle Emilio and Aunt Vicki who have Eddie, Jose and Ricki. My Uncle Robert is next and married to Aunt Rosa, and they are Eva and Isabella's parents. Then my Aunt Sonya and Uncle Antonio with baby Matthew. My mom is the third youngest, followed by Uncle Miguel and Aunt Lena, who is the baby. Lena and Uncle Miguel still live with *Grammita* and *Papí*.

Of course, that doesn't include all my second cousins and third cousins and friends of my grandparents, who I'm not really related to, but *Grammita* insists that I still call them "*Tía*" this and "*Tío*" that. I used to ask her why, but she just said it was the way we do things, we, meaning us Mexicans.

But I am only half-Mexican. Out of all her brothers and sisters, my mom is the only one to marry someone who is *not* Mexican. Making my brothers and I half-white. Or

Caucasian. The name I had to learn to check mark on school forms. But the story behind my parent's marriage and the uprising my mother created when she announced that she was going to marry a "*gabacho*," meaning my father. Whenever Uncle Robert told the story, he called it the second Mexican revolution.

Eva and I walked past the front door that faced the street. It was a door no one ever used. And I didn't even know it existed until one day when Eva, Isabella, Jose and I were playing hide-and-seek, and we heard a doorbell ring. We all left our hiding places, even Eva, who was a champion hider, came out from hiding inside one of *Grammita's* dresser drawers. How she got in there I'll never know. Because in all the times I visited my grandparent's house, I had never before heard a doorbell ring. Judging by the looks on my cousins' faces that day, they hadn't either.

The doorbell rang a second time, and we all scrambled to figure out where the bell was coming from. It wasn't until *Grammita* came running through the house asking us, "*¿Por qué no contestas la puerta?*" Which meant why weren't we answering the door. Then she opened a door that I always assumed was a storage closet. It turned out to be the mailman who said he had a package that was too big for my grandparent's mailbox. After he left, my cousins and I forgot all about our game. Instead, we spent the rest of the afternoon going through the house, opening and closing doors, to see if we could find other mystery doors that led to secret passages we didn't know about.

Remembering that day, I laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Eva asked, turning around.

"Nothing."

I hurried to catch up to her near the back porch where I could hear familiar guitar chords and Mexican singing. I could also smell *Grammita's frijoles* coming from the kitchen. I was starving.

Chapter Seven – *Grammita's Kitchen*

My mouth was watering by the time I made it up the steps and through the door. I saw Eddie and Ricki sitting on the wood floor in the corner of the living room. Living out

what I guessed to be their punishment for the water spectacle they caused during the baptism. Ricki was fussing with his tie until Aunt Virginia shot him a look from the dining table. He stopped but crossed his arms and sulked. If sitting in the corner was their only punishment, I thought they got off easy.

I moved into the kitchen where *Grammita* had set out her homemade tortilla chips and famous salsa. My grandmother was a great cook. I don't know how she did it, but she could make anything taste good. Even green beans, which I hated, but not when I ate them at her house. My mom would try to cook my brothers and I the same thing at our house, but it never tasted the same as *Grammita's*. She would get frustrated saying that it was the same as *Grammita's*. But deep down, I think that my mom knew, like we all did, that it really wasn't.

On the table there was flour tortillas, mole and *enchiladas*, made with a spicy, red sauce and stuffed with cheese. But *Grammita* also put out tamales, which must have been the last batch. I already said my grandmother's cooking was the best, but she really did make the best tamales in the world. Except, she only made them once a year around Christmas. She, my aunts and my mom spent hours in the kitchen rolling out the *masa*, filling the dough with meat and folding over the cornhusks to make dozens and dozens of tamales for her friends and our family.

When Eva and I spent the night at *Grammita's* house when we were young, we would often sit at the counter, our stocking feet dangling from the barstools, and watch *Grammita* make flour tortillas. *Papí* would come in from outside, after working in the barn or the yard, and joke, "Why do you think I married your *Grammita*?"

And without missing a beat, Eva and I both asked why.

"For her cooking, of course!" he said. He would pat his stomach that bulged over his brown belt with one hand while swiping a hot tortilla from the top of *Grammita's* stack with the other.

"¡Aye! No mas Miguel!" she said. "You heard what the doctor said about your heart."

But *Papí* just wrapped his arms around her small frame and kissed her cheek. She would try to ward him off, but only halfheartedly, because her hands were caked with *masa*. Eva and I always laughed to see *Grammita* struggling in *Papí's* hold. And he let

her go eventually and slink out of the kitchen but not before snatching another tortilla off the griddle on his way out.

I grabbed a chip and plunged the tip into the *chile* before popping it into my mouth. I may not look it, but I had a wicked kick for spicy food. A high tolerance for things hot was the only Mexican gene I seemed to inherit from my mom.

“*Aye* Sophia!”

Grammita was at the stove making corn tortillas with a tortilla press she brought with her from *Mexico*. She was still in her church dress but had an apron around her waist, which told me that she, like always, had hurried home to start cooking for the herds of guests that were going to be arriving soon.

“Sophía, *por favor*, call your *Papí* and uncles in from the barn. It’s time to eat.”

“Okay.”

I grabbed one more chip dunked in *chile* before heading back out the door.

“Hey, Sam,” Eva called, from the living room. “Where are you going? I need to talk to you.”

“I’ll be right back.” I said.

I walked across the yard toward the red barn. *Papí* had converted the barn into a workshop where he fixed or built things for *Grammita* or the house. But the barn was also where he spent time hiding from her too.

“Understand Sam,” he would say. “I love your *Grammita*. *Con todo mi corazón*. *Pero* sometimes, even God understands, that I need time away from that woman.”

When he wasn’t escaping from *Grammita*, *Papí* was really good with his hands and building things. Mom always said he could have been an excellent carpenter, if he ever had the opportunity to start his own business. *Papí* could make anything with a good piece of wood. If he wasn’t fixing things around the house, *Papí* was fixing something for family or friends. The barn held a lot of tools that he collected over the years, among other things stashed here and there.

Reaching the barn, I pushed open the big side door and almost hit an orange and black tabby cat that had jumped to the side just in time.

“Oh, sorry, Whiskers.”

Whiskers meowed indignantly before fleeing through my legs and off in the direction of the woods. Whiskers was *Papí's* cat. But *Papí* couldn't really claim her because *Grammita* had a thing against cats. She thought that they were the Devil's pets. My grandmother could be a little superstitious sometimes, and that meant no cats allowed.

What my grandmother didn't know was that *Papí* had a soft spot for furry feline friends. He found Whiskers three years ago. She was a scrawny little thing then. No bigger than Ray's shoe, and certainly no larger. She had wandered up Maple Street and ended up at my grandparents' house. I remember I could count her small ribs with my finger. *Papí* took pity on her and made everyone promise not to tell my grandmother about the cat. And no one did because we all knew what would happen if *Grammita* did find out. Whiskers seemed to understand the unspoken contract that she had to keep, which was to stay out of *Grammita's* sight, if she wanted to stay at the house. And she did.

Under *Papí's* care, Whiskers eventually filled out and now helped keep the mice out of the barn. Ever since she came, I haven't seen a mouse poking around the barn or house. She was a good catch, and she never left the mess of her kill for us to find. To be honest, I think *Grammita* knew about Whiskers, and the secret we all kept from her. But she didn't let on. She seemed happy that there haven't been any mice underfoot in her kitchen in the past three years. And I could have sworn that one night I saw her fill up Whisker's bowl that *Papí* left out for her by the barn when the milk was getting low.

I entered the barn and saw that my uncles and *Papí* were sitting around in lawn chairs, drinking beers and talking. *Papí* saw me enter and said, “Sam!”

“Hi *Papí*.” I walked over to them. “*Grammita* says lunch is ready and wants you all to come eat.”

“Does she. Well give your *Papí* a hug first,” he said, leaning back and opening up his arms, which caused him to teeter for a scary moment on the chair.

I sat on his knee before throwing my arms around his neck. “I’m getting too old to sit on your lap.”

“*Esta diciendo locuras,*” he said. “You’ll never get too old.”

“I almost hit Whiskers with the door.”

“Is she angry?”

“I think so.”

He shook his head, “Women.”

And all of us laughed. He stood up, and I stood up with him. He arched his back and said, “Ahhh,” before placing a hand over his heart.

“Don’t grow up, or grow old, Sophía.”

“It’s Sam.”

“*Si, si, si,*” he said. “I know.” He turned toward my uncles. “*Niños,* go inside and eat before your mother comes out here and yells at all of us.” Turning toward me, he said, “Sam I have something for you.”

My uncles cleaned up the shop and threw away their empty beer bottles in the trashcan. I noticed that Uncle Miguel threw away four of his own.

“*Ven, ven,* Sam,” *Papí* beckoned.

He led me over to a cabinet he had made in a corner of the barn. Fishing his keys out from his pocket, he opened the door. He reached in and pulled out a long wooden handle. Once he pulled it threw the open door, I saw that he was holding a medium-sized wooden bat. In the middle was a Mexican flag he had painted green, white and red.

“I know you can’t use it for your real games,” he said, tossing it lightly in his hands. “But I thought that you could use it to practice. Or maybe,” he said, with a grin. “You could use it to knock some sense into your *tontos* brothers.”

We laughed.

“Thank you, *Papí.*”

I took the bat from him, feeling its delicate weight. I gave him a hug.

“Oye! Not so hard,” he laughed. “I’m old.”

I kissed his bearded cheek. “Not so old,” I said, then asked, “As old as an acorn?”

“Older.”

“As old as the trunk?”

It was a game we used to play. Once when I was eight and had spent the night, I had a nightmare. *Grammita* was gone, and *Papí* found me crying in bed. I had a dream that my mom, dad and brothers were in a car crash, and I was left all alone. To calm me down, he told me a story about how death really wasn't so scary. He said it was a little like growing up – a change more than an end.

“Older.”

“As old as branches?”

“Older.”

“As old as leaves?”

Papí didn't answer. I never asked what came after leaves.

“Come on,” he said. “We better go inside before your *Grammita* comes looking for us.”

Chapter Eight – A carrot, some lettuce, a slice of tomato and a funeral

By the time *Papí* and I entered the house, the kitchen was packed, and people were spilling over into the dining and living room. It looked like *Grammita* invited everyone she and *Papí* knew. I wouldn't have been surprised to see the mailman too.

When my grandparents came to America, they became friends with other Mexican families they met along the way. They also made friends with people they met in the fields where they worked. Helping in the fields was the only job *Papí* could find since he didn't speak any English or had much experience, except working in his father's woodshop in *Mexico*. In the fields, *Papí* met other men like him – immigrants who hoped to create a better life for their families in America. And *Papí* with his booming laugh and crooked grin made friends easy. *Grammita* always said that she learned to make extra food for dinner, since she never knew when *Papí* would bring someone home to share a meal and reminisce about the smells and sights of *Mexico*.

I recognized most faces that were talking and eating, and the lucky few that found a spot to sit down, since I had seen them at my grandparents' house before. Many of my grandparents' friends had children around the same age as my mom and my aunts and uncles. They all grew up together like cousins. And, like my mom, they were all grown-

up and had children of their own that were the same age as me and my cousins. When I was younger, I had a hard time figuring out who was my real aunt, uncle or cousin.

I grabbed a plate from the counter and filled it up with beans and rice. I saw Rodrigo Marquez talking in the corner with Uncle Robert. Him and Uncle Robert were the same age and went to school together. He had a son who shared his name, but everyone called him Junior. Junior was the same age as Eva and me. We've known each other since before we all could walk, and even then, he would crawl after us. Which only got worse, the older we got. I made a mental note to warn Eva to be on Junior-Alert.

I squeezed my way through the kitchen and into the living room looking for a vacant spot. I saw Eva huddled down by the misshapen fireplace. It had mismatched bricks and some that jutted out dangerously from the wall. It was a project *Papí* thought my uncles could do when they were younger. But, halfway through building the fireplace, he took a nap. My uncles decided to surprise him and finish laying the stones by themselves. They were so proud of finishing the job by themselves that *Papí* didn't have the heart to take it apart and fix the mess they made. So ever since, the fireplace remains rocky and lopsided.

Eva waved a hand at me. I inched my way through the crowd of people, careful not to spill my food on the floor.

"Hey, have you seen Junior?" she asked, darting her head around the crowd of bodies and legs, looking for what I assumed was Junior's brown and uncombed hair.

"No," I said, sitting down. "But I saw your Dad talking with Uncle Rodrigo and Aunt Maria, so he is probably around here somewhere."

"Urgh, he is so creepy."

"Agreed."

I attempted to balance my plate on my knees, but I wasn't doing a good job.

"Why are you wearing a jacket?" she asked. "It's like ninety degrees outside. Well, probably more like a hundred inside with everybody in here."

"I'm not that hot."

Truth was I was dying since Mass. But I wasn't about to take off my jacket at the cost that everyone would see the dress I was wearing underneath.

“Have you seen Lena?” I asked, changing the subject. But I didn’t need to because Eva didn’t respond.

I looked over to see her staring into space.

“Hellooo – Eva?”

“Huh?” she asked. “Lena. No, I haven’t seen her.” She took a big bite out of her carrot. I looked over at her plate and noticed that the only thing on it was some shredded lettuce, a tomato slice, and now a half-eaten carrot.

“Real hungry?”

“Hmmm?”

I nodded at her plate. “Not hungry?” I asked. “I didn’t know *Grammita* had vegetables for lunch,” I said, taking a spoonful of beans off my own plate.

“I found this next to the tacos,” she said, waving a hand at her plate’s meager contents. “I guess I wasn’t very hungry,” she said, with a shrug.

“Really?” I asked, skeptical. I knew my cousin Eva. And I knew better than anyone that she loved *Grammita*’s cooking, just as much as me. She was as bad as *Papi* when it came to stealing extra flour tortillas.

“Not even for a tortilla?” I asked, waving a warm one under her nose.

She swatted it away from her face and scowled at me.

“No. I’m not hungry.”

“Okay, okay” I said, retracting the dejected tortilla. “Sorry.”

She took another big bite from her carrot, and after a moment, she sighed.

“Look, if you want to know, I’m trying to lose a little weight.”

“What? Why? You’re not even fat.”

“Gee thanks, Sam.”

“Sorry that’s not what I meant.”

“I know I am not *fat*,” she said, slowly. “But I want to be a little thinner. For dance.”

My face must have done something funny because she laughed and said, “Don’t look so shocked! It’s no big deal. Besides,” she said, matter-of-factly. “People go on diets all the time.”

I looked at Eva, the cousin I had grown up with, the one I had shared a bottle with as a baby and lost a tooth with as a kid, and *really* looked at her.

I had always been the lanky, super-skinny kid growing up while Eva always had a little more meat on her bones, as *Grammita* liked to say. I used to think it bothered Eva when *Grammita* said that, but then she never complained or said anything. She would just get quiet.

Still looking at her, I knew Eva was not fat. Sure, in the last few years, she had more meat on her than before, but I knew that happened to a lot of girls. I knew I wouldn't mind having "more meat on my bones." I didn't tell Eva this, but it would be nice to look semi girl-like.

But the more I looked at Eva and the thin line of her mouth, the more I knew that she was serious about this diet.

Once when we were nine, Eva and I decided to collect potato bugs – the ones that are small and grey with black stripes and roll up into a ball if you picked them up. We found them in *Grammita's* vegetable garden, and tickled their stomachs, like Uncle Miguel taught us, which made their bodies unfurl. Eva wanted to build a home for them because she felt that they were homeless and needed a place to live all together as a family. I didn't tell her that maybe the garden was their home, or that we didn't even know if the ones we found were even related. But I agreed to help her anyway.

Eva got *Papí* to agree to build us a bughouse with several small openings for our friends to breathe. We painted it a deep green and filled it with grass and leaves and dirt. We thought that filling the bughouse with things we found in the garden would make them less homesick. Eva said she wanted them to feel comfortable in their brand-new box.

The first couple of days, we watched over our potato bug family in their new house nonstop. But then, they never seemed to do much, so we forgot about the bughouse and them. It wasn't until a week later that we remembered to check the box and found all our bugs upside down with their tiny thread-like legs up in the air.

I remember I started to cry and blamed Eva for making me a murderer at the age of nine.

“We killed them, “ I cried. “This is all your fault! I knew putting them in a box was a stupid idea.”

But Eva just stood there. I could tell she was thinking, but I didn't care because I all *I* could think about was that we were going to go to Hell for sure now. I tried to remember if *Grammita* said she was going to confessions that afternoon, and if I could join because maybe then, I would be saved after all.

I started hiccupping when Eva knelt down next to me. I was still holding the box, which now, was really a casket.

“We didn't kill them, Sam,” she said, softly. “I didn't want to tell you this before because I knew you would only be upset, but they were sick before we built their home. She put her hand on my shoulder. “I just wanted to give them a place to rest during their last days on earth,” she said, solemnly.

I hiccupped again. I wanted to believe her then, and her face looked so earnest, that I did.

“Now we have to give them a proper funeral.”

And so *we* did.

Like she planned the bughouse, Eva orchestrated the whole funeral. She got a black piece of cloth from *Grammita*'s sewing basket and draped it dramatically over the box. She then enlisted Uncle Miguel to dig us a small hole in the garden, which we both agreed was appropriate for their final resting place.

Papí stopped working, and *Grammita* stopped making lunch to attend our funeral. *Grammita* was still dressed in her apron, and *Papí* took off his straw hat after Eva gave him a look. Lena was there too, and Ray and Julio. Ray kept snickering and whispering, “Murderers,” during the service, until *Papí* smacked the back of his head. He was much quieter after that.

The funeral was short as Eva only said only few prayers. Although I cried the whole time, Eva's face remained stoic. After her farewell speech – which I admit was pretty good –she gave me my cue to throw the wildflowers I had picked from the garden on top of the black-covered box. Then Uncle Miguel shoveled the fresh dirt on top of our bughouse and covered our first, and only, potato bug family.

I remember I couldn't help but think that, after our bugs were buried and *Grammita* called us in for lunch, Eva had planned everything from the beginning. That day, she seemed to enjoy planning the funeral more than building a bughouse. So even though I thought the diet was a stupid idea, I knew that once Eva set her mind to something, there was no talking her out of it.

Chapter Nine –Aunt Lena has a date

Eva had finished her carrot and tomato slice and was picking at her lettuce when I remembered she had wanted to tell me something.

“Hey, what did you want to talk to me about again?”

“Hmm?”

“You said you had something to tell me.”

“Oh, yeah!” she said. She turned toward me, and her face lit up. “I met this boy.”

“A boy?”

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that this was the big news she had to tell me. Eva has been boy crazy since – well, ever since I remember really.

“Well,” she added, quickly. “I didn't really meet him...but I saw him. And he is sooo cute!”

“Where?”

“At the city library. Which is why I wanted to tell you because now I really want to go to the library with you, so that I can see him again and find out who he is.”

I laughed. I had been trying to get Eva to go the main public library for a year now. Ever since our parents said we were old enough to take the light rail into the city by ourselves.

Unlike Eva, I loved reading. I took after my dad who was always reading a book. Ever since the main library re-opened after being re-modeled, I had wanted to go. Dad took me there once before when I was seven, and all I remember was feeling like every book that was ever written was somewhere waiting to be read in that library. I loved our library in Lakecrest, especially because all the librarians knew me by name and would sometimes set books aside for me that they knew I would like. But I had already read

most books in the children and young-adult section that I had started requesting books from other libraries, most came from the city library. I avoided the adult-fiction section because I didn't know if I was even allowed to look, let alone check out, the books in there.

"So let me get this straight," I said. "You'll finally go to the city library with me because you want to find some boy there? Why were you there in the first place? I thought you were allergic to libraries."

"Very funny," Eva sneered. "Mom and I were meeting Dad in the city last week, and we got there early. So we went to the library while we were waiting. Trust me, it wasn't my idea. Although now I know he's there, I wish I had gone with you sooner."

"Wait a minute Eva. Saying we do go there," I said. "How do you even know that he's going to be there?"

"Because he works there – duh! Do you think I'd lead you on a wild goose chase?"

I didn't answer that question. "Okay, okay," I said. "How do you know he works there? *And*, he has to be, like, super old."

"He was putting books away."

"That doesn't mean he works there."

"Well, I don't know – but he's not *that* old."

"You don't even know if he works there!"

"Well he looks like he's our age." She paused, "Although that would be sooo cool if he was older."

"Oh jeez, Eva. I don't want to go to the library with you, if all you want to do is swoon over some boy."

"Aw, come on, Sam. Don't be such a baby! Besides you've wanted to go since last winter, and whenever we go to the library together, you always wander off on your own anyway."

I didn't say anything.

"Come on," Eva said, with a plea in her voice. She grabbed my arm, "Pleasse." Then letting go, she pressed her hands together like we were taught to pray in Catechism class.

“Fine,” I said, standing up with my empty plate. “I guess we can go, but we’ll have to get our moms to agree.”

“Yes!” she said, and her plate toppled over, spilling the rest of her lettuce on the floor. “They will.”

I started walking toward the kitchen

“Hey, where are you going?”

“To find Lena,” I said, but I don’t know if she heard me over the talking and music, and I only heard bits of her warning,

“Well—remember—watch—Junior.”

After dropping my plate off in the kitchen, I headed toward the stairs that led to Lena’s room. Lena and Uncle Miguel still lived at home with *Grammita* and *Papí*. Both were much younger than my mom and her other four siblings, which explained why Lena and Uncle Miguel were so close.

After my mom married my dad, Lena and Miguel were the only ones left at home. Lena was eight and Miguel seven when Aunt Cynthia had my cousin Carmen. Unlike Aunt Cynthia, Aunt Sonya, Aunt Vicki and Aunt Rosalinda, Lena seemed more like a big sister than an aunt. Ever since I was little and whenever I was at *Grammita*’s, Lena was always there with new ideas to have fun. She also let us jump on her bed, as long as we didn’t giggle too much and alerted *Grammita*.

I walked up the half-flight of stairs and heard sounds of Mexican music coming from the room on the left. Except this time, the music had more beats and rhythm and not as lyrical as the music being played in the kitchen.

I knocked quietly on the door, which was slightly ajar. No answer. I knocked again a little harder.

“¿Qué? ¡Estoy ocupanda!”

“Lena, it’s me.”

“¿Quién?”

“Sam,” I shouted, through the crack.

At the sound of my name, the door flew open from the inside, and I saw Lena still wearing her colorful dress, but her hair a little less tame and the curls a little more like lighting bolts coming from her head.

“Oh, Sam!” she said, with a smile. “Sorry. I thought you were someone else.” She turned around just as quickly and waked over to her vanity that was just as colorful as her outfit.

Tucked inside the vanity mirror were pictures of my cousins and me, some when we were little and some more recent. There were also pictures of my aunt and her friends. All of the people in the photos were smiling. Also attached were torn pages from books and letters, and postcards from *Mexico*. I loved looking at her mirror and reading the new sayings she added or found.

Scattered along the table were miniature bottles of perfume, lotions, nail polish and jewelry. I sat down on her bed that had a brightly colored blanket thrown over it. It was called a *serape* – a hand-woven blanket made on the great looms in *Mexico* from brightly dyed sheep wool. Most had unique patterns and designs made especially by the weaver. My mom had one too. She kept hers neatly folded at the foot of her and my dad’s bed.

I loved my aunt’s room. It reminded me and smelled just like her. The walls were covered with posters and paintings. Some of the paintings were hers and some were paintings by her friends who were also artists. I smiled when I saw one of my paintings – one of my first – thumb tacked to the wall. I’d given it to her as a present, and it was awful.

I had tried to paint a picture of the ocean with a bird flying in the sky. But it looked more like an odd-shaped fish in the air. I had thrown it away after Ray saw it and made fun of it, but my mom had fished it out of the garbage and gave it to my aunt without telling me. Lena had smoothed out the wrinkles and put it right in the middle of her room.

“Now everyone can see the great imagination my niece has,” she said.

But my favorite part to Lena’s room was the two pictures on her nightstand, which was a collection of shoeboxes Lena painted, stacked and glued together. The first photograph was of my mom and Lena taken the year before mom married my dad. They

were both smiling with their arms wrapped around each other's necks and the same happy look in their green eyes. The second photo was of Lena, Uncle Miguel and I. I was eleven. It was taken last summer when we drove all day to the beach, and it started raining. Eva was sick that day, and my brothers didn't want to come. All three of us didn't think to bring a jacket, but we ran across the sand anyway and got soaked. In the picture, I'm squeezed between Lena and Uncle Miguel, and our clothes our suctioned to our skin, but we're smiling.

"Who'd you think I was?" I asked. I started to play with her blanket's tassels.

"Oh," she said, with one eyelid closed, as she applied more green makeup. "I thought you were Giovanni."

I laughed. "Giovanni? You mean your boyfriend?"

"He is *not* my boyfriend, Sam. We went on one date because *Papí* said I had to give him a chance," she paused to look at me through the mirror and lifted up her brush indignantly. Deepening her voice, she mimicked *Papí*, "Elena Mariah Ramirez, Giovanni is the son of my closet friend, Bernado Rodriquez. Bernado is like my brother. So you will agree to have dinner with Giovanni, so help me God."

I fell back on the bed, clutching my stomach. Lena always gave the best impression of *Papí*. She was the only one who could mimic *Papí's* serious voice and stern frown without breaking character.

"*Aye*, Sam," she said, shaking her head after she stopped laughing. "One date, and he thinks we are going to walk down the aisle tomorrow. Even after I told him, I didn't like him like that and only agreed to have dinner with him because *Papí* forced me."

This started me laughing again.

"I am warning you," she said, this time more seriously, and shaking her make-up brush at my reflection. "Dating *Mexicanos* is *no bueno*. All they want you to do is marry them, raise their children and feed them *frijoles* and tortillas every day."

That only made me laugh harder.

Lena finished her makeup and moved to her armoire where she started picking through her clothes. She grabbed a black dress and flung it on the bed. Over her shoulder she said, "Help me will you?"

I hopped off the bed and started to unzip the back of the dress she was wearing.

“Where are you going?”

She stepped out of her dress and grabbed the black one from the bed. Slipping it off its hanger, she pulled it down over her head.

“*Otra vez.*”

I zipped her back up, but this time, the dress took a longer time to zip up because it was skintight. And that was saying something, because my aunt was rather thin, but unlike me, she had curves. She whirled around.

“How do I look?”

She looked amazing, like always. It was a black dress with long sleeves and a neck that scooped along her slender shoulders. But it was short. And tight.

“*Papí* is not going to be happy.”

Lena turned around to look at herself in the mirror. She pulled and teased her curls making them bounce even more. “What *Papí* doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

She turned back around, arms akimbo. “Really Sam, *¿Qué te parece?* ”

“You look great.”

She smiled and moved to grab some red lipstick from her table.

“Where are going anyway? You can’t just leave the party.”

“I have a date.”

“I thought you just said dating was no good.”

“Ah,” she said, pausing to smack her lips together. “I said dating silly *Mexicano* boys is no good.”

“But you’re Mexican,” I protested. “And I’m Mexican...at least half- Mexican,” I added, after a pause.

“*Ya se, Ya se.* But I think Maria Ella is right. It is much better to date a *gabacho*. Less messy. You don’t have to worry about the *loca* mother-in-laws and big, noisy families.”

I thought about what she said, and how it was true that we never really saw my dad’s side of the family, except for Thanksgiving and once during the summer when my grandparents visited. My dad was an only child, so I always thought that if he had

brothers and sisters, like my mom, then we would see them just as much, but maybe, I was wrong.

But I still didn't really understand what was wrong with dating someone who was Mexican. My parents didn't fight much, but if they did, it was often because of something *Papí* had said about Americans or some Mexican tradition that my mom wanted to have Ray, Julio and I follow that my dad didn't agree with. But I guess, sometimes, it did make sense to marry someone from the same culture.

At least it would be easier for the kids, I thought. Kids from two different backgrounds often get stuck in the middle. Between the limbo of not knowing if she is more Mexican or more American, and if she has to choose one over the other. But I didn't say any of this to Lena.

Seeing my face, Lena grabbed and hugged me.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she said into my hair. "That was so *stúpido*. I didn't mean it."

I didn't say anything

"Besides," she said, holding me away from her. "I will probably end up marrying someone exactly like Giovanni and have ten full-blooded Mexican babies." She smiled, "And then won't *Papí* be happy!"

That made me laugh. Lena tucked my hair behind my ears. "*Aye mija*, you sure are getting tall."

Holding me at arm's length, I was now level with her eyes. The last time I had measured myself, I was 5'2", which was a month before softball season started.

"Must be from your father's side," she said finally.

She was probably right because Lena and my mom were the tallest girls in the Ramirez family, and they only stood at 5'4."

"And why are you wearing this jacket," she said, grabbing my zipper. "*Hace calor—*"

But she managed to unzip my jacket before I could stop her, and she spied the bubblegum-pink dress. She whistled out loud, and I raised my hands to cover my red face, another reminder that I had inherited my dad's pale skin.

"I knew she was wearing a dress!"

Both Lena and I turned to see my brother Ray and cousin Eddie standing in the doorway of Lena's room.

"Nice dress, Sam." Eddie called, before snickering.

"Yeah, you finally look like a real girl," Ray said. "NOT!"

"*Miralo!*" Lena shouted, waving her hand at them. "Get going, *ustedes dos*, and don't say things you know nothing about."

Unlike my mother, Lena understood how much I hated wearing dresses.

"*Aye, niños.*"

I sat down hard on the bed.

"Oh Sam, it's okay. They're just being boys." She stood in front of me with her hands held out. "Here. Stand up."

"Why?"

"Come on, you'll see. *Levantate.*"

She pulled me up, and then, she looked me up and down, clucking her tongue.

"I know. I look stupid." I went to sit back down, but Lena grabbed my arms and kept me standing.

"No. It's this dress —" She shook her head. "It's *bestia*. Where did you get this dress?"

"My mom bought it for me."

"*¡Aye no!*" she said. "Maria Ella should have known that this dress is not for you. This summer, I promise we will go shopping and get you a proper dress that doesn't make you look like—like a—"

"Like a pink popsicle," I finished.

This time I sat back down on her bed pulling the woven blanket around me, and she let me.

"*Si,*" she said, shaking her head again.

"So who are you going to see?"

She looked hard at me knowing I was trying to change the subject before she decided to let me.

"His name is Marcus, and he is in one of my art classes. And that is all the information you are going to get," she finished, in seeing my mouth open again.

Grabbing her purse from the nightstand and throwing me my black jacket, she said, “And now, you are going to create a distraction to help me get out of the house without *Papí* or Mama seeing me.”

Chapter Ten – Learning how to straighten my elbow

“Straighten that elbow, Sam!”

I pulled my right elbow up, raised behind my ear, like Coach Sanders showed us. I bent my knees, digging my cleat deeper into the soft, red dirt. I watched Tina lean back, raise her arm in the air before arching it back and around, fast and hard, and releasing the ball exactly at her hip. And for a split second, I waited.

“WHACK.”

I could hear Coach Sanders yelling at Sasha and Becca in the outfield as I took off for first. Becca had an eye and glove for line drives, but I kept running because I knew that the moment my bat hit the ball I was golden.

I saw Megan crouched low by home plate with her gloved hand open and waiting, as I rounded third. I slid, and my side hit the dirt first before my outreached fingers touched home plate just as Megan caught the ball from Sasha.

Cheers erupted from behind the fence, and I could hear Natalie and Joanna’s excited hollers.

“That was a close call, Sam.”

I stood up and tried to dust the red off my pants but ended up smearing it more.

“I know,” I smiled at Megan who had taken off her catcher’s helmet. “Good catch, Megan! When we play on Saturday, the Beavers won’t know what hit them.”

Our first softball game was on Saturday, and for the last half hour of practice, Coach broke us into two teams to play a scrimmage game. My home run got my team two more runs and put us in the lead, and practice was almost over.

I walked back toward the dugout as Natalie went out to bat next. I passed my coach who was leaning against the fence with her arms crossed.

“You need to watch that right arm, Sam.”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Tina! Keep your left leg planted on your release,” Coach Sanders shouted at Tina on the pitcher’s mound.

I started making my way to the bench. Over her shoulder, she said, “Good hit, Sam.” Before turning back around and shouting, “Natalie bend your knees!”

“Thanks, Coach.”

Coach Sanders, whose name was Paula, was Becca’s mom. But we never called her anything but Coach. Even when the team and I went over to Becca’s house, and Coach Sanders was dressed in business clothes. Becca’s mom worked for a law office as a paralegal. It was always weird to see her out of her track pants, T-shirts and zip-up hoodies, and in normal grown-up clothes.

Coach Sanders has been our coach for the last three years. She was a good coach but as tough as nails and pushed us hard, which is why we slowly became one of the best teams in our league. Coach used to play softball in college, and in the same position I played – third basemen. Becca said that her mom was picked to play for the USA women’s softball team after college, but then she met Becca’s dad, and they had Becca and her younger brother and sister. Now she sometimes played on Lakecrest’s women’s softball team or coached us, but that was all.

“Good job, Sam.”

“Yeah, nice hit!”

“Now if you just hit like that on Saturday, we’ll cream those Beavers!”

I laughed. “Thanks guys.”

My teammates turned back to watching Natalie who just got a hit. I took off my batting helmet and started cheering with them. But Coach called our game quits soon after because practice was over. Everyone piled back into the dugout to pick up our bags and swap out our red-caked cleats with our normal sneakers. It was always a scramble after practice to make sure you grabbed the right shoe, mitt or bag.

It was a little after seven, but being summer, it was still light outside. And warm. Our parents’ cars were starting to line up in the parking lot, and their headlights were faintly visible. As we headed out of the dugout, my scrimmage teammates gave each other high fives to celebrate our win. And we tried not to look too smug for the rest of our team.

“Hey Sam, did you need a ride?” Joanna asked, slinging her pack over a shoulder. I looked up from tying my sneaker. “Yeah, do you think that’d be okay with your mom?”

“Sure! No problem,” she said. “My mom was the one who offered.”

“Okay, thanks.”

We followed everyone down the hill together, almost running, because of the weight of our bags. People were still saying goodbye, climbing into cars, and calling out about Saturday and kicking butt at our first game of the season.

Joanna swung open the passenger-side door of the silver minivan as well the side door for me and threw her bag on the ground before climbing in next to her mom.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Hi, honey.”

Joanna’s mom turned in her seat and smiled back at me.

“Hi, Sam.”

“Hi, Mrs. Peters,” I said, climbing inside the van and pulling my bag on top of my lab. “Thank you for driving me home.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said, waving her hand and pulling out of the parking lot to follow the train of cars headed into town. “When Joanna told me that your dad works nights on Wednesdays, and that your mother...well, that she isn’t very comfortable driving—”

“Mom,” Joanna said, with a strain and note of irritation. She looked back at me with apologetic eyes.

“What? What did I say?”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Peters,” I said. “My dad does work some nights at the library, and my mom doesn’t really like driving unless she has to. When she was little, she was in a bad car accident.” Although my mom’s fear of driving wasn’t a big secret, it was still embarrassing to explain to people, and why I always seemed to need a ride home.

“See Joanna, it’s no big secret,” Mrs. Peters said. “And,” she said, looking back at me. “I don’t mind driving you home dear.” Facing forward, she said, “And Sam, you and Joanna have known each other for two years now, please call me Holli.”

“Uh, okay thanks—Holli,” I said.

Mrs. Peters, Holli, winked at me in the rearview mirror.

I always liked Joanna's mom. Whenever I came over to their house, she was always kind to me. She'd often bring us Oreos – my favorite – on a tray with two glasses of milk to Joanna's room, and then, she'd leave us alone. If we were at my house, and it was my mom, it would be rare that anyone I brought home would escape my mom's questions long enough to even make it to my room. And once there, I don't know if she would leave us alone like Holli did. Which is why even though I've known Joanna since we started playing softball together, which is how we became friends, I've never invited her over to my house.

In the front seat, Joanna started talking about practice and how she caught two excellent passes on first that both turned into double plays. I settled back into my seat and looked over at Bethany, Joanna's little sister, who was only twelve months old. She was starring at me from her car seat with large, blue eyes. I reached out a finger and tickled her toes through her white socks with pink frills that were upright in the air.

She giggled.

At practice, Joanna always talked about how much it sucked to have a little sister because her mom always expected her to baby-sit. Or change Bethany's diapers.

Joanna's parents got divorced when Joanna was eight. Then two years ago, right when we became friends, her mom re-married and had a baby with Joanna's step-dad, Tim. I told her that she should be grateful that at least her mom had a girl and not a boy.

I tickled Bethany's toes again, and she laughed, reaching out with her small hands to grab her own feet.

"She still awake?" Holli asked, through the rearview mirror.

"Oh yeah, sorry. I didn't mean to keep her up."

"Oh, she never sleeps during car rides anyway," Holli said. "If I remember right, you have a little brother, don't you Sam?"

"Yeah. But he is eight, and not so little anymore. Or cute," I added. "I also have an older brother Ray."

"Ray's fifteen. He's gonna be in ninth grade next year," Joanna said, excitedly.

“Well, that should be fun,” Holli said.

“Yeah,” I said, looking out the window. “Real fun.”

Joanna and I both went to different grade schools, and although we were both excited to be going to the same school in the fall, Lakecrest Jr. High School, Joanna was more excited to be in the same school as my brother than I was.

“Joanna told me that one of your family members had a baptism last Saturday.”

“Yeah, my baby cousin Matthew.”

“Sam has a huge family, Mom,” Joanna gushed. “Like,” she turned around in her seat, “don’t you have thirty cousins?”

“I don’t have thirty *real* cousins,” I said. “But yeah, something like that.”

“And they all hang out, Mom. Like *all* the time. Isn’t that just insanely cool!”

“Uhuh—I can’t even imagine,” Holli said. “I only have one sister, Sam, and she only has two boys—”

“Who both suck,” Joanna muttered.

“Joanna!”

“Well, they do. You know they’re not nice to me, Mom.”

We had made it to my neighborhood, and Holli pulled the van up to the curbside of my house. I could see Ray in the driveway dribbling a basketball. Julio was probably around somewhere too.

“Thanks again for the ride, Mrs. Sanders— I mean Holli,” I said, swinging open the door and hopping down on the freshly cut grass. Maybe Dad had finally gotten Ray to mow the lawn, I thought.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. Anytime.”

“See ya Saturday, Jo.”

“Bye Sam!”

I watched Joanna wave at me from the window as they pulled away, but when I turned around I saw that my brother had stopped dribbling and was standing directly behind me. I don’t know if Joanna was waving goodbye to me, or hello to my brother. But I didn’t stay in the yard long enough to figure it out.

Chapter Eleven – Sophía Annalicia Maria Martin, but my name is still Sam

I went into the house through the garage, and I could hear sounds from the kitchen where my mom was making dinner. I snuck into the kitchen as quietly as I could on the way up the stairs to my room. I thought I was in the clear stepping into the upstairs hallway and just inches from my room, when my mother came and stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Sophía, is that you?” she called up.

I waited.

“Sophía?”

“It’s Sam, Mom!” I shouted, pressed against the wall.

Silence.

“I’m pretty dirty Mom, so I’m going to go take a shower. “

“Dinner will be ready soon, Sophía”

“Okay!”

I hurried to my room before she started asking more questions, and even though she didn’t, I could hear her muttering in Spanish on her way back into the kitchen.

I opened my door, threw my bag on the floor before falling in a heap on my bed, exhausted. I reached down and grabbed my ball and mitt from my bag. I started tossing it in the air and catching it on its descent. I wasn’t technically allowed to throw balls in the house, but then again, I thought, I was supposed to be taking a shower right now, and I wasn’t doing that either.

Tossing the ball in the air and catching it helped me forget about being frustrated with my mom for forgetting, or refusing, to call me Sam.

My full name is Sophía Annalicia Maria Martin. In kindergarten, I remember struggling to remember all the letters when we had to practice spelling our names. I also remember having to ask Mrs. Bradshaw for more paper. The only exception, of course, was Grammita, who I still let call me Sophía.

We were finishing eating dinner when I announced to my mom and dad that I wanted to be called Sam two years ago. I should have known better to predict what happened next.

“But you have such a beautiful name,” my mom said, exasperated. “You could go by so many different names, Sophie, Anna, Maria, Lecia. But *aye no*, you choose ‘Sam.’ Why Sophía? *¿Por que?* Why do you insist on being called such a *bestia* name?”

But when I refused to listen to her, my mom pleaded with my dad.

“*Por favor* Michael! *Como se dice en inglés*, ‘talk some sense into your daughter.’”

And I was surprised to see that my dad, who often agrees with my mom on most things, actually stood up in my defense that day.

“Maria Ella,” he said, calmly. “If Sophía wants to be called a name different than the one we gave her, then, maybe, we should respect her wishes. I think she’s old enough for us to trust her judgment.”

My mom looked back and forth between my dad and me before she threw up her hands.

“*Aye! Por favor Dios!* What kind of daughter am I raising that she insists to be called such an American name?”

My mom left the room, muttering more in Spanish, and my dad threw me a knowing look before following her out of the kitchen.

Even though two years have past since our argument in the kitchen, my mom still insists on calling me Sophía, despite that everyone else, after some time, switched to calling me Sam.

It’s not that I don’t like the name Sophía or Annalicia or even Maria. When I was little, I didn’t mind Sophía so much. I didn’t change my name to make my mom upset, even though she still complains that I go by Sam to act *La Rebeldono* or the rebel. Besides my pale white skin and mousy-brown hair doesn’t really scream: Sophía. At least what a *real* Sophía must look like. But I could never explain that to my mom.

I tossed the ball a little higher this time, and as I raised my mitt to catch it, a hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

“Gotcha!”

I screamed. The ball that was still airborne fell just to the right of my head before rolling off the bed.

I heard laughing and looked to see Julio rolling on the floor.

“I totally got you,” he giggled, between breaths. He threw out his arms and opened his mouth in a mock scream, imitating me.

“Julio, it’s not funny,” I said, angrily. “That ball could have hit me! Who said you could come into my room? Didn’t you read the sign?”

I reached behind me to chuck a pillow at him. He raised his arms over his head to protect himself but kept laughing.

“You think it’s funny?” I asked, but I could feel a grin forming. I grabbed another pillow and chucked it. This time it hit its mark.

Julio stood up, picked up a pillow and charged me by jumping onto the bed. I blocked his attack with another pillow, and soon, we entered a full on combat. But we collapsed on the bed when our arms grew tired and our stomachs ached from laughing.

“I really sacred you– uh?” Julio said. His grin was missing a tooth.

“Sure. I guess.” I said, sarcastically.

“I had to wait under your bed *forever*. And it smelled. From your stinky old softball shoes.”

I pushed his black head of hair against the bed. “Serves you right.” I smiled. Sometimes my little brother could be all right.

Julio just laughed some more. Then he grabbed my hand and raised it in the air with his. His hand was still soft, although it was getting to be the same size as mine. Julio had caramel skin like a blend of hazelnuts and cocoa. My eggshell white hand stood out more when interlaced with his.

“Like milk chocolate,” he said.

“Like white chocolate,” I said.

We both paused.

“Like dark chocolate,” Julio said, after while.

It was a game we used to play when we were little. Ray, Julio and I would put our hands together and shout out the three colors of chocolate that we represented: I was white, Julio was milk and Ray was always dark chocolate. It had been awhile since we played.

“I wish Ray wasn’t still mad at me. As he said this, he dropped my hand like it was suddenly too hot to hold.

“Ray’s mad at you? For what?”

“Because of what happened at church.”

“But that was practically his fault.”

“Yeah, but it was my ball. He still won’t talk to me, especially since Mom said he has to mow the lawn for the rest of the summer.”

“Oh,” I said, “That’s why the grass was cut.” Julio and I knew that Ray hated mowing the lawn more than anything.

Julio was quiet. I could tell he was thinking. I wanted to tell him not worry about Ray, and that he would eventually come around. But I knew that Julio idolized Ray. Anything I said wouldn’t change the fact that his older brother wasn’t talking to him. And I wasn’t sure that Ray would come around. Lately, he’d been acting like a class-A jerk. Most days I just ignored him, but with Julio, it was different. But before I could think of anything to say, Julio said, “It’s not fair you have your own room.”

“I’m the only girl. It makes sense that I get my own room,” I said. “Besides I thought you liked sharing with Ray.” I nudged him, hoping to crack a smile.

“Yeah, when he was cool.”

I wanted to hug him, but then, we heard Mom calling us for dinner.

“Shoot,” I said, jumping up from the bed. “Mom is going to kill me.”

Julio got up from the bed but at a normal pace. “Why?”

“I was supposed to be taking a shower. Cover for me?”

“Okay, I guess,” he said, shrugging. On his way out the door, he said, “But you owe me.”

“Yeah, yeah okay” I said, grabbing my stuff to head toward the bathroom.

He stuck his head around the doorframe, “Yeah. I was going to tell you: You really do stink!”

I chucked my sneaker at the door, but his head had already disappeared.

Chapter Twelve – A cat that hiccups soap bubbles

On Saturday, we played the Beavers and won nine to three. I had a home run that gained us three extra runs. I almost had a second home run, but I got tagged at second. But Becca and Natalie did make it home. It was a scorcher that day, 95 degrees. By the end of the game, we were all sweaty and our hair stuck to our scalps underneath our baseball caps. But it felt good to win our first game of the season.

To celebrate, Coach took us out for ice cream at Bert's. It was Lakecrest's most popular burger joint. Bert's drew a crowd, not because of the food, but because Bert owned a pet monkey named, Neiko, who had his own little jungle built in the corner of the diner.

My teammates gathered around the glass mirror when we arrived while we took turns ordering our ice cream. Katie and Sasha had their noses pressed to the glass trying to catch a glimpse of Neiko the monkey.

"I think he's over there," Sasha said, pointing a finger toward the corner where the least amount of light reached.

"I wish he would walk across the trapeze or something," Katie said, disappointed.

"What's the point of having a monkey if he's just going to sit there," Rachel said.

I stood back from the window. I thought it was cruel to have monkey in a diner for people to gawk or point fingers.

"Maybe he's sick of people always looking at him," Joanna spoke up from behind. But our teammates didn't seem to hear her.

"Doesn't it make you sick?" she said, coming to stand next to me. Joanna was one of the first to order and had a double scoop of Cherry-Cherry Cola in her hand.

"Yeah."

"Poor monkey," she said taking a lick. "Everyone is watching him, but I bet he still feels all alone."

I nodded. In some ways, I felt like I knew exactly how Neiko must feel. I knew what it was like to be surround by a lot of people and still feel all alone and out of place. Sometimes I wish I wasn't part of such a big family. Sometimes it was overwhelming to have so many people know about everything thing you're doing, all the time.

"Hey Sam...Sam?" Joanna said. "Hey you there?"

“What?”

“You’re doing that thing again. You know, when you get all serious and space out. Like you’re in another world.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said, embarrassed and avoided Joanna’s stare. “I’m fine.” I turned away from Sasha and Natalie who were now rapping on the glass. “I think I’m gonna get my ice cream now,” I said.

Dad picked me up from Bert’s after we all finished our ice cream and swapped stories about the game’s highlights. When I saw our car pulling into the parking lot, I said goodbye to Joanna and my teammates, whose parents were still on their way, before grabbing my gear and hopping in the car.

“Hey kiddo! How was the game? Don’t forget your seat belt.”

I sighed but buckled my seat belt as we pulled out of Bert’s.

“We won. Nine to three.”

“Really? That’s great!”

A minute passed. “I got a home run.”

“Wow, that’s really great!”

“Yeah,” I said, staring out the windshield. “It’d been cool if you could have been there,” I added.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” he said, looking over at me. “You know I would have been there if I could. The library has me working extra hours with this new special collection that came in last week.”

He pushed his sliver-rimmed glasses up on the bridge of his nose. It was a nervous habit.

“Yeah, I know.” I gave him a half smile. “I just wish you could’ve been there.”

“Next game. Promise.”

I spent the rest of the car ride filling him in on the details of the game. Like how Joanna got the first three runners out at first in the first inning, and how Becca almost ran into the fence trying to catch a pop fly, but she missed the fence and caught the ball. I was about to tell him about my second almost-home run and how my foot was

centimeters away from the base when the second baseman tagged me out, when we drove into our cul-de-sac, and I saw Uncle Emilio and Aunt Vicki's car in our driveway.

"Looks like we have company," my dad said, smiling.

"Oh great," I muttered. "I bet they already have five booby traps lined up just to get to my room." They being my brothers and cousins.

My dad chuckled. "I wouldn't expect anything less from them."

My dad and I made it into the house without running, falling or tripping on something, which was a good sign. My mom and Aunt Vicki were talking in the kitchen. They were standing by the stove and rolling out what looked like *enchiladas*, which were my favorite.

"Sophía!" my mom said. "Good! You're home. Now you can help me and Aunt Vicki make *enchiladas* for dinner."

"Aw, Mom," I said, dropping my bag on the tile floor. "Do I have to? I'm tired and sweaty."

"How was the game, Sam?" Aunt Vicki asked.

"We won," I said, smiling at her. "And I had a home run."

"Aye softball," my mom sighed. She raised a hand in the air that was red from the *chile* sauce. "All she thinks about is that game. You shouldn't encourage her Vicki."

My dad sensing an argument, interjected. "Where are the boys?"

"They're outside playing. Emilio is supervising."

He walked over to my mom and kissed her on the cheek.

"Which means he is either sleeping or encouraging their mischief," Aunt Vicki said, shaking her head.

"Well, maybe, I should leave you two alone and join him," he said, winking at me. "Emilio might need an extra pair of eyes."

"You are just as bad as your daughter," my mom said, pulling away from his hug. "Never helping in the kitchen."

But dad and I both knew that my mom hated having my dad in the kitchen with her because when he did try to help, she ended up yelling at him to get out of her kitchen because he was just getting in the way. As for me, although I loved Mexican food, I was

horrible when it came to anything related to cooking. I could barely manage to stir something without ruining it, and that was often a fluke.

I tried to sneak upstairs as my dad made his way outside, but my mom saw me.

“I mean it, Sophía,” she warned. “Clean up, but then come right back downstairs to help. How are you going to cook for your family, uh *hija*? When are you going to learn how to make all your favorite dishes?”

“Okay, okay, Mom.” I said, before taking the stairs two at a time.

I heard her mumble something to Aunt Vicki before shouting up to me, “I’m going to call your *Grammita* and tell her you’re coming over to learn how to cook like *la verdadera mujer Mexicana*.”

After I changed, I reported back to the kitchen. But I wasn’t there long because my tortilla skills weren’t too great.

“*Estas mal*,” my mom said shortly after and shooed me from the kitchen, which I was only too glad to leave.

After dinner and after Uncle Emilio, Aunt Vicki and cousins left, I locked myself in my room to avoid Julio and Ricki when the telephone rang. Two seconds later, my dad called up the stairs.

“Sam, it’s for you.”

“Who is it?”

“Eva.”

I picked up my brand-new phone in my room that took two months of convincing my mom to let me get with the promise that I wouldn’t make long-distance phone calls, make prank calls or be on the phone with my friends all night. Her conditions were easy enough to agree to on account that I didn’t know anyone that lived outside Lakecrest, I wasn’t Ray or Eddie or six-years-old, and I wasn’t the kind of girl who really talked on the phone. The only people I really called, or who called me, was Eva or sometimes Joanna, although mostly just Eva. I wanted a phone because I wanted to be able to have a conversation without my brothers overhearing everything I said.

“Hello?”

“Sam! Hi, it’s Eva!”

I sat down on my bed, crossed my legs and leaned against my pillows. “I know who it is silly. Dad just said it was you.”

“I know, but it’s good etiquette to announce yourself to the person you are calling. I read it in ‘Twist Magazine.’”

I rolled my eyes. Of course, she did.

“Sam, you still there?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Nothing...really...I just thought I’d call. Mom said the T.A.B. were over at your house today.”

The T.A.B. stood for Totally Annoying Boys, meaning my brothers and boy cousins.

“Yeah, Ray went to spend the night at Eddie’s. But Ricki’s staying with us tonight.”

“Urggh. I’m so happy I don’t have brothers,” she said. “How was your softball game?”

“Good! We won.”

“Really? That’s great!”

“Yeah, it was pretty awesome. We had—”

“Well actually, Sam,” she said, interrupting. “I was kind of calling because I wanted to know if you still wanted to go to the library? Like on Monday? My dad said that he can give us a ride to the station on his way to work.”

“Uh, okay...I’d have to ask—”

“I mean you don’t have practice or anything—right? Because if you did, then maybe, you could like miss it because I really want to go, and this might be the only time my dad said he could—”

“No, I don’t have practice,” I said. “But I have to ask my mom if I can go.”

“Awesome! I’m sure Aunt Maria Ella will say yes,” Eva said excitedly, then she paused, “And if not, then I’ll just have my mom call your mom.”

I laughed, “Uh, okay.”

“Cool, so we’ll pick you up like at eight Monday – okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” I said, and then thinking, “Eva, are you sure he’s even going to be there?”

I heard an airy cough in the background.

“Well no...” she said but quickly added, “But I’m sure he’ll be there. He just has to be.”

This time the cough sounded more like a snicker.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

I heard another noise that was definitely a snicker, followed by a laugh.

“Julio! Get off the phone! Is Ricki with you?”

Another laugh confirmed it.

“I’m going to tell mom! You two are going to be in so much trouble!”

“I’m going to tell mom that you guys are going to meet a *boy!*”

“Hey, Julio and Ricki! Are you listening?” Eva said. “If you tell Aunt Maria Ella what me and Sam just talked about, then I am going to tell *Papí* the real reason Whiskers got sick last April!”

There was a silence. Then I heard a click, and Eva started laughing.

“Eva what was that about?” I asked, baffled. “What are you talking about? What really happened to Whiskers?”

Eva tried to stop laughing. “Well, you remember when Whiskers got really sick in April?”

“Yeah, I remember *Papí* was really upset. I’ve never seen him so worried.”

“Well, a few days before Whiskers got sick, I saw Julio and Ricki put soap into Whiskers’ milk bowl because they wanted to see if a cat could hiccup real bubbles.”

At that, we both cracked up laughing. And I knew that our secret about our co-op mission to the library was safe.

Chapter Thirteen – Two lessons learned at the train station

It took some coaxing from me, and even my dad, to convince my mom that everything would be okay if Eva and I took the train into the city. And it wasn’t until

Uncle Robert called, by Eva's prodding, to tell my mom that nothing bad would happen, and he would see us off at the station that my mom finally agreed to let me go. I don't think my mom was convinced, but she knew the odds were four against one and not in her favor.

So Monday morning, Uncle Robert honked his horn at five minutes to eight. I was still eating breakfast at the counter, but I jammed the piece of toast in my mouth and grabbed the money from my mom's open hand to pay the rail's fare.

"Thanks Mom!" Which really came out, "Hank Um," since bits of toast flew out of my mouth.

"*Aye Sophía*, slow down!"

I headed toward the door but turned around and grabbed the granola bar and a couple of Oreos lying on the table because who knew what Eva and I were going to eat for lunch that day.

"Don't talk to anyone you don't know," she said, following me to the door where I grabbed my backpack. "And stay together. Don't separate!"

"Okay, okay," I said, opening the door.

"And be careful, *Sophía*!"

But I didn't hear the last part as the door closed shut behind me.

At West Central Station, Uncle Robert parked the car and got out to help Eva and I get our tickets from the kiosk. Once we paid for our tickets, we walked together toward the loading platform.

"Now you girls remember to be careful and keep together."

"Okay!" Eva and I chimed in unison.

"And remember Uncle Mike will be at the library to pick you up at three o'clock."

"We know dad," Eva said. She hugged him before grabbing my arm and dragging me over to where people were lining up and waiting to get on the car. Uncle Robert followed us.

"Thanks for dropping us off, Uncle Robert," I said, waving my free hand.

"Don't worry, Dad," Eva said as she waved at him. "Sam and I will be fine. Promise."

He waved back, and then stood back as people moved forward to find their rail car. Eva and I got swept up in the line of people waiting to be let on. We followed an elderly lady onto the rail car who had two large, but empty and worn, shopping bags dangling from her short arms.

“Wonder where she’s going?” Eva whispered near my ear.

I giggled.

The lady slowly wobbled up the steps, gave the driver her ticket and then, carefully made her way down the isle. Eva and I clamored up the steps after her where the driver in a blue uniform that was dirty from coffee stains frowned at us. He grumbled but took our tickets and fed them into the machine.

“Jeez, what a grouch,” Eva whispered, tucking her arm in mine as we made our way down the isle looking for a seat.

We passed the lady with the large bags, which she had placed on the seat next to her. We took two seats half way down the rail car, and Eva nabbed the window seat.

“You can have the window seat on our way back,” she promised.

I didn’t remind her that my dad was picking us up, and there was no ride back, but I figured a window seat wasn’t worth fighting about and I wasn’t quite awake enough to care.

“Look! There’s my dad,” she said, pointing out the window.

I looked to where she was pointing, and sure enough, Uncle Robert had stayed, waiting, right where we had left him.

“I don’t know why he thinks he has to wait. It’s not like we’re eight or something.” She sat back in her seat and starred at the chair in front of her. “Just don’t look at him.”

But I leaned over her and waved widely out the window. Uncle Robert saw me and waved back.

“What are you doing Sam?! You’re just encouraging him.”

“I know.”

“You’re such a nerd,” she said, rolling her eyes.

The train started, and I sat back in my seat. The West Central station was a new stop for the light rail. The grand opening last year was a big deal for our town since the rail ran directly from Lakecrest to the city's downtown area.

My dad was really excited when he heard that Lakecrest was getting its own station. Since he worked at the university library, he said he might switch from driving everyday to taking the train instead. But the light rail had been running for more than a year now, and he never really switched.

"What's the backpack for?" Eva asked.

"What do you mean?"

Eva picked up my backpack that I had stuffed between my feet and the chair in front of me, she asked, "Did you bring any food?"

"No."

She continued to open the zippers.

"It's empty."

Still she searched through it before tossing it back on my lap.

"I told you its empty," I said. "I just brought it for books."

"Nothing," she said. "How many books do you plan on getting anyway?" she laughed. But then her stomach rumbled, which sounded like a miniature train pulling away.

"Man, I should've grabbed that apple," she muttered.

"Didn't you eat breakfast?" I said, closing the zippers and putting my backpack back under the seat.

"No. I haven't eaten since lunch."

"Since lunch?" I asked, shocked. "Like yesterday?! Why?"

"I wasn't hungry," she shrugged but avoided my look.

"Are you still on that stupid diet?"

"It's not stupid."

"It is stupid if you don't eat," I retorted.

"I wasn't hungry."

We were both quiet.

"Do you think I look skinnier?" she said, turning to face me.

I looked at her. She looked the same, except for her eyes. They looked different: tired and wild.

“Yeah, I guess,” I lied. I didn’t want to lie, but this was the first time, in a long time, that Eva and I did something just the two of us, and I didn’t want to ruin the day. I was also nervous to tell her something differently.

She smiled, sat back in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest triumphantly.

“Hey wait!”

I suddenly remembered that I had grabbed that granola bar from the table and stuck it in my pocket. I reached behind me and pulled out a peanut butter and chocolate-chip granola bar. It was a little flattened but definitely still good.

“Here.”

“Excellent!” she said, sitting up and grabbing the bar from my hand. She ripped through the aluminum wrapper and took a huge bite.

“These are my favorite thanks.” Which sounded like, “Tease are my favorite tanks.”

I laughed. “I was saving it for a snack later, but I guess you needed it more than me.”

The train ride only took an hour to get into the city. We had to wait our turn to get off the rail car, but once we did, we followed the crowd into the middle of the train station.

Unlike West Central, this station was large and circular. One half of the circle was lined with windows that tellers stood behind to sell train tickets. The rest of the circle was broken by several door openings that on the left led outside into the city and on the right led back toward the loading and departing docks where we had just come from.

“So where do we go?” I asked. I pulled my hair up into a ponytail with the rubber band that was on my wrist.

I always had two or three rubber bands around my wrist because I was always losing them, and I was always tying my hair back. It drove my mom crazy because she said my hair looked better down since it framed my face. But I didn’t really care much about framing my face and leaving my hair down just got in my way.

“Um...I don’t really know,” Eva said, circling around.

She looked at all the signs hanging from the dome-shaped ceiling. Most were advertisements but some featured arrival and departure times.

“I thought you said you knew where we were going?”

“Well...I do. The library is by the city park. But—now don’t get mad,” she said, “But I don’t really know how to get to the park—”

“Eva!”

“I said don’t get mad. But don’t worry. I’m sure once we start walking, I’ll start recognizing things. Hey wait,” she cried. “Be right back.”

Then she darted off. I watched her black hair disappear into the crowd of people coming and going. And since I didn’t have anywhere else to go, I waited.

“So much for staying together,” I muttered.

Pretty soon the station began to clear. The arrivals all seemed to have left having headed through one of the doors that led to their next destination. And the next train wasn’t scheduled to depart for another half hour. With the crowds finally gone, I could finally see where Eva took off running.

She was standing in front of a half-window, similar to where they sell tickets. But above this window hung a sign in the shape of a blue circle with the letter “I” in the middle. I saw Eva talking to a woman wearing a pretty blue jacket and a red bow tie around her neck. Her hair was coiled on top of her head in a style I remember Joanna tried to tell me once was called a chiffon. Then another lady dressed in the same uniform joined Eva’s teller, except she had darker skin and short-curly hair. Only it wasn’t the pretty kind of curl like Lena’s. Her hair was big, and I could tell, even from a distance, frizzy. Eva stood there talking to the two women. I began to wonder how long it took to get directions from the train station to the city library and started to worry that maybe we got off at the wrong station when Eva started walking back toward me. I could tell, even before I could see her face, that she was upset.

“What happened? Did you get directions?”

“Yeah. I got them,” she said, gruffly.

“Really? That’s good. What happened back there? Why did it take so long?”

She didn’t say anything and started walking toward the doors.

I had to jog to catch up with her.

“Hey, Eva!” I grabbed her arm, pulling her up short. “What happened?! What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Come one, let’s just go.”

“It *was* something,” I said, not letting go of her arm, even though she kept trying to pull away. “And I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what happened.”

“Look Sam, it was stupid. It doesn’t even matter.”

I planted my feet.

“Aw, fine,” she said. “Look, if I tell you, will you let go of my arm?”

“Yes,” I said and dropped her arm to prove it.

“God, Sam,” she said, rubbing her arm. “You really have a brutal grip.”

I shrugged to say sorry. “You shouldn’t say the Lord God’s name in vain,” I said, mimicking *Grammita’s* voice. And that made her laugh.

“Okay, fine. I’ll tell you,” she said, “But not here,” she said, nodding back at the woman who was still at the window.

We left the train station, and I followed Eva, as she turned left, following what I assumed to be the directions the woman gave her.

A few yards from the train station I asked, “So come on, what happened?”

“Well, when we standing inside, I saw the information sign, so I went over there—”

“I know. It’d been nice if you told me before disappearing and leaving me by myself.”

Eva shrugged, which was probably the closest thing to an apology that I was going to get.

“Anyway, I started asking the lady in the window if she knew how to get to the library, but I must have been talking too fast or something because she started talking to me really loudly and slow, like I was deaf or something.”

We stopped because we reached the end of the street. Eva pressed in the metal knob on the streetlight, and we waited for the white man to appear on the other end.

“So I tried to tell her that I understood what she was saying, and that I just needed directions to the library when she left and brought back someone else.”

“The girl with curly hair,” I said. “Yeah, I saw her.”

More people joined us on the corner. The number ten started flashing, and we started to cross the street.

“Yeah, well she was Mexican or at least she spoke Spanish, which is why the other girl went and got her. I guess because of the way I looked or something, she thought couldn’t speak English. Then, I had to explain to the other girl that I didn’t speak Spanish,” she took a deep breath, and looked at me, “I mean, you know, not really.”

I nodded. Although Eva and her sister were both full Mexicans, they didn’t speak Spanish, at least not fluently. None of us did.

When *Papí* and *Grammita* first immigrated, my aunts and uncles spoke Spanish all the time. It was the first language they learned, even Uncle Miguel and Lena, who were born in America. But as time passed, and *Papí* started working more and learning more English, he would start speaking English in the house more. Then my mom’s older sisters and brothers went to school, and they learned even more English from their school. Mom said that Aunt Cynthia, Uncle Emilio and Robert – Aunt Sonya was still too young – would come home from school speaking English all the time to practice. She said at first they would speak together like they had a secret club that her, Aunt Sonya, Uncle Miguel and Lena were excluded from. But then they started to teach them English too. It was soon after my mom started school that *Papí* and her siblings all started speaking English more than Spanish in the house.

Mom said this made *Grammita* upset because she was the only one who didn’t have to learn how to speak English, and she felt that her children were forgetting their culture. *Grammita* started to ban talking at dinner, unless it was in Spanish. She didn’t like when they all spoke English, and she couldn’t understand what they were saying. But slowly, *Grammita* started to learn English too, and then, she didn’t care as much about what language was spoken at dinner or elsewhere. Mom said that because my grandmother loved to talk so much and got better and better at English that it was often my grandmother who started the conversation in English.

All my aunts and uncles and mom still know Spanish. Sometimes they switch to Spanish when my cousins and I are around, and they don’t want us to hear what they are saying. But my cousins and I never really learned to speak Spanish. My mom tried

teaching my brothers and me when we were little, but as we got older, she stopped. I know that some of my first words were in Spanish, like *agua*, *más*, and *niña*. Plus, growing up in a Mexican Spanish-speaking family, I can't say that I don't know *any* Spanish. We all knew *some* words and phrases. But Eva was right – we definitely weren't fluent.

“It was sooo embarrassing Sam!” Eva continued, as we headed down the street, this time to the right. “The first girl didn't believe me, and it wasn't until the other one convinced her that I really didn't understand Spanish that she started telling me the directions to the library,” she said. “And finally in a normal voice.”

We turned the corner. I still had no idea where we were, but I hoped that Eva did get the right directions.

“I wish you had asked instead of me.”

“Why?” I asked, confused.

Eva stopped so quickly that I almost tripped over my feet to stop too. She starred at me.

“You don't get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

She started walking again, but this time much faster, “Never mind.”

“No, Eva, wait,” I said. I practically had to run to catch up with her. “Get what?”

She stopped again, but this time I caught myself in time. “Have you ever had someone speak really slow to you? Like you're dumb or stupid?”

“No—”

“Or stop you at the door because they think that you stole something?”

“No—but—”

“Or have someone throw their empty wrappers at you, your mom and your sister and telling you to go back to your county when all you're doing is walking on the street that *is* your home?”

“That happened—?”

A second before Eva's black eyes were charged like electric bolts, but now they were glassy and wet.

“When? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was a couple of weeks ago,” she said, wiping a hand under her eye. I looked down at the sidewalk where she let the tear fall from her finger. “It doesn’t matter anyway,” she shrugged.

“I’m sorry, Eva.”

She was staring at the ground and didn’t say anything. For once, my cousin looked smaller than me. Ever since we were little, it was always Eva taking care of me. I’d never seen her look so...defeated. I reached over the sidewalk crack and hugged her, hard.

She didn’t hug me back at first, but then I felt her arms rise and slip around me.

“Sometimes I wish I looked more like you, Sam.”

I pulled back and touched my skin, which I knew was pale, even though my cheek felt flushed. “But why?” I asked, perplexed

She just looked at me. “I don’t know. I guess, I just think things would be easier if I did.”

“Well, they aren’t.”

“Maybe.” Then she smiled. “Come on, I think the park is around the corner.”

Chapter Fourteen – Cartwheels, fallen books and Nicholas

Eva was right about the park being around the corner. But it took us another ten minutes to reach Lakewood Public Library. As we neared the library building, Eva skipped ahead, “Watch this!”

I laughed as I watched her do a cartwheel on the sidewalk.

“Come on your turn!”

Last summer, Eva and I spent hours in *Grammita’s* yard where she tried to teach me how to do a cartwheel. After a couple of hours and several bruises from falling, I finally learned. But I still wasn’t very good.

“I don’t know Eva—”

“Ah, come on Sam.”

So I did. I got dizzy after three, but Eva kept going, following the sidewalk leading up to the library steps. She was laughing and twirling so fast that she didn't see the woman and her son coming down the steps, and Eva almost tumbled into them.

"Oops! Sorry!" Eva said. Her face was red, and her hair stood out in every which way.

Luckily, the lady started laughing.

Eva and I helped her pick up the bag of books she had dropped to move her son out of Eva's way. He was now hiding behind his mom's leg, terrified. Eva apologized again, and we waved goodbye at the steps. The little boy seemed happy to see us go. As soon as they took off down the sidewalk, Eva whipped around and said, "Come on, race ya!" Before she sprinted up the stone steps.

We entered Lakewood Library, a little breathless, through its two revolving doors that were trimmed with gold. Standing inside the entrance, I had forgotten how enormous it was. The entrance ceiling was vaulted and in the shape of a dome. Etched inside its cap were portraits of people seated around a table. The few faces I recognized were authors of books I'd read. It looked like any other dinner party. Except, instead of your average turkey dinner, books were served. Mountains and mountains of books. Oddly enough, looking at all the books piled high on the table made my mouth water.

"Sam, come on," Eva whispered and yanked my arm. "You look like owl with your eyes coming out of your head like that. Come on," she insisted. "You can gawk later."

Eva managed to pull me out from the center of the entrance and past the checkout desk where a librarian gave me a sympathetic smile.

"Jeez, I can't take you anywhere," she muttered.

We ended up in the room off to the right. My attention was still on the ceiling of books, but I realized that Eva had taken me into a room full of actual row-to-row bookshelves. We had entered the reference room. People were sitting at the wooden desks that lined the wall-length windows that looked out to the street. I suddenly felt embarrassed that these people turning their books' pages so intently could have looked up to see me doing cartwheels on the sidewalk outside.

“Over here.” Eva, who still had a hold on my arm, pulled me deep into the aisle of books on our left. “Finally someplace we can talk,” she said.

“Shhh! Don’t talk so loud,” I said, looking around. “We *are* in a library.”

“No one is going to hear us back here.” She looked around and said, “Plus, who’s gonna read about amphibians anyway. Eww.”

I followed her gaze and read a title called, “The Amphibians Come To Conquer.” Eva snapped her fingers in front of my face.

“Sam! Pay attention. We need to come up with a plan.”

“Huh? What plan?”

“That’s what I mean. We need a plan to find him and make him fall in love with me. And we only have until your dad picks us up at three.”

“I always thought you were crazy, but this confirms it,” I said. “How are we supposed to find him in this place?! Its huge.”

“You’re right,” she said, thinking. “I think we should split up. You know, take different floors. We’d cover more territory that way.”

Her mention of floors reminded me that there were four floors to this library. Then I started thinking that Eva did have a point – I only had until three to explore all these books. “I think that is the first brilliant thing you said all day, Eva.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah, we should split up. Cover more ground.”

She looked skeptically at me. Even though she and I were both used to having things go her way, I usually put up more of a fight. And she knew I wasn’t a very good liar. But today, I looked right back at her with what I hoped was a face void of ulterior motives.

“Okay,” she said, at last. “I’ll take the first and second floor. You take the third and fourth floor.”

“Great!” I said. I moved around her and back toward the entrance of the library where I had seen the grand staircase.

“Hey, wait!” she whispered. “We didn’t talk about what we would do if we found him!”

But it was too late, and I took the steps two at a time. And that wasn't the only problem. I didn't even know what he looked like, I thought.

The library was where my parents first met. My dad worked at the university library as a part-time reference librarian. He was working and finishing school to become a full-time librarian.

My mom sometimes went to the university library when she lived in the city with Aunt Sonya. She was a waitress at a Mexican restaurant called, *La Bonita*. She would visit the library to read before her evening shift. My mom worked to save up money to go to the university. My mom loved poetry and literature, especially Spanish writers. Her favorite author was *Gabriel García Márquez*. The day she met my dad, she was looking for a Spanish copy of one of his books.

For weeks, my mom said she'd visit my dad every day. She would spend hours trying to find a book that the library didn't own just so she could spend extra time with him because he would search to find a copy for her. Sometimes, she said, she would even hide books in a wrong place – a librarian's worst nightmare – so she could tell him that she couldn't find a book she was looking for. And then, they would spend hours searching through the shelves to find the misplaced book.

"I asked him for help *tantas veces*. He probably thought I wouldn't be able to find my own head, if it wasn't attached," my mom laughed whenever she told the story.

After a month, and after the library fired one of their employees who re-shelved books, my dad finally got up enough courage to ask my mom to dinner.

"*Aye*, and I still confess to Father Ignacio for getting that poor person fired," my mom said, shaking her head. "But," she admitted. "The rest is like Americans say, *historia*," she smiled.

But really, that was only the beginning of my parents' story. My mom spent the next three months arguing with my grandpa that she was going to marry a *gabacho*, and that she didn't care if he didn't walk her down the aisle or not. My mom also spent the next three months convincing *Grammita* that she wasn't abandoning the Church by marrying a Southern Baptist because my dad, who wasn't really religious before he met my mom, had agreed to convert to Catholicism.

In the end, *Papí* didn't disown my mom. And he eventually accepted the fact that his daughter was in love with someone who was not Hispanic or from *su país*. And *Papí* did walk my mom down the aisle on her wedding day. *Grammita* also came around and helped make my mom's wedding dress. By the time she had Ray, my mom said, my grandparents felt better about her and my dad.

"*Tú Grammita* was just happy to have another grandchild to spoil," my mom said.

The third floor of the library was the American fiction section – my dad's favorite section. The fiction room had the same floor to ceiling shelves on both sides of room. Parting the room, right down the middle, were overstuffed armchairs in pairs of fours and twos with coffee tables and reading lamps. At the opposite end of the room, there was a fireplace that wasn't on since it was summer, and blazing outside.

I decided to start alphabetically, and make my way down the aisles. I wandered down the end of the aisle on my left, running my hands over the spines of the books. It was a habit I learned from my dad. When I was younger, he'd sometimes take me with him to work. I'd follow him through the stacks as he searched for books or looked for a book for someone else. He would press my hand to the spines on the shelf and then, rub my fingers past the titles.

"It's our way of saying hello," he said.

And I would run down the aisle, my hand running past the titles, whispering, "Hello. Hello. Hello. Hello."

Running my fingers of over the spines now, I realized it had been awhile since I had visited my dad at his work.

I was in the stacks for a while, but I had barely made it past the "A" section, although I already had five books in my backpack to borrow. I was surprised that Eva hadn't been up to find me yet. But maybe she had found her library boy, I thought, chuckling. At the end of the aisle, I glanced out the window that looked out over the park. I could see the pond where I know you could feed the ducks, and sometimes swans. My hands were still on the spines, and my eyes were focused on the park outside that I didn't see the cart of books when I rounded the corner.

Have you ever heard what a cart of books falling sounds like? It is like a small earthquake inside a silent library. It sounded like the third floor of the library was cracking into two.

“I – am – so sorry!”

Lying in between the two aisles was a pile of overturned books dumped on the floor in a heap.

“Sorry! Let me help,” I said, quickly bending down to pick up the books, but my backpack had another idea, and it swung across my back and hit the cart again, knocking down the few remaining books on the shelf while also managing to hit the boy with shaggy-brown hair in the head, who had been pushing the cart.

“Jeez, don’t you think you helped enough?” he said, rubbing his head and looking up from the floor in disgust.

“I am *really* sorry,” I said, raising my hands to my face that I knew was turning red.

He had a rather dark complexion, and his nose was spotted with scattered freckles, barely visible, unless you were close up enough to see. But he looked so flustered and upset that I couldn’t help but laugh a little.

“What?! You think this is funny?”

I clamped my hand down over my mouth and shook my head. After a moment when I trusted that I could speak and not laugh, I swallowed said, “I really am sorry.”

He sighed and started putting the books back on the cart.

“Nicholas, everything okay?” A lady from the down the aisle asked. She was dressed in exactly what I pictured women librarians to wear: an odd-designed vest over a cream-colored blouse, a below-the-knee skirt, stockings and sensible brown shoes.

“Yeah, Martha. I’m fine. Just had a little run-in,” said the boy, whose name I now knew was Nicholas, nodding at me.

She stood there for a second, looking at me through her moon-shaped glasses, before turning around. I could hear her short heels clicking down the aisle.

“I really am sorry,” I said again for the fifth time as I helped pick up the books and put them back on the sorting cart. “And my name is Sam.”

“What were you so busy looking at anyway?”

I noticed that he wore a hemp necklace that had a single black bead – it was a miniature magic-eight ball. He also wore a smaller hemp bracelet on his right wrist that was weaved with bits of green.

“I was looking out the window. I didn’t see you,” I said.

He was silent.

“*And* you were right in the middle of the aisle.”

He snorted. “So it’s my fault that you were too distracted to look to see where you were going?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess.”

We finished putting all the books back on the cart, and we both stood up. I realized we were almost the same height, and his eyes were grey.

“Do you work here?” I asked, rubbing my hands on my jeans because I wasn’t sure what else to do with them. “Sorry, that was stupid. Of course, you work here.” Duh, Sam, I thought.

“Sam!”

I turned around to see Eva coming down the aisle. Nicholas turned back toward the books and started to re-alphabetize them.

“Have you been here the whole time? I’ve already been through the second and first floor three times, and I still haven’t seen—”

She stopped when she noticed Nicholas standing behind me. I saw her eyes go wide.

“This is Nicholas,” I said, moving to the side. I hoped to cut her off before she said anything else that would make me more embarrassed than I already was.

Nicholas leaned over the cart and offered his hand to Eva, “It’s Nick.”

“Um hi, I’m Eva.”

“He works here,” I added.

Nicholas, or Nick, looked over at me, his mouth a half-smile, “Actually, what I was going to tell your friend was that I don’t really work here. I just volunteer. I come in

from time to time to help the librarians out when they need extra hands, usually to re-shelf books.”

“That’s really cool,” Eva said.

“Yeah,” I said. Really cool, I thought.

Nick turned back to his cart and started alphabetizing again. Eva pinched my arm.

“Ow,” I said, rubbing my arm. “What was that for—” But I got quiet when I saw her eyes wide and screaming. She jerked her head at Nick, who was still alphabetizing the books, and mouthed something I couldn’t make out.

“What?” I mouthed back.

“So you guys come here a lot?” Nick asked, still shuffling through the books and didn’t look up.

“No. Not really. We live in Lakecrest, so we don’t come to the city much. We just came today because we’re looking for someone—”

Eva kicked me in the calf.

“Ow— I mean, we’re looking for books— ” I said.

Eva was still trying to mouth something to me, which I still didn’t understand. She started to use gestures and pointed widely at Nick’s head ducked behind the cart and then pointed back at her.

“—That weren’t at our library,” I continued, baffled by Eva’s ape-like gestures.

Then I got it. Nick was *the* guy. I pointed at her and then back Nick, and Eva lifted up her arms, palms raised towards the ceiling like *Grammita* did when she gives thanks.

Eva tried to mouth something else at me when Nick looked up.

“So you guys planning on sticking around the library much longer?”

“Um—” I said.

“We really didn’t have plans,” Eva broke in.

“Well, this was my last cart to shelf before I took a break for lunch.”

“You get a lunch break, even if you don’t work here?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, laughing causing his bangs to fall over his forehead. “Librarians may be strict about noise violations, but they let you eat.”

Eva giggled.

“I was going to go get something to eat, and since you guys don’t come here often, I could show you around, if you want.”

“Yes!” Eva said. “I mean...we don’t have anything else to do – right Sam?”

I wanted to say no, because I still hadn’t finished looking through the rest of the library and who knew when I would have another chance to come back. But Eva was looking at me expectantly.

“Yeah, we don’t have any plans,” I said, reluctantly.

“So meet you guys in the main entrance in like fifteen minutes?” Nick asked.

“Yes!” Eva said for the both us.

Sure, I thought.

Chapter Fifteen – Lunch from *Los Trés Amigos*

Nick showed up in the library’s main entrance fifteen minutes later, just like he said he would. Except now, he wore a brown-leather jacket. I thought it was weird he was wearing a jacket since it was ninety degrees outside. But Eva didn’t seem to notice the irony.

“Oh, my God Sam,” Eva said in my ear, grabbing my arm as he walked toward us. “He is sooo cute.”

She had spent the last fifteen minutes while we waited worrying about her hair and her outfit. She ran to the restroom every two minutes to make sure every hair was in place. I don’t know why she bothered, since every time she came back, she looked the exact same. But I didn’t say so.

“Ready?” he asked.

Together, we headed toward the doors when the library’s metal detector promptly went off. I had forgotten to check out the books in my backpack. Nick and Eva waited for me while I embarrassingly took out my books and handed them to the librarian at the checkout desk. My face was a grapefruit red, which isn’t a hard color for me to turn since I’m so pale.

Eva couldn't stop laughing when we finally walked outside and wouldn't let me, or Nick, forget it as the three of us walked down Centennial Street toward the food carts Nick said had the best food in the city.

The food carts weren't far from the library. When we got there it seemed like everyone else in the city was on their lunch break too. The food carts looked more like large rectangles on wheels. A dozen or more lined the square block all facing the street in what looked like an old parking lot. All the carts were painted in bright, fantastic colors: reds, blues, yellows, greens and orange. I noticed that most were painted in the colors that represented that country's food.

We passed a Greek food cart, an Ethiopian food cart – I only recognized that cart's origin because "A Taste of Ethiopia" was painted on the side of the cart. I couldn't even imagine what Ethiopian food must taste like. Then there was a cart that said Authentic French Crepes. There was an Indian food cart where a line of people in suits and track pants alike stood waiting.

"That's a popular one," Nick pointed out. "If you guys like Indian food we could go there—but if you guys don't mind, I really wanted to go here."

We had made it to the end of the block, and Nick stopped in front of the last cart on the street. The cart was painted in red, white and green. Painted in black cursive was "*Los Trés Amigos*," and a big sombrero hung off the "L."

"These guys make the best tacos," Nick said. "Almost better than my grandmother's."

"You're Mexican?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah, half. From my dad's side."

I didn't get a chance to ask him more because a guy in a white apron leaned out of the tiny bus window and placed his forearms on the flat metal shelf. His shoulders were so wide that they practically filled the entire window.

"Aye, Nicholas!" he called. "*¿Qué pasa?*"

"Hi, Uncle Mark!" Nick called up. "How's it going?"

"Can't complain son," he said. "Can't complain." He leaned his head back into the cart and yelled, "Mario, guess who came to see us."

I didn't think another person could fit through the window, but I was wrong because the guy named Mario poked his head and shoulder through, and he seemed bigger than Mark. I didn't know how they could both fit inside that small cart let alone cook.

"It's Nick!" Mario said. "Who are your friends?"

"This is Sam and Eva," Nick said, pointing to us. "They're—"

"Cousins," Eva finished for him.

Nick looked at us in shock, "I didn't know you guys were cousins? Really? You sure don't look like it. "

"You kids hungry?" Mark interrupted.

"Yes, sir," I said. I was starting to feel better about leaving the library. I was feeling pretty hungry.

"¡*Bueno!*" Mario said. "I like a girl with an appetite." He winked at me.

"We'll fix you kids up with something special."

With that, Mark and Mario both disappeared into the bus.

"And they mean it," Nick said, smiling and turning around to face us.

"Is Mark really your uncle?" Eva asked.

"Well, no, not really. Mark and Mario are my dad's friends. They've been best friends since they were kids, and I've known them as long as I can remember. That's why they call their cart, '*Los Trés Amigos*,' even though my dad doesn't technically work with them. Although sometimes, he comes help out when he can. But my dad really isn't too great in the kitchen," Nick laughed, and then turning more somber, "He usually is away a lot for work anyway."

"So do you come here a lot?" I asked.

"Yeah, whenever I volunteer at the library. I kind of have to you know? Family allegiance and stuff," he said. "Although Mark and Mario don't really mind if I try another food cart from time to time," he added. "But you'll see! These guys really know how to cook!"

Fifteen minutes later, Mark leaned back out the window with three plastic containers wrapped in three separate white bags.

"Here you go kids."

Eva and I reached into our pockets for money to pay for lunch, but Mario, who had joined Mark in the window, waved his hand and said, “No, no! It’s on the house.”

“But—” I began.

“I would stop now,” Nick said, grabbing his bag from Mark and smiling. “They’ll never let you pay. Trust me.” He looked at his uncles. “They’re stubborn like that.”

“Who are you calling stubborn?” Mario called. And Nick laughed.

Eva and I thanked them, and said goodbye.

“Anytime!” they said. “Just don’t forget to come visit us again.”

As we walked away, Mark and Mario started singing. I recognized some of the tunes as Mexican love songs *Grammita* would sing in her kitchen.

“They’re crazy,” Nick said, shaking his head and turning a little red. “But they sure know how to make a mean taco.”

We walked back with our food to the city park and found a spot on the grass that was near enough to the pond, but far enough away that we didn’t have ducks crowding around us because we had food.

I opened the plastic bag and opened my carton. Inside was a side of beans and rice and several corn tortillas with a big portion of meat. Nick told us that we should roll the meat in the tortillas with pieces of *cilantro* and squeeze lime on top. He said if we wanted, we could add the green *chile* Mark and Mario had included.

But seeing me dump almost half of the green *chile* on top of my rolled taco, Nick said, “Whoa Sam! I’m not sure you should use that much. Uncle Mario makes a pretty hot—”

“Don’t worry,” Eva said, moving her rice around with a fork. “Sam loves things really hot. I don’t know how her mouth handles it,” she said shuddering. “I’m not that crazy.”

I took a big bite out of my taco. The sweet spice of the green *chile* – jalapenos I would say by the burn of it – cleared my nose.

“You’re right. Your Uncle Mario makes a pretty hot *chile*,” I said, smiling, but I took another big bite. “But I’ve had hotter.”

Nick and Eva laughed.

“So do you live in the city,” I asked, through a mouth full of taco.

He laughed. “I think you asked if I live in the city.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, embarrassed again.

But Nick continued, un-phased, “Yeah, I do. I live with my mom and my step-dad on the other side of the river.”

“Your step-dad?” Eva asked.

“Yeah. My parents got a divorce when I was ten, and my mom remarried two years ago. But they’re on pretty good terms now. I get to see my dad like every week, when he’s not working. He works a lot, and doesn’t live in the city. So sometimes it’s hard for us to see each other.”

Before I could stop myself, I asked, “Why did your parents get a divorce?”

Nick paused. “My parents used to fight a lot when I was little. When you’re a kid, you don’t really remember a lot of the reasons why they fight – they just do,” he said, shrugging.

Looking out toward the water, he seemed to be watching a mom that was trying to pull her son back from chasing a duck and following him into the water.

“I already told you guys my dad is Mexican. Well, my mom isn’t. Her parents, my grandparents are from Europe. I think Denmark or something. Anyway, my mom never really said it out loud, and I never asked her, but I think, now, the reason she and my dad split up was because they couldn’t get past some of the cultural differences, with my dad having immigrated from *Mexico* and all. And then when I was twelve, my mom remarried my step-dad, who’s your average, run-of-the-mill white American guy.”

He shrugged and took a bite of taco, then looking back over at us. “Not that there is anything wrong with Steve. He’s a cool dude, and he makes my mom happy. Plus, he is a pretty cool Dad to my half-sister, Gracie.” He laughed. “That was probably more information than you guys wanted to know,” he said but looked at me. “What about you guys? Cousins— right?”

I let Eva do most of the talking for the rest of the conversation. She talked about our family at first, but she moved on to talking about other things, like music and movies. I chimed in now and then, when they asked for my opinion on some new song on the radio. But mostly, I kept thinking about what Nick had said about his parents and

remembering the way his eyes had turned steel blue when he talked about his parent's divorce. The same color I'd seen the ocean turn when breaking against the sand.

It was getting close to two o'clock when Nick said he had to get back to the library to finish up his shift. I offered to throw away our food cartons. I noticed when I went to throw Eva's bag away in the trash bin that it was still fairly heavy. Eva and her stupid diet, I thought, before tossing it in along with Nick's and mine.

As I made my way back toward Eva and Nick, I noticed that Nick had handed a piece of paper to Eva. He started walking backwards toward the library. He gave me a wave then turned and jogged up the hill toward the library.

When I finally reached Eva who was still sitting on the ground, and Nick was out of sight, she turned toward me and squealed. She stood up and threw her arms in the air. Her right hand clutched a ripped piece of notebook paper.

"He gave me his number!"

"Really?!" For a second, it felt like my stomach had dropped just an inch. "I mean...that's cool. Really cool," I said.

She flung her arms around my neck, and unprepared for her weight, we fell down onto the grass. Eva rolled off me, laughing.

"Sorry, Sam," she giggled.

We lay there in the grass while she held that piece of paper, as if it was the baby Jesus himself, tight against her chest.

"I just can't believe he actually gave me his number. Me! His number. To call *him*."

"Well, what else are you supposed to do with it? Use the paper as tissue?"

She was quiet. "Are you mad at me or something?" she asked, propping herself up on her elbow. "You've been acting all weird since we left the library. And you didn't say much earlier, even when Nick asked you questions."

"No, I'm not mad at you," I said, sitting up and drawing my knees up to my chest.

"Because I know you really wanted to go the library today, and we didn't really spend a lot of time there—"she said, sitting up. "I mean we could go back inside now, if you want, until your dad picks us up—"

“No, it’s fine. I don’t really want to go back.”

We were shoulder to shoulder, but her shoulder didn’t quite reach mine.

“Promise you’re not mad?”

“Promise.”

“Good!” she said, giddy. “Because then we can talk about Nick instead.” She fell back onto the grass, her black hair running through the grass and her arms spread-eagle.

“He’s fifteen. Just think Sam, a fifteen-year-old gave me his number and wants me to call him.”

I sat there with my arms around my legs and my chin between the divot in my knees listening to Eva talk about Nick, and I just couldn’t get my stomach to stop doing cartwheels. Maybe there was something more in that *chile* than I thought, I said to myself.

Chapter Sixteen – Lena and the mystery guy

Eva and I spent the next hour walking around the park and watching kids run away laughing, some screaming, from the ducks who chased after them in the hopes that they might get fed. We wandered over to the park’s playground where we took turns pushing each other on the swings, like Uncle Miguel used to do when we were six.

Whenever *Grammita* went to the store, and Eva and I were at her house, she would make Uncle Miguel watch over us. But as soon as she drove away, Uncle Miguel swept us up, one of us under each arm, and he would walk us to the park up the street. It wasn’t much of a park, but it did have swings. If I was in charge of building parks, I’d mandate that every park – to be called a park – had to have swings. Monkey bars and slides were important, but I think swings gave a park its heart.

It was my turn to push Eva. We both could swing on our own at seven, but for swing jumping, it was better to have someone push you. Eva and I often had contests to see who could jump the farthest.

“Okay Sam! One—two—”

On two, I gave her an extra hard push.

“Three—“

Eva jumped out of the swing at exactly the right moment, and I watched her sail over the sand, landing, deftly, on the ground in a crouched position.

“Sam did you see that?! I bet Uncle Miguel would say that was nine points for sure! Hey, Sam! Did you hear me—” Eva stopped and looked over her shoulder in the direction of my gaze.

I had heard Eva, but I was looking out past the sand and low-iron fence of the playground at a woman in a bright blue and green floral dress. She stood underneath an oak tree near the sidewalk. Her back was to us, but I recognized my aunt’s corkscrew black hair anywhere.

“Hey, is that—” Eva started as I walked past her, and I motioned her to be quiet. She followed me behind the yellow slide while I peered over the top. She was still standing by the tree, talking to someone whose face I couldn’t see.

“Isn’t that’s Lena?” Eva whispered. “Who’s she talking to?”

“Shhh!”

“Why we are standing here like we’re eight and in trouble?” she whispered back. “Let’s go talk her. I want to know who Lena’s talking to.”

But before I could respond, Lena and the man started walking our way. Grabbing Eva’s arm, I pulled her under the slide and onto the other side just as they walked past and followed the park’s walkway. They didn’t seem to see us, or anyone else for that matter.

“Come on,” I whispered, moving quickly toward the playground gate. I walked quickly and moved past the walkway onto the grass. Eva followed. I ducked behind the trees and kept my distance, but I was careful not to lose sight of them.

“This is crazy, Sam. What are we doing?” Eva said, coming up behind me where I was pressed against the tree trunk.

“I want to see who he is.”

“The guy? Well, let’s go say hi. It’s probably some friend or something. No big deal.”

Lena and her “friend” still walked along the sidewalk, and my aunt threw her head back like she does when she laughs. They walked past the flowerbeds, alive and in full bloom from the sun. There were freesias, snapdragons, daisies and geraniums. I

watched as the man leaned down and picked a small white daisy from the garden before offering it to my aunt. Lena laughed again and placed it behind her ear. It looked innocent against her jet hair. They started to hold hands and kept walking.

“I think he is more than *just* a friend,” I said, over my shoulder.

“Well, maybe it’s Giovanni?”

“Giovanni wouldn’t pick Lena a flower,” I said, sharply.

Eva started rattling off more theories about who the guy with Lena could be, but I ignored her questions until she finally stopped and just followed me, sulking a bit. We followed them around the park until we found ourselves back at the bottom of the hill where we had lunch with Nick.

Then Lena and the mystery guy started walking up the hill, still holding hands. And I knew I needed to see his face. I gave them a good head start before following them. But once we cleared the hill and reached the sidewalk, I couldn’t see them anymore.

“Where did they go?” I asked.

“Maybe, they went into the library?” Eva suggested.

“Maybe,” I said, upset. “I just wish I could have seen what he—”

“Hey look! I think I see them,” Eva said, grapping my shoulder and turned me toward the opposite side of the street where Lena came out of the ice-cream shop on the corner. She held the man’s arm with hers. They stopped just outside the store door, and I saw my aunt lean over and kiss the man carrying two ice-cream cones, one in each hand.

“That is definitely not Giovanni,” Eva muttered.

I said nothing but kept staring at the ice-cream cones, one white and the other one chocolate, looking eerily similar to Lena and the man she was with.

“*Papí’s* not going to be happy,” Eva said.

Nope, I thought. *Papí* is definitely not going to be happy.

“Do you think—”

Eva didn’t get a chance to finish her question because just then a bus drove by cutting off our view from the sidewalk.

“Sam! Eva!”

We both turned at the sound of our name to see my dad who had just pulled into a parking spot at the curb. He was waving and smiling. Eva waved back and headed toward

the car. I looked back once more across the street, but Lena and her mystery guy were gone.

Chapter Seventeen – The real story of my parents

Eva and I didn't talk much on the drive home. My dad tried asking us questions about our day and if we liked the library, but we both responded in one syllable answers, so he gave up and started humming along with the radio instead.

I was dying to know more about Lena and the mystery man she was with today, who was clearly American. But I could tell that Eva was preoccupied with thoughts of Nick. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her lift up the tiny piece of paper with his number and name from time to time and pressed it against her chest, as if to reassure herself that it was still there and not erased by some magical force. And even if some force did exist, I knew that she already memorized the number. I, for one, could not shake the image of my aunt laughing in the park, her holding his hand or the flower he picked tucked behind her ear out of my mind. And I couldn't forget the look of happiness on her face before she kissed him.

We pulled up to Uncle Robert's house, and Eva hopped out of the car.

"Thanks for the ride, Uncle Mike!"

"You're welcome, Eva," my dad said, waving his hand.

"Call you okay," she said, looking at me. It wasn't a question as much as a statement before shutting the door and running toward her front door.

"Want to be shotgun, kiddo?"

I shrugged but climbed, although rather awkwardly, over to the passenger seat.

We started driving home before my dad asked me, "You and Eva get into a fight?"

"No," I said, surprised. "Why?"

"Awful quiet that's all," he said, looking over at me. "Usually the two of you can't keep quiet." After a moment, he asked, "Wanna talk about it?"

I can usually talk to my dad about anything. Unlike most my friends who tell their mom's everything, I often turned to my dad for advice or for someone to just listen. He was a good listener. He always let me talk without interrupting or nodded his head to show that he was listening, and then, once I finished, really finished, he'd sit still for a minute, thinking, before he said anything.

But today, I couldn't bring myself to talk about Lena, so I opted for a safer route.

"We met someone at the library today."

"Yeah?"

My dad's tone didn't change, but I saw his eyebrow arch over his frames.

"Well, it was more like Eva met someone," I said. "I just sort of ran into him." I paused, but I could tell my dad was listening.

"His name is Nicholas, but he goes by Nick. He volunteers at the library. Did you know you could volunteer at a library?" I asked. "Do you think I could?" At this question, I turned in my seat and looked at him.

"Possibly," he said, staring ahead. "We'll have to talk to your mom."

"He's also half-Mexican," I said, but I didn't add like me. "His dad is Mexican and his mom is white—"

"Caucasian."

"Yeah that," I continued. "Or something European. But he said they split up, and now he has a half-sister who is full Caucasian or European or whatever. Anyway, he took us to these food carts that are near the library. Have you ever had Ethiopian food? There was an Ethiopian food cart there. And Nick knew these guys, Mark and Mario. They were his dad's friends who owned a Mexican food bus. And they gave us free tacos. They were almost better than *Grammita's*," I said, smiling.

"You better not tell your grandmother that."

I laughed. "I won't."

Before I could stop myself. "Eva's in love with him."

My dad was quiet for a moment. "And what do you think?"

"He's okay," I said, quickly. "I mean he's cool and everything. But I don't like him—like that I mean."

My dad didn't say anything, but his silence seemed to ask, "Are you sure?"

We drove in silence again. And I found myself thinking about Nick's grey eyes, and the way his freckles grew darker when he laughed. That is the other thing about my dad. Not only is he a good listener, but he also gets you to tell him things that you didn't even know you needed to talk about. It's something about his silence. As if breaking it, means opening the door to all the answers to yours and the world's problems.

"Dad?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why did you marry Mom?"

Without missing a beat, he said, "Because I loved her."

I thought about that. "But weren't you sacred?"

This time my dad looked at me. "Scared of what?"

"I don't know—*Papi*?"

My dad looked out at the streets of our neighborhood. We passed Jack and Lucas Thompson's house that were good friends with my brothers.

"Your grandfather is a good man," my dad began. "I respect him very much, especially because he loves his family and would do anything to keep them safe and happy. I know him and I don't always see eye-to-eye, but I love your mother, just as much as I love you and your brothers," he said, turning to look at me. "And, it would have taken a lot more than your upsetting your grandpa to have stopped me from marrying his daughter, no matter how much he may have disapproved."

I thought about what he said. "But don't you worry that maybe you and mom weren't supposed to get married, even though you loved her, because, well, because you aren't...well, you're not the same kind of person?"

My dad suddenly pulled the car over to the side of the road next to the curb and right outside the Henderson's house. The Henderson's have a Great Dane named Oliver who I sometimes take on walks, or really he walks me, when they go on vacation.

"Listen to me, *Sophía*," he said, putting the car in park, but leaving the engine running. He turned in his seat and looked straight at me.

"Your mother and I may come from different families, backgrounds and cultures. And I am not saying it has been easy learning how to understand and accommodate each other's customs, but I would *never*," he stressed, "*never* change anything about me and

your mother. Just because people appear different on the outside doesn't change who they are inside. Okay?"

"Okay."

Our car ride that summer made me realize for the first time that even though my dad struggled to sometimes fit into my mom's family, he tried his best to bridge the differences anyway because he loved my mom, and he loved our family.

My dad started the car again and pulled away from the curb moving toward our house. "Even your *Papi* knows that," he said, his tone softened. Then he winked at me, "We just have to remind him that from time to time."

Chapter Eighteen – A lesson in *Grammita's* kitchen

Summers always flew by fast. But I remember that summer that June took off so quick that I felt like I had crashed landed into the first week of July.

It was Wednesday, and I was supposed to be cleaning my room. And after breakfast, I had every intention of cleaning up the piles of clothes, books and other junk that I was too busy or tired to put away, but I got distracted by reading a softball magazine that Coach gave after last night's practice.

To avoid my mom coming upstairs to check on me, I dropped Julio's old blocks onto the floor from time to time to make it sound like I was working up a sweat. Julio left them behind in my room last week when he was building, "The Towers of Doom," he said.

I was reading about how to better hit a curve ball when I heard my mom's footsteps on the stairs. I stashed the magazine under the covers of my unmade bed and grabbed a handful of clothes from the ground, just as my mom opened my door.

"You're supposed to knock," I said as I dumped my clothes in the hamper. I saw her eying the blocks on my bed and then, the pile on the floor. "But I'll forgive you this time," I said, feigning graciousness. "I'm going to take this hamper to the laundry room."

Heading toward the open door, I tried to pass her, but she picked up a white shirt from the top of the pile.

“Sophía, I just washed this yesterday.”

Busted, I thought.

“Weird. I thought I just wore that shirt.”

“Nice try.”

Pointing a hand at my closet with empty hangers, she said, “Go put those clothes away where they belong, and then come downstairs right after. You’re going to your grandmother’s.”

“Really? How come?” I tried not to act too excited because going to *Grammita’s* meant getting out of cleaning my room, and seeing as I wasn’t getting in trouble for *not* cleaning my room now, a visit to *Grammita’s* was like a miracle.

“You’re going to learn how to cook.”

“Wait! What?” I said, stopping to fit a shirt mid-hanger. “Cook?”

“You need to learn how to cook, Sophía. And who better to learn from than your grandmother?”

“But Mom...” I said, groping for an excuse.

“*No hay peros.*”

“But—who’s going to take me?” Then I remembered my dad was at work, and my mom hated to drive. Second miracle in one day, I thought.

“I am. Now. ¡*Rápido!*”

The ride to *Grammita’s* was the scariest in my life. It started with my mom stepping too hard on the gas and making the tires squeal on our driveway. Luckily, she remembered to hit the brakes before running into Mrs. Henry’s flowerbeds. But before the almost-rose massacre, Ray had spent the first twenty minutes coaxing my mom to turn the key in the ignition. Julio sat next to me in the back seat and held my hand through the whole drive. Since he turned six, Julio usually refused to hold my hand, especially because Ray made fun of him, but I am glad that he did.

What is only a fifteen-minute drive to my grandparent’s house took us an hour to drive here that day. People honked at us to drive faster or get off the road. My mom chose

the second option and pulled off to the side of the road to let them pass. And only until the road was clear did she return to driving twenty-miles-an-hour. While Julio muttered Hail Mary's under his breath the whole way, I kept my head down and prayed that no one passed us that I knew. But an hour later, we did arrive at *Grammita's* house, alive.

"That wasn't so bad," my mom said, smiling and looking at all of us after she pulled up next to the house.

Ray and Julio didn't say anything, and I jumped out of the car, thankful to be on solid ground again.

"Call me when you're done, Sophía," my mom called from the open window.

I waved goodbye, especially to Julio whose face still had a plastered look of horror. Ray's didn't look too excited either, but my mom was smiling and waved goodbye. I watched our car jolt forward once it was back on the street before I turned around and headed toward the backdoor.

The house already smelled like Mexican spices at work. Although I wouldn't recognize *Grammita's* house without the smell of roasted chilies, sweet garlic and other spices I didn't know the names of. I could hear humming in the kitchen, so I gave a sigh and went in.

"Hi *Grammita*."

"Sophía! ¡*Hola angelita!*"

My grandmother looked up from the counter where she was chopping something that looked like a white circle of Jell-O, if Jell-O was white. She opened up her arms, expectantly. I walked over and wrapped my arms around her small frame. She didn't return my hug since her hands were floured, but she kissed me on both cheeks.

"Your mother told me today you're going to learn how to cook – like *la verdadera mujer Mexicana*."

"I guess." I pointed at the strange, white lump sitting on the cutting board.

"What's that?"

"Cheese, of course," she said, as if I asked her if chickens lay eggs. She ripped off a chunk of it and shoved it in my mouth.

“It’s *queso cazero*. The best *queso* in the world! And the perfect cheese for my *enchiladas*.”

The cheese was soft and sweeter than I expected. It was more watery than most cheeses I had tasted. It didn’t taste sharp like the cheddar cheese dad bought at the grocery store. This cheese, well, this cheese melted on my tongue.

“*¡Delicioso, si!*” *Grammita* smiled. “Good! Now get that apron behind the door,” she said, pointing a finger at the pantry. “And wash your hands in the sink. Then we’ll get started.”

I did as I was told, and so, my first lesson in Mexican cooking began.

I never realized how much work it took to cook some of my favorite foods.

Grammita said cooking wasn’t hard work. “Hard work is cleaning your *Papí*’s shirts after he dirties them in his barn,” she said. “*Aye Dios* give me patience with that man. But no, *Sophía*,” she continued. “*Mexican* cooking is not so hard. It just takes time. Lots and lots of time. Which, is why,” she said, smiling at me. “We sing.”

And my grandmother began to sing in a rich, tenor voice.

All the songs were in Spanish. I didn’t always know what we were singing about. I only repeated her words, but some sounded familiar. Some were songs from my childhood. The ones I heard her singing in the house when I was younger.

That day we sang in her kitchen, my grandmother also taught me that the water’s temperature for the *harina* – used to make tortillas – had to be just hot enough, or all would be ruined. She showed me how to mix the *masa* with only one hand while the other hand steadied the bowl. She taught me to scoop up the dough, as if cupping water, and turn it over with a firm pat of my heel. Then repeating the process until the red *chile* powder mixed completely, and the *masa* turned a bold red.

She moved her hands over my hands as we worked the tortilla press – a wedding gift from her grandmother, she told me. We placed the small red balls of dough we had shaped perfectly, and nearly identical in size, on top of the plastic bag that *Grammita* found at the grocery store to put fruit and vegetables in.

“It keeps the *masa* from sticking to press,” she said, and then she pressed the handle down hard.

I had to use both hands to flatten the dough to the right thickness that met my grandmother's approval. But *Grammita* only used one hand to flatten the ball of *masa* into a soft and perfectly round tortilla.

We filled the tortillas with the cheese mixture she prepared and made with the sweet *queso* I had tried earlier.

“And some more *chile*, she said with a wink. “For extra spice.”

Then we folded the tortilla in half and pinched the ends together. I watched her place the *enchiladas* one by one on the hot griddle, which she had already tested for its heat. Earlier she flicked some water on top of the griddle, and the tiny drops sizzled and evaporated in the warm air of her kitchen.

Once on the griddle, the *enchiladas* turned golden and red and bubbled in the middle where the cheese lay. Some cheese oozed out the cracks that I hadn't pinched tight enough, but *Grammita* said that they'd taste just as good.

I spent the rest of the morning working side by side next to my grandmother making her famous red pockets of love. That's what she called her *enchiladas*. But I don't care what *Grammita* said. That day cooking was hard work, and my arms hurt after pressing the tortillas flat all morning. It was like when Coach made us do extra drills if we goofed off at practice. But instead, I was making *enchiladas* with my grandmother and muscles that I didn't even know existed hurt.

Around one o'clock, *Papí* came in from outside. He kissed *Grammita* on the cheek and gave me a big hug, only making me warmer.

“How's the lesson?” he asked, cheerfully and sitting down at the counter. He took off his straw hat that was tattered and frayed at the ends. No matter how much *Grammita* begged for him to throw it out and to get a new one, he refused to get rid of it, even though there was a large hole at the top. When it was sunny, there would be a red circle on the top of his head where his hair had stopped growing. Yet, *Papí* kept the hat because he said it was the only hat he took with him from *Mexico*, and it protected his head all those years in the fields. “And I don't trust those baseball caps your uncles wear,” he said.

“I’m not very good,” I said, frustrated. I was hot and sweaty, and the last tortilla I pressed failed to turn out into a perfect circular tortilla. Instead, it looked more like a three-quarter moon whose edges had been nibbled on like it was made of cheese.

“*Aye* don’t listen to her, she’s learning,” my grandmother said.

Grammita came to my side, took the lopsided tortilla, re-rolled the dough, pressed down once, flipped it over, pressed down again, and opened the tortilla press to reveal the kind of perfect full moon I had been trying to achieve.

“You make it look so easy!” I complained.

Papí laughed. “Yes, she does.”

“It is nothing. I’ve had years of practice, *Sophía*. Cooking for seven hungry babies, eight including *Papí*, is all the practice you need. Do you think I knew anything about cooking when I was your age? No. I had to learn everything on my own because I was a *stúpida* girl and didn’t listen to *my* grandmother. *Aye*, *Sophía*,” she said, taking a rare pause in her lightning movements to wipe her hands on her apron and place both on her hips. Then, she looked at both of us. “Now that was a woman who could cook. The things she’d make when I was *niña*,” she sighed. “Flour tortillas that melted...like clouds in your mouth.”

I could tell from her expression that she was back in her grandmother’s kitchen in *Mexico*, a place where that *Papí* and I couldn’t follow. Slowly her eyes cleared, and she came out of her dream-like stance to look at *Papí*’s hand and realized that they were streaked with dirt.

“Miguel! Go wash your hands and clean up.”

Papí stood up. He knew when an order was an order. *Grammita* returned to the stove and finished cooking the last batch of *enchiladas*.

“Do you miss it, *Grammita*?” I asked.

“Hmmm?” she asked, stirring the soup she also had made and using her finger to taste it. “Maybe a little more salt—” she murmured.

“*Mexico*. Your home. Do you miss it?”

She stopped stirring, and sighed. She turned around and looked at me.

“Sophía,” she said, quietly and shaking her head. “My home is here. With my family.” She walked over to me and placed an arm around my shoulder. “Missing is like something is missing inside of you. *Pero Mexico* is apart of my blood. Your blood too—”

“Only half.”

Squeezing my shoulder she said, “Still. It is apart of your blood, *and* as long as this blood pumps in our hearts, there is nothing to be missed.” She was quiet again before she said, “Now you go wash up too, and let’s eat lunch.”

At lunch, *Papí* and I talked about softball. He asked me about my team. I told him that we had won our last five games, and we were tied with the Ravens for first place. If we won our next four games, then we would go to the championship game. I told him that the team we were playing against this Saturday was also undefeated this season. And I heard that their pitcher struck out half of the other team in the first two innings. Saturday’s game was a big game and talking about it with *Papí* made me nervous.

“Have you used the bat I made you?” he asked, excitedly. “How many homeruns have you had?”

My mind flashed to the bat lying underneath my bed somewhere and under a pile of something. I couldn’t tell him that I hadn’t used it because the Mexican flag embarrassed me. Joanna was the only one who knew that I was half-Mexican, and I hadn’t wanted to explain to my teammates about my Mexican heritage.

“Um, yeah *Papí*, I use it at practice all the time,” I lied. “It’s really great! Thanks.” I didn’t want to lie. But I didn’t want to make him unhappy either. And *Papí* didn’t ask me any more questions about the bat after that.

Grammita started cleaning up the plates and taking them to the sink. “Miguel, have you seen Lena today? I wonder if I should save a plate for her?”

“I haven’t seen that girl in the house all week,” he grumbled.

At the mention of Lena’s name, I remembered what Eva and I saw in the park. “Maybe she is at her art class?” I asked.

“I don’t know where that daughter of yours is, Maya,” *Papí* said, ignoring my comment. “But I need to talk to her. She was supposed to call back Antonio’s son,

Giovanni, and she hasn't. I saw Antonio at Fernando's yesterday, and he told me that Giovanni is broken up—"

"*Aye, Miguel,*" *Grammita* said. "You know Lena didn't even like that boy, and she just went to dinner with him to please you and your temper."

"What temper? I didn't force her to see him," *Papí* said, his voice rising. "I just want her to be happy. Giovanni is a nice boy. Lena should just give him—"

"You know you did more than just that Miguel Ramirez," *Grammita* fired back at him. "Always meddling."

My grandpa didn't say anything after that, but picked up his shamble of a hat and stormed out the kitchen toward the barn.

"*Aye Dios, help that man,*" *Grammita* muttered.

And under my breath, I whispered a silent prayer for God to help Lena if *Papí* ever found out what she was doing and who she was seeing.

Chapter Nineteen – A Mexican Fourth of July

It was the Fourth of July. That week, I watched the insides of stores turn into festive stripes of red, white and blue. Store aisles filled up with any kind of item I could imagine, and others I couldn't, that represented America's proud colors. There were American flags, T-shirts, crowns, silly string with bonus star confetti and water balloons, which my brothers tried to convince my mom to buy before we went to *Grammita's* house for their annual Fourth of July party.

Papí and *Grammita* loved to celebrate the Fourth of July, even though neither one of them was born in America. But every July, they invited all the family and their friends and family over to the house to celebrate Uncle Sam's birthday. Every year, Uncle Robert and Miguel were in charge of buying the fireworks, which meant that they drove eight hours to bring back the best ones. And every year, my mom and aunts argued with my uncles about bringing back fireworks that were unsafe, and some were even illegal. If the police caught my uncles, they warned, then everyone was going to get into big trouble. But every year, Uncle Robert and Miguel brought back the biggest and brightest

fireworks they could find, and my mom and aunts “oohed” and “aahed” as much as the rest of us.

When we arrived at *Grammita's* house, there was already a crowd of cars parked outside, bumper to bumper.

“Do they always have to invite everyone they know to these things,” I muttered under my breath. But my mom, who has ears like a fox, heard me.

“*Mirala.*”

Walking into the house, I threaded through the people my grandparents knew and threw my softball bag on the floor by the kitchen barstool before sitting down.

“*Sophía!*” my mom said, coming in after me. She carried a stack of Tupperware filled with guacamole and bean dip *Grammita* told her to bring. “Go put your bag in one of the bedrooms right now!”

I picked up my bag, threw it over my back and headed toward the stairs.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to your grandmother, *Sophía?*”

I ignored her and kept walking.

“What’s wrong with Sam?” I heard my Aunt Cynthia say.

“She lost her game today,” Julio said, running in through the kitchen with Ricki, who he had met up with outside.

“Always softball,” my mom said, exasperated to Aunt Cynthia while dumping the tortilla chips in a bowl and smacking Julio and Ricki’s hands away. “It’s all she thinks about.”

“It is not,” I called back. “And we didn’t lose!”

From the corner of my eye, I saw my mom shake her head at my aunt. “She’s not even thirteen,” she said.

I wasn’t lying when I said we didn’t lose. But we didn’t win either. That afternoon, we had a game against the Bears, a team from the town to the west of Lakecrest. They became part of our league when they re-drew the county lines. Because we hadn’t played them last year, we weren’t exactly sure what to expect.

The score was close the entire game. Every time one of our runners made it home, the other team would get three outs, and we'd have to switch to the outfield. The same went them. At the bottom of the ninth, we were one run ahead, but the Bears were up to bat.

They had a runner on third and a runner on second. Number ten hit a hard-line drive to left field. Rachel, whose glove is usually like gold, caught the ball, but then, it bounced out of her mitt and hit the grass. The runner on third managed to make it home by the time we recovered to finish the play. I tagged number fifteen out on third, but when I threw the ball back to Sarah on second base, I aimed too high, and it sailed over her head letting the hitter, number ten, slide into home and tie the game.

Since we played in the junior league, the umpires called it a tie game after two hours. Although it was better than losing, it meant that the Ravens took the lead for first, and we tied with the Bears for second. And unless the Ravens lost a game, our chance of going into the playoffs in first place was looking grim.

I headed up the stairs and thought that I would just throw my bag into Lena's room. But when I got to her door, it was ajar. I could hear my aunt's voice, and it sounded like she was talking with someone.

I walked up quietly to the door. I thought about knocking, but then I heard her say, "I don't know Henry."

Who's Henry? I thought.

Although I have spied on my parents, brothers, cousins, grandparents and aunts and uncles multiple times before, I've never spied on Lena. But hearing my aunt's voice and her laugh, I remembered the guy she stood outside the ice-cream shop with two weeks ago, and I couldn't resist listening to see if his name was Henry.

"Because I don't think I could get away."

"My family is having a party."

"They would notice if I left."

She laughed.

"You don't know my father."

Father, I thought. Lena, like all of us, always called *Papí, Papí*.

“I’m just not sure—”

I heard someone running up the stairs. Two someones by the sound of it, and it was probably Julio and Ricki. Lena must have heard them too because she said, “I’ll see what I can do, okay? But no promises.”

My ear was still near the door’s opening when Lena pulled it open with a phone in her hand, and I stumbled back.

“Sam? What are you—were you listening in on me?”

“I—”

But I didn’t have to finish my sentence because just then Julio and Ricki came running through the hallway, and fast. Lena and I had to squeeze up against the wall, or else get hit, as they bolted through her door yelling like savages. I’d never been so happy to see Julio and Ricki before.

“*Niños*, what are you doing? Stop yelling. Or run off and start yelling outside where *Papí* can deal with you.”

That made Julio and Ricki start yelling louder, but at least, they headed out of Lena’s room and back down the hallway.

“*¡Aye niños!*”

Silence passed as we watched them disappear.

“Um, I came to see if I could leave my bag in your room,” I said, lifting up my softball bag with all my gear and smiling.

Lena looked at me, and I could tell she wasn’t buying that I had just came by to drop off my stuff, and that I hadn’t been eavesdropping on her conversation.

“I lost my game today,” I said, before she could decide if she wanted to know the truth or not, and that seemed to soften her up.

“Oh, Sam, I’m sorry. Does that mean you won’t get to play in the finals?”

“Well,” I said, walking past her and dropping my bag on the floor near her bed.

“We didn’t actually lose.”

“Ow!” I rubbed my arm where she had just smacked me. “What was that for?”

“Why did you lie to me?”

“I wasn’t really lying. I was just going to tell you that it was a tie game.”

Her arms were still crossed. “That’s still lying.”

“Sorry. I guess it just feels like we lost,” I said, still rubbing my arm.

She reached out to touch my arm, and I jerked back.

“I’m not going to hit you, Sam,” she laughed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

She reached out again, and this time, I let her.

“Come on, we should join the party.”

We started walking down the hallway, and sensing that she wasn’t upset anymore

I asked, “So who is Henry?”

Her head whipped around, and so did her hair.

“So you were listening to my conversation.”

I looked away. “Yeah,” I said, sheepishly. “Sorry.”

She was quiet before saying, “He’s just a friend.”

And she started walking toward the kitchen without me.

Look who’s lying now, I thought grimly.

Chapter Twenty – “Ooh,” “Aah,” and “Oh no”

Everyone was in the back yard. My uncles were sitting around on lawn chairs that *Papí* had somehow managed to find and piece together from the barn. Every year, the lawn chairs went missing when *Grammita*’s friends came over and wanted to sit outside and chat. And every year, *Papí* finds them when he needs them. A big picnic table was set up on the patio. A plastic tablecloth covered the table, which was held down by big dishes that *Grammita* and my aunts had brought out from the kitchen with the heat still coming out from under their lids.

That was the other weird thing about my family celebrating the Fourth of July. On the Fourth of July people get together and eat corn-on-the-cob, hamburgers and hotdogs, watermelon and root-beer floats. At least that’s what my teammates talked about after the game. Even though we hadn’t won our game, they were all excited to go home to their family or friend’s barbeque. But the plates my family put out didn’t resemble any of the foods that my friends were so excited about.

Our table was covered with *enchilada* dishes. Some were the ones that I had helped *Grammita* make earlier that week, but there were also *enchiladas* made from flour tortillas and drenched in a thick, creamy green sauce and stuffed with chicken, cheese, rice and peppers. Although we had fruit too, watermelon was one of the options. Instead, there were papayas, pineapple, plantains, which are like bananas but not as sweet, and mangos. Of course, *Grammita* also made beans, rice and tortillas, both flour and corn, and then, lots of different kinds of salsa.

As much as I loved my grandmother's cooking, sometimes I wondered what it would be like to go to somebody's house where the table had normal food, or food that I recognized in grocery stores. Or what it would be like to sit down at a table where everyone can fit and no one has to squeeze or stand in a corner like they're in timeout.

I caught sight of Eva who finally arrived with Aunt Rosa and Uncle Robert.

"Eva!"

At the sound of her name, she looked around, spotted me and waved. She hurried over to the table.

"Come on, let's grab some food and head toward the river. There's so much I have to tell you."

I was more than happy to agree. I hadn't seen Eva since the day we went to the library. She'd called once, but I was at practice, and she wasn't home when I tried calling back. We still hadn't talked about Lena, and I was dying to tell her about the conversation I just overheard, and that Lena's mystery guy was named Henry.

We loaded our plates up with as much food as we felt we could carry with the least amount falling off on our way to the river. We walked over to the edge of our grandparent's property and disappeared into the trees.

The nice thing about big parties is that it's easy to disappear. It takes awhile for someone to know that we were missing and even longer, for people to start looking.

We reached the end of the short hill, and we headed instinctively toward the two big rocks. We found them two years ago and with Uncle Miguel's help we, well actually, he, hauled them over to the creek's bed. The creek behind my grandparent's house was really nothing more than a sliver of a stream.

Eva sat down on the nearest rock and immediately crisscrossed her legs creating a life-like leg pretzel. I tried to do the same on the second rock, but I've never been that flexible and my legs wouldn't bend at the right places, so I stuck them straight out and used my lap as a table instead.

"Jeez, it's been awhile since we've been here – uh?"

"Yeah," I said. "These rocks seem a lot smaller." I kicked my feet that were dangling over the edge.

Eva laughed, "Yeah."

"I called you back last week, but your dad said you were out with your mom."

"We went shopping. I was going to call you back, but then I couldn't in case my parents or Bella was listening because Sam," she turned toward me, "You won't believe what happened—"

"You saw them again?" I asked, excited.

"Uh?" Eva looked confused. "Saw who? No, I called him."

Now it was my turn to be confused. "Who?"

Eva looked at me, her eyes wide. "Nick."

"Ohhh— Nick," I said.

"Yeah, I went over to a friend's house—"

"What friend?"

"Raquel." she said, not missing a beat. "I called him at her house, so my parents wouldn't hear. And well, we talked for like twenty minutes. Raquel thinks it was more like ten minutes, but," she shook her head, "I think she's just jealous because the boy she likes doesn't like her, and well, we talked about the library again, and then Nick said—"

She said "Nick" like she was eating one of those too sweet strawberry popsicles that she loved so much that I thought tasted like water trying to taste like sugar.

"—his uncles from the taco bus said to tell us hi. Then, we started talking about music and — Did you know he was in a band? Gosh, Sam he is just *so cool!* He said he volunteers at the library again on Thursday, and that I should come visit him again. I mean—" She snapped out of her dreamy state. She looked back at me, but her eyes still looked like they'd been hit by stardust. "Nick said *we* should come visit the library again.

And he would show us around the city more.” Looking out at the bank where the water was rippling gently, she said, “But I told him that you probably had softball practice—”

“I have practice on Tuesdays, not Thursdays.”

“Oh,” she said, and then laughed. “Well, I didn’t know if you even wanted to come because you didn’t seem to have too much fun last time—”

“I had fun,” I said, a little more defensively than I meant.

“Well,” she said, slowly. “If you really want to come, I could call him back and tell him that you’re going to come too—”

“You were going to go to the city by yourself?” I asked, shocked. “Aunt Rosa is going to let you?”

“Well—I haven’t really told mom or dad yet—but nothing bad happened last time. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I shoved my food around on my plate. I noticed that Eva’s plate wasn’t filled with rabbit food today. She actually served herself two of *Grammita’s enchiladas*, a big portion of rice and beans and two more tortillas.

“Glad you’re done with that stupid diet,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Eva said, putting her fork down that was halfway to her mouth. “Yeah, well, it wasn’t really working.”

“It was stupid,” I said. “I don’t know why you were so worried about losing weight anyway.” And why you’re so obsessed with Nick, I wanted to add.

“Easy for you to say,” she said, her voice rising. “I wish I could be as skinny as you.”

“No, you don’t,” I said, quickly. “Trust me.”

We fell silent again. I could hear people from the party laughing and talking faintly behind us. It seemed like that summer more and more awkward silences erupted between Eva and me, and they kept getting more frequent and longer. Sitting on the rock, I felt like I should say I’m sorry or something that would make these silences go away. But instead, I said, “I think I know who Lena is seeing.”

“Lena?” Eva looked up. “Oh yeah! She was with that guy the other day.”

“Just that guy? Eva, Lena has never dated just ‘some guy,’ or really any guy. At least nobody we didn’t know about,” I said. And nobody that I didn’t know about, I thought.

“Hmm, that’s interesting,” she said, as if I had just said that the moon is round.

“His name is Henry.”

“That’s a nice name.”

I didn’t understand why Eva was acting so normal. I didn’t understand how she wasn’t curious or at least more interested in the fact that our aunt was seeing someone that the family didn’t know about. But maybe, the real reason I was getting upset was because Lena had a secret, and she wasn’t telling me.

“I think he’s from her art class.”

Eva paused from picking at her pink-nail polish. “How’d you know his name was Henry anyway?” she asked.

“I—um, I overheard Lena talking with him on the phone.”

Eva’s head jerked up. “You were listening to her on the phone?”

“What? It wasn’t like I picked up the phone or anything,” I said. “I was dropping off my bag, and her door was open. We’ve done worse before,” I pointed out.

That seemed to soften her stare.

“Still,” she said. “It was a private call. I bet she wouldn’t have liked you listening, if she knew.”

“She didn’t care,” I lied.

Eva looked over at me again, and opened her mouth to say something, but then, Isabella came out from the behind the trees.

“You guys never let me to hang out with you,” she said.

“You’re right. We don’t,” Eva said. “So why are you here?”

“Hi, Bella,” I said. I liked my cousin Bella, and she was right. Eva and I never invited her to tag along because she could sometimes be a pest. It really wasn’t her fault that she happened to be born three years younger than us.

“Fine,” she said. “I didn’t come here to sit around on your stupid rocks anyway. Mom told me to find you because Dad and Uncle Miguel are going to start the fireworks soon.” As soon as she finished delivering her message, she left in a huff.

Because it was a full moon tonight, I didn't realize how late it was, or how long Eva and I had been out there.

"I'll probably get in trouble for that one," Eva muttered.

"You could've been a little nicer." I said. "Bella's not so bad."

"Easy for you to say. You don't live with her."

We picked up our plates and made our way back to the house. When we reached the yard again, everyone had set up blankets on the lawn to watch the show. My dad brought a blanket from home, and he was sitting off to the side of yard. He was sitting back on his hands by himself. I didn't see my mom, but I guessed that she and my aunts were inside helping *Grammita* clean up dinner. I was tempted to go sit next to him, but near the corner of the barn, I saw Uncle Robert with my brothers and cousins. They were looking at the selection of fireworks lying on the grass. But I didn't see Uncle Miguel anywhere.

"I wonder where Uncle Miguel is—" I started to say to Eva, but when I looked behind me she was gone. Weird, I thought.

I forgot about my dad and headed toward the barn. When I got closer, the boys were shouting back and forth about which firework they wanted to light first.

"Hey, Uncle Robert, where's Uncle Miguel?" I asked.

He looked up. "I don't know, Sam. He said he was going to go fetch something from the barn, but that was ten minutes ago—Jesus, Ricki! Keep that sparkler away from the rest of the fireworks."

Ricki pulled his sparkler away muttering that he was sorry while Eddie and Ray started to laugh.

"You said Jesus," they said.

"Tell your grandmother, and you'll both be indoors next year," my uncle warned.

Turning back to me he said, "Sam would you do me a big favor and go get your Uncle Miguel? Tell him I need him out here *horita!* To help keep these kids from blowing up the yard."

"Sure, Uncle Robert," I said.

I entered the barn. Uncle Miguel wasn't anywhere near *Papí's* big tool shed. I moved toward the woodshed thinking that maybe he went to grab something in there. The lights were on when I opened the door. Moving around the aisle, I saw my uncle sitting on the gravel floor, slouched against the shelf that was stacked with odd pieces of wood that *Papí* called his scraps.

"Uncle Miguel? Are you okay?"

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Sam."

I bent down next to him, and I could smell the beer on his breath and the cigar smoke from his shirt. I noticed his hand was purple and swollen like something hard had fallen on top of it. Then I saw several pieces of wood on the ground next to him, and I realized it was more like three some things.

"Sam? Whaa—what are you doing here?"

"Uncle Robert told me to come get you. What happened to your hand?"

"What—" he lifted up his bruised hand and winced. "I—I was trying to get some wood up there—" he gestured again with his hurt hand. He seemed to keep forgetting it was hurt, and winced again.

"I'm going to go get Uncle Robert," I said, standing up. "Stay right here."

I don't know if he heard me because he was still staring at the shelf above him, but I figured since Uncle Miguel wasn't going to go anywhere that it didn't matter, and I hurried out the door.

When I brought Uncle Robert into the woodshed, he had one look at Uncle Miguel on the floor and said, "*Borracho*" quietly under his breath.

"Sam, go get *Papí*," he commanded.

I had heard that word, *Borracho*, only once before. It was a year ago when my mom found Eva and me at a bar with Uncle Miguel.

I remember we had the day off school, and Ray and Julio went to their friends' houses, but I went to *Grammita's* and Eva came too. *Grammita* had to run some errands for her church group, so she left Uncle Miguel in charge. He ended up taking us for a drive, and we ended up at the local bar in a few blocks down the street. I remember

thinking that Eva and I weren't really supposed to be there, but Uncle Miguel said it would be okay.

My uncle must have been there a lot before because he knew the bartender, a huge stocky guy with lots of tattoos, who my uncle called, Jack. It was only noon, and the only other person at the bar was a man dressed in an old army coat. Uncle Miguel seemed to know him as well because he patted him on the back and ordered himself and his friend a drink. With my uncle at the bar, Eva and I decided to play around at pool tables. Eva and I weren't very good, and the table was missing several balls, so it turned into a short game.

It was not long after we arrived that I remember my mom stormed into the bar. Her eyes were wild, and I remember thinking that I had never seen my mom so angry, not even when Ray and Eddie ruined her tomato plants by running over them with their bikes.

She started yelling at my uncle in Spanish, and her arms waved so violently that I was sure she was going to smack my uncle right there, even though he sat two feet away from her. She dragged Eva and me out of the bar soon afterwards, and I remember as we walked out the double doors, she had uttered that same word Uncle Robert just muttered under his breath—*borracho*.

Papí came into the barn with Uncle Emilio and Uncle Antonio. The four of them, including Uncle Robert, helped Uncle Miguel onto his feet. Inside the house, Uncle Emilio bandaged Uncle Miguel's hand and put him to bed. While *Papí* went to explain things to *Grammita*, Uncle Robert and Uncle Antonio went back outside to start the fireworks. Amidst the hustle and bustle, I noticed that no one was talking about what happened to Uncle Miguel. Not even my aunts. It was almost as if nobody was surprised by what happened.

Eva was still missing, so I decided to go back inside the house to find her before she missed the firework show too. Walking past the kitchen, I saw her coming out of the bathroom.

"Hey Eva, did you hear what happened to Uncle Miguel? No one is talking about it. And everyone is acting weird and like nothing happened. I don't get—"

Once she got closer, I noticed that her face was pale, and her forehead glistened. It looked like she was sick.

“Hey,” I said, stopping short. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, briskly, wiping her mouth and avoiding my stare. She brushed past me and said, “Come on, the show’s probably starting.”

I followed her out the door, but she took off toward her mom and Bella, so I went over and sat down next to my dad instead.

“Excited, kiddo?” he asked, nudging my shoulder.

“Yeah sure,” I muttered.

Sitting there on the grass, shoulder to shoulder with my dad, I couldn’t help but wish that holidays at my grandparents were more normal. First Lena is dating some guy no one knows about, then Eva starts acting strange, and finally, Uncle Miguel gets hurt and no one says anything.

I looked over at Eva sitting next to my aunt and cousin. I couldn’t get her pale face out of my mind, and then I remembered how purple and swollen, like a watermelon, Uncle Miguel’s hand looked and the smell of beer on his breath. And then, there was Lena. I hadn’t seen her since I was caught eavesdropping on her conversation. So while Uncle Robert, with the help of Uncle Antonio, lit up the sky and everyone else “oohed” and “aahed,” I just couldn’t help but think that somehow I was missing out on something. I was confused and somehow stuck in the middle again. And I remember thinking that summer I didn’t know how I got there.

Chapter Twenty-One – Grandma and Grandpa Martin come to town

Two weeks went by since the Fourth of July party. No one talked about what happened at the *Grammita’s* house with Uncle Miguel or where Lena had disappeared. And I didn’t say anything to anyone about Eva since I didn’t know then that there was something to say. Although the days kept getting hotter, I thought that maybe things in our family were ready to cool down. Little did I know that things, like the weather, were just warming up.

On Thursday, I woke up and headed downstairs for breakfast. From the hallway, I could hear my mom and dad talking, loudly.

“Michael, I don’t understand why—”

“Morning!” I said.

My parents were sitting at the dining table, and I bee lined past them for the pantry. I grabbed the Cheerio box, a glass from the cupboard, and the gallon of milk from the fridge. Even though it was early, I also sneaked a few Oreos from the bag I saw open in the pantry.

“Morning, Sam,” my dad said.

“Hey? Don’t you work today?” My question came out muffled because of the Oreo I had stuffed in my mouth. I wasn’t the best at keeping track of what day it is during the summer, but I was pretty sure that it was Thursday because the game against the Timberwolves was only two days away.

“No cookies before breakfast, Sophía, and use a bowl,” my mom said.

I sighed but went back to the cupboard. I liked to eat my cereal from the box with a big glass of milk. I hated soggy cereal, and this method guaranteed that each Cheerio was just as crunchy as the last one. Then, I could wash my Cheerios down with a gulp of milk.

“Michael, you didn’t answer me,” my mom said, turning back to my dad. “Why can’t your parents stay with us?”

That caught my attention. “Grandma and Grandpa Martin? They’re coming? When?”

“Today,” my dad said, turning toward the counter. “I’m picking them up at the airport this afternoon.”

“We have a room for them here,” my mom continued, pointing her finger on the table. “I don’t see why they just don’t stay with us. Why waste money at some cold, sterile hotel room?” she asked, throwing up her hands.

“Where are Grandma and Grandpa Martin staying?”

“Grandma and Grandpa Martin are coming?! Awesome!”

Julio came running into the kitchen still in his Batman pajamas. His black hair was wild from sleep and stuck out in every which way as if elves played tug of war with

his hair in the middle of the night. He came to an abrupt halt near my mom's chair, and she tried to detangle it, unsuccessfully.

"You need a haircut," I said.

He stuck his tongue out at me. "Can I have some cereal?" he asked my mom.

"Sophía, get your brother a bowl of cereal please."

I stuck my tongue at him but got up to get another bowl from the cupboard.

"I told you, Maria Ella, they said they didn't want to be an imposition or have you tire yourself in making a fuss over them."

"What fuss? It's no fuss. They're your parents. They come to town, and I want to welcome them into our home. Give them a place to stay. Good food. They're your family, Michael. If we visited *my* family in *Mexico*, they would — *Como se dice?* — roll out the red carpet. What's so wrong with that?"

"What's an imposition?" Julio asked.

"Maria Ella," my dad pleaded. "My parents aren't the same as your family. They're used to living on their own. They keep to themselves. And they just said that they would be more comfortable—"

"Who said?" my mom asked, sharply. "You mother? That women hates me." She stood up, pushing Julio off her lap and onto the floor. "Ever since she thinks I stole you away from her."

My mom, still in her dressing robe, left the kitchen muttering to herself in Spanish. It was never a good sign when my mom muttered in Spanish.

My dad dropped his head into his hands and ran his fingers through his hair. Julio climbed up on top of the barstool and stared scooping Cheerios into his mouth from the box.

"Jeez, use a bowl," I said.

"I'm too hungry," he said, through a mouthful of Cheerios.

My dad stood up, sighing, and tousled Julio's hair before grabbing the bowl I had brought from cupboard and snatching the box out from Julio's reaching hand.

"Here, buddie," he said, pouring him a bowl and handing him a spoon. "Wanna come with me to the airport to get Grandma and Grandpa?"

"Yeah!"

“Okay, be ready to go at noon.”

I didn't know why my dad didn't ask me to come, but then I remembered I had practice this afternoon. Still I tried to give him an encouraging smile on his way out of the kitchen. But he didn't see me. I heard his footsteps on the stairs, and I knew he was going to talk with my mom.

“I wonder what Grandma Martin is going to bring me this time?” Julio said, before he started rambling. “Maybe that dinosaur transformer I saw at the store. You know, Sam, the one that you take apart and change into all different kinds of dinosaurs, like the T-Rex, the brachiosaurus—”

Julio started listing names of other dinosaurs that the toy morphed into, but I had already stopped listening. Taking another bite of my Cheerios, I realized that they had gotten mushy. But it didn't matter because I was too busy thinking about Grandma and Grandpa Martin's upcoming visit.

Grandma and Grandpa Martin lived in Wilbur, Nebraska. They visited us twice a year, once in the summer and then again for Thanksgiving. They've been coming to visit ever since I could remember.

One time we went on a family vacation to visit them in Wilbur. It was the strangest place I had ever seen and not much of a vacation. Vacations usually meant lots of swimming, tropical trees and for me, several bottles of sunscreen. But in Wilbur, there were no tropical trees and no place to go swimming either. But there were rows and rows and rows of cornfields.

My grandparents lived on farm, and my dad grew up in the same house he was born in. Since he moved away and married my mom, my grandparents retired and sold most of their land to other farmers.

I had never been anywhere before where it took twenty minutes, driving, to borrow a cup of sugar from the nearest neighbor. Sometimes my dad would tell us stories about his childhood and growing up on a farm. Like when he had to wake up every morning at sunrise to milk their cow, Margaret. Sometimes when we were little, and my brothers and I would fight, my dad would tell us that we were lucky we had each other and our cousins to play with. He never said it, but I think sometimes my dad was lonely

growing up as a kid all by himself. Because back then, he said there weren't many kids his age to play with. Instead, he said he made friends with the horses and other barn animals. Which is maybe why he likes mom's family so much.

I had forgotten, until that morning, that my grandparents usually made a trip to visit us mid-summer. I was excited to see them. Not because they brought us gifts like Julio said, but because I hadn't seen them since last Thanksgiving.

But I was worried about my mom. Whenever Grandma Martin came to town, she was always on edge – more so than usual.

Holli dropped me off from practice again a little after six. Inside, I heard voices coming from the backyard through the open patio door.

“Sam is that you? Come out back, kiddo! We're all out here.”

I dropped my bag by the front door and walked out onto the patio. My dad stood at the grill with the ridiculous red apron he always wore when he grilled.

Next to my dad was a tall, blond-haired woman. From the side, I could see that her hair was pinned up with a large barrette with turquoise beads. It looked like a Navajo design. Grandma Martin loved everything that was Native American. She owned a big collection of earrings, necklaces and bracelets that all shared similar designs. She said that her great-great-grandmother was Native American, which would make me technically one-sixteenth Native American. But that math was too much for me to handle, and I was already too confused by being half-Mexican and half-American. Grandma Martin wore a brown woven vest over an off-white blouse and jeans. She was tall and thin like my dad, and her eyes were the same ice blue color, except my dad's were a bit softer. Grandma Martin had crinkles around her eyes when she smiled, which was a lot.

In seeing me, she smiled. “There's my beautiful granddaughter!”

“I'm your only granddaughter, Grandma,” I said.

She chuckled. “A minor detail.” She laughed again. “Well, don't just stand there dear! Come give me a hug!”

I put my arms lightly around her. “I'm all dirty from practice, Grandma.”

But her arms wrapped around me and squeezed tight until I felt crushed against her. She smelled like lavender and freshly cut grass. So different from *Grammita* who always smelled like garlic and chili peppers.

“Dirt never hurt anybody,” she said, squeezing me tighter. Then she pulled away and held me back by my shoulders. “By golly, Peter,” she said, over her shoulder to my Grandpa Martin who was rocking back and forth on our porch swing. “This girl’s gonna to be tall! Just like her daddy.”

She pulled me against her again, and the top of my hair brushed the bridge of her nose.

“See here, darlin’, you’re gonna be taller than me the next time I see you.”

We laughed, and she squeezed me again.

Ray walked through our backyard gate. He had been over at Jack Thompson’s house again. As he made his way up to the patio, Grandma Martin moved to make the same fuss over Ray. I walked over to Grandpa Martin on the swing and gave his cheek a kiss.

“Hi, Grandpa.”

He patted my knee. “How’s my girl?” he said, winking.

We talked about my summer and softball. Grandpa Martin was a big baseball fan. He was a New York Yankees fan at his core, but because Nebraska didn’t have its own major league baseball team, I knew he also had a soft spot for the Kansas City Royals, although he’d never admit it.

I started telling him about my team’s record, which was now 6-0 with one tied game. We were only two games away from the championship game when my dad said, “Hamburgers are up! Ger your buns ready.” And he laughed at his own joke.

After dinner, Grandma Martin and I took turns bringing the plates into the kitchen where my mom was cleaning up.

“Glenda, please don’t worry about cleaning. Sophía and I can get everything. You’re a guest. Go outside and relax,” my mom said.

“Yeah, Grandma, I can do it.”

“You’re both sweet,” Grandma Martin said. “But these old feet don’t know what it means to sit still. So I might as well put them to good use,” she said before walking out of the kitchen to bring more things in from outside.

I shrugged my shoulders at my mom, but she bit her lip, looking unhappy.

We were almost finished tidying up when Grandma Martin asked me, “Sam, I was thinking of seeing a movie. What do you say you and I go tomorrow?”

“Yeah!” I said. “I’d love to see a movie.”

My mom coughed while drying a plate.

“Of course, if that’s okay with you, Maria Ella?”

“That’s very kind of you, Glenda. Of course, Sophía can go,” she said.

“Good! We can go tomorrow morning,” Grandma Martin said, smiling. “Do you have anyone else you might want to invite, Sam?”

“Eva might want to go,” my mom said.

Normally, my mom was right. I usually invite Eva to do stuff with, especially because she loves movies. But I still hadn’t talked with Eva since *Grammita’s* party and seeing her pale face.

“Who’s Eva, dear?”

“She’s my brother’s little girl, Glenda,” my mom said. “She and Sophía are the same age and grew up together. They do *everything* together. They’re practically sisters.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

Eva was the easiest choice. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was upset at me, although I didn’t know why. I just remember her looking angry in seeing me as she came out of the bathroom, as if I caught her doing something wrong. But I was tired of guessing if she was mad at me or not mad at me.

“Actually, Grandma,” I said. “I want to invite my friend Joanna.”

“Wonderful!” Grandma Martin said, clapping her hands. “It’s settled then.”

But the look on my mom’s face looked anything but wonderful.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Grandma Martin’s lesson in people watching

Grandma Martin and I picked up Joanna the next day before lunch. I had called Joanna right after dinner last night, and she called me back five minutes later to say that her mom said she could go. I went to bed feeling the best that I had in weeks.

The movie theater was at Lakecrest's Centerville Mall. Grandma Martin let us pick the movie, and Joanna and I decided to see the animated film about a panda bear who winds up in a forest and tries to fit in with the other black and grizzly bears. It was a funny film, and we all laughed a lot.

After the movie let out, Joanna and I made our way outside the theater and into the mall. Grandma Martin had followed the herd of people toward the restrooms. While we waited, I started watching people walk by. Moms pushed strollers with their handlebars loaded down by shopping bags. A group of girls our age walked by holding hands with their boyfriends.

Joanna looked at me and made a face. She started batting her eyelashes causing both of us to burst out laughing. The girls looked back at us with raised eyebrows, which only made us laugh more. We were still giggling long after they passed when Joanna said, "Your grandma's pretty cool."

I nodded. "Yeah, she is pretty cool."

"I wish my grandma would take me to movies with my friends," she said. "But I always thought your grandma was Mexican."

"Who's ready for a milkshake?" Grandma Martin came through the theater's door tucking her red lipstick away in her oversized purse. "Sorry it took so long, girls. But you won't believe what just happened," she said.

"What?" Joanna asked, forgetting her question.

"Well, I was washing my hands and fixing my hair – you know, after being smooshed against those theater seats – and these gals, who can't be much older than you two, came in. Pretty little things too. Well, one gal was so upset. I thought the poor girl's folks just died, the way she was carrying on. Anywhoo, it turned out that she spilled something awful on her shirt. And the poor dear was terribly embarrassed that the boy she was with was going to notice it. Now, I couldn't very well tell what the it was she spilled, but I couldn't just let the gal cry herself to death, and her friend, bless her heart, was trying to console her. But I tell you, girls, it was a lucky thing I was there because I

just so happened to have a small baggie of baking soda in my purse. 'Cause everybody knows a little baking soda can get out just about anything with a lil' bit of scrubbing. So we used a little soda and water, and just like that, it was gone. Of course, her shirt was a little wet, but that's what those fancy dryers y'all have are for," she said winking. "But now m'dears, what about those milkshakes?"

It was lunchtime, and the food court was busy. We had to wait in line at Blue Bell's Ice-Cream Shop. By the time we reached the counter, I still couldn't decide between vanilla or chocolate, and Grandma Martin and Joanna had already ordered their shakes.

"You don't think you could mix a little of both in there for my granddaughter, do ya, dear," she said, winking at the boy behind the counter. "Poor gal can't make up her mind."

And so he did.

"Thanks, Grandma," I said, as we walked away from the counter.

"Of course, sweet," she said, cheerfully.

We found a table that looked reasonably clean in the middle of the food court and sat down.

"Thanks for the movie and milkshake, Mrs. Martin."

"Call me Glenda, dear, please," my grandma said, waving a hand. "It's not every day that I get to spend time with my lovely granddaughter and her best friend. You two remind me of my childhood friend Suzie and me. I may be old, but I still remember what it was like to be a twelve. Oh, the mischief her and I used to get into! Our mothers worried that we'd never turn into respectable, young women. But that reminds me," she said, looking at me. "Isn't it someone's birthday next month?"

"Yeah," I muttered.

"Well, why aren't you more excited, dear? Thirteen is such a fun age! I remember I had my first boyfriend at thirteen."

"Really?" Joanna asked.

"Uhuh. First kiss too."

"*Grammita* — I mean, Grandma, I don't want to hear about that," I said.

“Why on earth not?” she asked, her eyes crinkling. “Do you think your grandpa was the first one to kiss me?” She laughed. “Me and Sam’s grandpa were high school sweethearts,” she said to Joanna. “But that doesn’t mean,” she said, turning back to me. “I didn’t have my fair share of beaus before him. What about you, Joanna? Do you have a boyfriend yet?”

“Grandma!”

“What, dear?” My grandmother exclaimed, innocently.

“No,” Joanna said. “There are no boys who like me.”

“I don’t believe it for a minute,” she said. “A charming, pretty girl like you. I’m sure once you and Sam start school—junior high this year, right Sam? Those boys are going to be lining up at your daddy’s door.”

Joanna giggled in her straw.

I didn’t say anything, but Nick’s face kept popping up in my mind.

“This is a great spot for people watching, girls,” my grandma said, after a minute’s silence, and she eyed the people around us.

“People watching?” Joanna asked.

“You’ve never people watched, dear?! Well, she doesn’t know what she’s missing, does she, Sam?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Nope.”

“People watching was one of the first things I taught Sam when she was little. Now don’t worry, dear,” she said, seeing Joanna’s expression. “It’s not the same as staring, which I’m sure your mother taught you was bad manners. We *never* stare, do we, Sam? No, people watching, Joanna, is learning about the human condition.”

“What’s the human condition?” Joanna asked.

“Everyone and everything, of course.” My grandma lifted her hand and swept it around her. “Everywhere you look you see people living their everyday lives. Doing the most normal things. Thinking the most normal thoughts. And having the most normal conversations. And that,” she said, pausing to take a drink from her milkshake, and lowered her voice as if she was letting us in on one of life’s secrets, “is the answer to understanding the human condition.”

Grandma and Grandpa Martin came to my game against the Timberwolves on Saturday that week. I usually didn't pay much attention to the people in the crowd, but that morning, I couldn't help but hear their cheers, especially Grandma Martin.

It was a tough game, but we won. The Timberwolves were two runs ahead in the first two innings, but we found our groove by the third inning. It was just like we had practiced during the week. No one made any overthrow passes, and at the plate, we watched the ball and didn't swing unless it was inbounds. By the time we took the lead, everyone was playing like we could read each other's minds. When the umpire called the game, we were smiling from ear to ear and so was Coach. Grandpa and Grandma Martin, and Julio who decided to tag along, met me at the dugout.

"You were terrific, sweetheart!" my grandma, exclaimed and crushed me against her chest. She only let up to wave at Joanna who waved back. I said goodbye to my teammates before we headed home. On the way, Grandpa stopped to get us all ice cream.

"For victory," he said. "And for beating those Ravens at the championships."

When we pulled into the driveway, Aunt Cynthia's car was parked outside. But so was Aunt Sonya's.

"Looks like you two have company," Grandma Martin said.

My mom and aunts were gathered around the kitchen counter and stopped talking once we came in. But I had heard Aunt Cynthia say, "He needs to get help." Before my mom asked us, "Hi, how was the game?"

"Sam won!" Julio said, running over to my mom and hugging her waist. "She hit a homerun. It was awesome!"

He looked up from her waist. "Can I have some ice cream?"

"Julio, you just had ice cream," my grandma said, putting her bag on the table.

"Is that true?"

"Yeah—"

"Well, then I think you already spoiled your appetite enough," she said.

"Okay," he said, untangling his arms. "Hey, can I call Ricki to come over?"

"Julio, tonight is not a good night—" my mom started.

But he already took off toward the living-room phone.

“I’ll check on him,” Grandpa Martin said.

But I could tell as he followed Julio into the living room that Grandpa was really heading toward the living-room chair for a nap.

“You two must be Maria Ella’s sisters,” my grandma said, turning toward my aunts. “You’ll have to forgive, dears, but I’m always forgetting the names of Maria Ella’s family.”

Aunt Cynthia and Aunt Sonya said hello and introduced themselves again.

“Is Lena here too?” I asked.

“No,” my mom said. “I haven’t seen or heard from Lena in awhile.”

“Nobody has,” Aunt Cynthia said. “Mama says that she’s hardly at home anymore.”

“She must be taking more classes at the college, or maybe more art classes?” Aunt Sonya said.

“I’m going to go my room,” I said. But no one heard or was listening to me.

I thought about calling Eva and asking her if she heard more about Lena. But I decided not to. If she wanted to talk to me, she could call, I thought stomping up the stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Three – More than just a name

Two more weeks went by quickly that summer, and my grandparent’s visit came to an end. Grandpa said they had to get back to Margaret and the farm. In their last week, Grandma Martin took me to the movies again, and we went shopping. She tricked me into going to the salon with her, and I got a manicure while her hair set. Although, once in the chair, I had the lady paint my fingernails clear. Grandpa Martin taught me how to play bridge and cribbage. Sometimes after dinner, we would sit outside on the patio swing and talk about baseball. But some nights we just sat there, not saying anything. I thought that this summer Grandma and Grandpa Martin’s visit was one of the best. But then again, that summer, I always spoke too soon.

On their last night, Mom invited my grandparents over for one last dinner before Dad would drive them to the airport the next morning, and we wouldn’t see them again

until Thanksgiving. My mom really outdid herself that night by roasting a chicken, even though it was ninety degrees outside, stuffed with vegetables from our garden. She made a salad, baked potatoes and cherry cobbler for dessert with homemade whipped cream.

Our house was like a sauna all day because Mom started cooking after breakfast, but it was worth it because the food was delicious. Everyone said so, including Grandma Martin. And even Grandpa asked for seconds, which made my mom smile from ear to ear. I was even thinking that maybe Grandma and Grandpa Martin would start visiting more because everyone was smiling and having a good time. That is, until I asked for more cherry cobbler.

“Of course, but finish your salad, Sophía,” my mom said.

“Maria Ella,” Grandma Martin asked, taking a small bite of her baked potato.

“Why do you call Sam, Sophía?”

My mom paused in severing my dad another helping of salad.

“*Disculpama*, Glenda. I don’t understand. Call Sophía what?”

“Well, Sophía of course, dear,” she said, putting down her fork.

I suddenly lost my appetite for another serving of cobbler. I could feel Ray and Julio both looking at me.

“You mean—” my mom said, tersely. “Call my daughter by her own name? The name I gave her at birth?” My mom’s voice rose to a dangerous octave.

I wanted to whisper in my grandma’s ear: Abort! Abort! But I wasn’t sitting next to her, and I could tell, before my dad even spoke up, that it was already too late.

“Maria Ella,” my dad said, gently, placing a hand on my mom’s arm. “I think what my mom meant to say—”

“What I meant to say, Michael,” Grandma Martin interrupted, “was that I don’t see why she doesn’t call Sam, Sam, if that’s what Sam wants.”

“Grandma, it’s okay. I don’t really—”

“No, it’s not okay, Sam, sweetheart,” she said, and turned to look back at my mom.

The plastic salad tongs were now shaking in her hands.

“Maria Ella, I just think that Sam is old enough to know what name she wants to be called. And I think that we should respect her decision. That’s all,” she said, placing her napkin down on the table.

The tongs dropped in the salad bowl.

“Respect? You think I don’t respect my daughter? My own flesh and blood. Do you think that if I didn’t love her so much that I wouldn’t have named her after *mí quierid abuela*, Sam’s great-grandmother?” My mom said “Sam” as if she was spitting a snake from her mouth. “*Aye no*, Glenda. I love my daughter. And I love her so much that I am trying to teach her to respect the memory of those no longer with us.”

My mom wiped her hands on her dress and walked out of the kitchen.

I stared at my plate. The half-eaten potato left in its skin looked like how I felt – a pile of empty scraps.

“Can I be excused?”

I didn’t wait for my dad to answer, and I headed for the porch door. But I wasn’t fast enough to not see Ray mouth, “Look what you’ve done now,” or to hear my dad start arguing with my grandma.

It was cold outside for July. The last place I wanted to be was on the porch swing, but since I was only twelve, I didn’t have many places to go. I could still hear my dad and Grandma arguing in the kitchen.

I didn’t feel like swinging, so I just sat on the cold wood panels and scuffed the toe of my tennis shoe on the cement. Dad must have excused Julio and Ray too because they came outside soon after. Ray took off in the direction of Jack Thompson’s house. Julio followed him, but he paused at the edge of the porch steps.

“Come one! Hurry up, Julio!”

Julio gave me a quick wave before darting off and becoming part of Ray’s shadow.

The arguing stopped after awhile, and I heard my grandma’s boots before I saw them in the doorway.

“Room on that swing for me?”

I saw her boots walk toward me, and the swing creaked with the added weight, and rocked until it righted itself again.

“I’m sorry, Sam.”

Grandma Martin is not the kind of a woman who says sorry easily, or often. It is one thing that she and my mom share in common. I knew she was sorry, but I wasn’t ready to forgive her just like that.

“I was just trying to help, sweetheart. I wasn’t trying to make things more difficult with your mom, I promise.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s my fault anyway.”

“Oh no, dear! It’s all my fault. Your grandpa is always telling me to think before I speak and—”

“No,” I said, firmly. “It’s not yours or my mom’s fault. It’s mine.”

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, reaching over to tuck my hair behind my ear, but I pulled away.

“You’re not listening, Grandma. Everyone thinks that I go by Sam because my mom hates it. But that’s not it. It’s not! I just—”

“Just what, dear?”

“I just—” I said, choking on my words. “I just don’t look like a Sophía!” I mean look at me, Grandma!”

I turned to face her, and she looked right back.

“Sophía is supposed to be a girl with black hair and dark skin like Julio’s or Eva’s. Not white like me.”

The last part came out more like a whimper than I had meant. And my eyes stung like when you forget to close your eyes under water.

“I didn’t know her name was Sophía.”

My mom used to talk about my great-grandmother when I was little. She lived and died in *Mexico*. Whenever my mom talked about her visits to *Mexico* as a girl, she always talked about her. I tried hard to keep the tears from falling, but they came anyway.

Grandma Martin scooted closer on the swing and put her arms around me. And this time, I let her. The swing started swaying on its own, and I was pressed up against her. We stayed like that for a while until my nose was raw and red.

“Feeling better, dear?”

I lifted my shoulders and let them drop.

“It’s always better to let those things out. You know, your body is made up of 60 percent water. Did you know that? Well, give or take a few points, of course.”

“Grandma.”

“Well, it’s true, dear. And I always say it never hurts to shed a few tears now and then. Won’t hurt you a bit with all that water on supply.”

“Grandma.”

“I’m just saying, dear, that’s a lot of water waiting to be used.”

I rolled my eyes at her. But she just laughed and squeezed me tighter, and I was pressed so firmly against her shaking chest that I couldn’t help but laugh a little too.

“Grandma,” I said, pulling back. “Do you think I should be called Sophía?”

She paused for a moment, and so did the swing.

“Sweetheart, I think you should go by whatever name you want. But it was wrong of me to say so to your mother,” she paused when she saw my face, “Yes, dear, even I am wrong sometimes. Oh Sam, I just want to see you happy. And if going by Sophía instead of Sam, or Sam instead of Sophía makes you happy, then, sweetheart, I’ll call you by both if you like,” she paused. “Besides sweets, a name is just a name until someone decides to make something of it.”

I didn’t know what she meant then, but somehow it made me feel a little better, and it gave me something to think about.

Chapter Twenty-Four – The Championship Game

At breakfast next Saturday, I could hardly finish my cereal I was so nervous. It was the morning of the big game. I couldn’t stop thinking about last summer and how close we were to winning. Even Julio didn’t distract me when he stuck two draws in his mouth pretending to be a walrus. Or even when he started blowing bubbles in his cereal bowl then surfacing to yell, “Argh! Underwater volcano! Erupting!”

He lost his straws soon after.

“Go get ready for Sam’s game,” my dad said to him, pointing upstairs.

“I’m not really hungry,” I said, pushing back my half bowl of Cheerios. “I think I’ll go pack my bag.” And I followed Julio up the stairs.

Once in my room, I sat on my bed and pulled on my white socks with the purple stripes. We had won the last two games of the season, but so did the Ravens. The Ravens were in first place with 10 wins and an undefeated season. We hadn’t lost any games, but our record was still one win short because of our tie with the Bears in the middle of the season. Luckily, the Bears lost to the Ravens two weeks ago, which put us in second place. And we earned our place in the championship game.

Last week, Coach had us practicing three times a week for three hours – an hour longer than normal – and she was more strict than usual. I was beginning to think that she wanted to beat the Ravens even more than we did.

I started packing my bag. But I couldn’t find my batting glove. I hunted under my bed and contacted crumbled papers, socks, headbands and a shirt I thought I had lost.

“Mom was right,” I muttered, against the carpet. “I really need to clean my room.”

I gave up the search under the bed and looked on my desk, but it wasn’t there. Starting to panic, I looked around the mess in my room before I saw it lying on my nightstand next to my phone. I picked it up, and then without thinking, I picked up the phone.

I heard the dial tone before I slammed the phone back down on its receiver. I hadn’t seen or talked with Eva for more than three weeks now. The longest either one of us had gone without talking.

Last week on my way to practice, my mom, who was on the kitchen phone, stopped me.

“Sophía, have you heard from Eva?”

“No,” I said grabbing an apple from the counter. “Do we have any Oreos?”

“Rosa,” she said, into the receiver. “Sophía says she hasn’t talked with Eva today. No, no. Sophía has been at home all day—”

Even though I wanted to know what was going on, I was already late for practice, and my dad was waiting in the driveway. But on the drive and all through practice, I couldn't stop thinking about Eva and why Aunt Rosa called.

But I learned the answer before going to bed that night. I overheard my mom telling my dad that Aunt Rosa found out that Eva had gone into the city by herself. She had lied to Aunt Rosa and told her that she and I were going to the city library together again.

I knew that Eva had gone back to see Nick. And I went to bed angry that she used me as an alibi to a plan I didn't even know about. But I was even more upset that she went without me.

I picked up the phone again. This time I listened for the dial tone before punching in the seven-digit number I memorized when I was seven.

"*Hola.*"

"Hi, *Grammita*," I said. "It's Sam."

"*Sophía!* How are you? Isn't today your big game?"

"Uh, yeah *Grammita*, um, that's why I called—is Aunt Lena there?" I asked, rubbing my baseball glove between my finger and thumb.

"*Un minuto—Miguel!*"

I couldn't see her, but I knew my grandmother had pulled away from the phone piece to shout, but I still had to hold the phone away from my ear.

"Miguel! Have you seen Lena? *Sophía* is on the phone."

I heard a vague muffling in the background from *Papí* shouting back.

"*Sophía?* Are you still there?"

"Yeah, *Grammita*, I'm still here," I said, still holding the phone at a safe distance.

"*Papí* says she's not here. *Aye*, God knows, I haven't seen her for days."

"Oh," I said. "Okay...well, never mind then. It's not a big deal."

"*Adios.* Good luck! What do Americans say, 'Break a leg?'"

"Um, yeah, *Grammita.*"

"Well, break a leg, *Sophía!*"

"Okay, thanks *Grammita*," I said, quickly and quietly before hanging up.

“Sam, it’s time to go!” my dad called. “You’re going to be late for your big game.”

“Okay,” I shouted. “Coming!”

There wasn’t time to worry about Lena anymore or to call Eva, even though I was still angry with her. I threw my glove into my bag and swung it over my shoulder along with my tied cleats – I’d put them on in the car –before running out the door. There were more important things to think about, I told myself. Like beating the Ravens.

“You nervous, kiddo?”

We were in the car and heading toward the park.

“Not really,” I said, as I finished tying my cleat. I tried to keep my voice calm, but my stomach felt like it was tied into a million miniature pretzels and sprinkled with *chile* peppers.

“Good. I’m sure you guys are going to do great today! Right, Julio?”

Julio was in the backseat. Him and my dad were the only ones who decided to come to my last game. I tried hard not to think about why everyone else in my family decided not to come.

“Yeah! Sam, you’re going to rock!” he said and pumped his fists hard in the air, first one then the other, like a boxer. When Ricki spent the night last week, they watched Rocky I all night long, over and over and over. Ever since then, Julio couldn’t stop pretending that he was in a live boxing ring.

My dad and I both laughed. And the knots in my stomach started to loosen.

“Hey, Sam! Your family is sitting next to mine.”

I looked up from double knotting my cleats, not because I thought that my laces would come undone during the game, but because I needed something to do with my hands, to see Joanna standing next to me in the dugout. She was tugging on the end of one of her braids like she did when she was nervous. I guess we all were.

“Really?” I looked over at the bleachers and saw my dad and Julio sitting next to Joanna’s step dad, Tim, and Holli, who was holding Bethany and waving her little hand at us.

Joanna gave a small-embarrassed wave. I waved too, which caught my dad's attention. He waved at me before giving me the thumbs up.

Joanna scanned the bleachers, "Where's your mom? Didn't your brother Ray come?"

I pulled my laces tight, cinching the knot. "No. They were busy."

"Oh— "she said.

I stood up, and forced a smile. "Come on, let's go toss the ball around to warm up."

Remembering the game that summer, I would say that it was intense, with a capital "I."

Our team won the coin toss, which meant the Ravens were first up to bat. The Ravens got in two runs before we took our turn at the plate. Two of my teammates were on first and third base when Rachel hit a pop fly, way out into left field. We started cheering from the dugout, but then a Raven outfielder caught the ball.

Carlie, who was on second, ran back and touched the base before dashing toward home. Megan got out on second, but luckily, Carlie managed to slide into home plate before The Ravens finished their play. We cheered for both Megan and Carlie as they walked back to the dugout. Megan's out helped Carlie get home and helped us gain our first run. Natalie and Beth also made it home by the end of the second inning. Returning to the field, it felt good to see the scoreboard: Home Team 3 and Visitors 2.

But once the Ravens were up to bat, they quickly evened the score. Tina did her best to make it difficult for their batters. But the Ravens kept hitting off of Tina's trickiest pitches. By the time we were up to bat again, the scoreboard read: Home Team 3 and Visitors 6.

The rest of the game went back and forth between each team leading the score. We were nearing the hour mark in the fifth inning, which was when most games ended unless there was a tie, when Becca caught a fly ball. It was the third out we needed to bat for the last time and pull ahead.

We all ran back into the dugout, slapping each other on the back and trying to pump ourselves up before we lined up to bat. I rummaged in my bag for my batting glove

because I was one of the first to bat this inning when I heard Vanessa say, “Whoa! Whose family is that?”

I looked up and saw that my family – and I mean *all* of my family – was piling out of cars and trucks and making their way from the parking lot and over toward the stands.

“Oh, crap,” I muttered under my breath.

From the dugout, I could hear *Grammita* bickering with *Papi* about driving too fast that it gave her a headache. I saw Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Pablo, and even my cousin Carmen who I hadn’t seen all summer because she was taking classes at the university.

Then, there was Uncle Robert, Aunt Rosa, Eva and Bella. Uncle Emilio and Aunt Vicki were walking with Eddie, Jose and Ricki. I saw that Ray had tagged along with them too. Aunt Sonya carried baby Matthew, who was wearing a purple baseball cap two sizes too big for his head, and Uncle Antonio followed. Uncle Miguel was bringing up the rear, and leading the pack was my mom.

I watched them head toward my dad and Julio in the stands. The other families seemed confused by my family’s arrival. There was a lot of standing up and sitting back down to make room for all of them in the bleachers. I could hear a lot of whispering and mild complaints from the crowd. Once seated, my family ended filling up two rows of bleachers. By now my family’s noisy arrival caught the rest of my teammates’ attention.

“Hey, Sam! Aren’t they sitting by your dad?” Suzie asked.

“Yeah, do you know them?” Megan asked.

I didn’t have to answer their questions because Coach walked into the dugout and said, “You guys ready? Anderson, where’s your helmet? You’re first up to bat! Come on girls, keep your head in the game!”

I tried hard to avoid looking back at the bleachers and to concentrate on the game like Coach said. I started cheering along on my teammates for Suzie who was in the batter’s box. But my chanting was half-hearted because I couldn’t stop thinking about my family in the stands. I wondered why today, of all days, they decided to come watch me play. And not just one or two of them, but all of them, even Matthew.

“Martin. Martin!” Coach shouted at me. “You’re up next!”

I grabbed my helmet and shoved it down over my ponytail.

The score was Phoenixes 8 and Ravens 9. Alexis just walked to first. Emily was batting, and on the second pitch, she swung hard and hit a long drive toward center field. But mid-way to first base, the centerfielder caught the ball in her mitt, and Emily was out.

“Good try, Emily,” I said, patting her on the back. But she just walked into the dugout, defeated as I stepped out on the field.

My batting helmet’s padding usually does a good job of blocking out sounds, but today, they weren’t thick enough to block out the cheers and shouts from my family as I stepped up to the plate.

Just focus, I thought.

I dug my left toe into the soft dirt, only inches before the white marker of the box. I looked over my shoulder at Coach who was standing in the coaching box just off of third base. Her arms were crossed, and she nodded.

I tightened my grip on the bat and looked out at the pitcher’s mound. I watched the Raven pitcher shuffle her feet before winding up and pitching a ball that flew a hair to the left of the batting box.

“Ball!” the ump yelled.

On the second pitch, the ball came flying too close to my legs, and I jumped back to avoid getting hit. I could tell that she was getting tired. I looked back again at Coach who hadn’t change her stance, but this time, she tugged on her right ear. I smiled and turned back around.

Bending my knees, I remembered to keep my elbow straight as I watched her wind up again. This time I knew as soon as she released the ball from her hand that it was headed straight and dead center toward the middle of the batting box. I waited. And at the last possible second, I swung hard and even. A loud crack erupted from the bat in connecting with the ball’s core. I dropped the bat and ran.

I don’t remember rounding first, but I remember circling second. I saw Alexis sprinting to home base. Her run would tie the score. My teammates were screaming and cheering, but I couldn’t make out the words as I kept running. Coach pointed for me to keep going, so I did.

The Raven centerfield threw the ball to second-base. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her throw the ball to the pitcher, but I kept running. The catcher was crouched low

at home, and I felt her glove on my shoulder only seconds before my fingers had touched the base beneath her.

“SAFE!” the umpired yelled.

I rolled onto my back. But I didn’t stay there for long because my teammates stormed the field. I was picked up and hugged inside a mosh pit of my teammates. The kind of thing I heard happened at concerts that my mom said I’m not allowed to go to.

Taking off my helmet, I heard *Papi’s* voice. “That’s *mí nieta!*”

Turning around, I saw my family standing and pounding their feet on the metal bleachers like a percussion of metal drums in a parade. They cheered and shouted my name in the crowd. Actually, my family was the crowd that day. And seeing all of them, I couldn’t help but grin before falling to the field with my teammates, celebrating.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Love and other stuff

After winning the championship game, it was hard to go back to anything resembling normal. And I realized that summer was almost over.

I remember after getting out from under the pile that was my teammates, I made my way over to my family. They attacked me like a swarm of bees drawn to a hive, but without the sting.

On Sunday, we had a team party at Becca’s house to celebrate our victory season. It was the last time we would hang out together as a team since the season was over, and there would be no more practices.

Coach bought us all pizza, and that night, we relived the season, game by game. But the biggest play everyone kept talking about was my homerun against the Ravens that helped us win the championship.

When we were all getting ready for our parents to pick us up, Coach stopped me on my way out the door.

“Tell your mom that Sam will be right there,” Coach told Joanna who was already out the door.

She turned toward me. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you good job last Saturday.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“Becca told me that you and Joanna are going to Lakecrest Jr. High School in the fall. An old teammate of mine is the softball coach there. You and Joanna are going to try out for the team next year, aren’t you?”

“Gee...I don’t know, Coach,” I said. “I guess I haven’t thought about it.”

“Well, you should,” she said, switching back to her coach voice. “I’ll tell Mindi to keep an eye out for you. As long as you remember to keep that right arm straight—”

And then on impulse, I hugged her. “Thanks for a great year, Coach.”

She patted my back. “Enjoy the rest of your summer, Sam.”

I walked toward Joanna and her mom waiting in the car, smiling. School started in less than three weeks, and I tried not to think about it. But now with Coach putting in a good word for me and the chance to still play softball—

“And don’t forget what I said about that elbow!” Coach called from the doorway.

Well, starting junior high school didn’t seem so bad, I thought.

When I got home, I heard talking in the kitchen. I didn’t see a car outside, but I recognized that the voices belonged to my mom and Lena.

What is she doing here? I thought.

Lena hadn’t been to our house all summer. The last time she was here was when she and my mom had an argument. But that was way back in the spring, and I never really found out what they had argued about. I heard laughter coming from the kitchen.

Whatever happened, it sounded like they were best friends again, I thought, angrily. I went to go upstairs, but not careful enough.

“Sophía? Is that you?”

I decided not to answer.

“Sophía? You need to clean—”

But my door closed before I heard the rest of my mom’s sentence.

I climbed on top of my bed with my ball and glove. I wasn’t there long when I heard a knock.

“Yeah Mom, it’s me. Look, I am cleaning my room. But it’s a mess right now, so don’t come in.”

I threw the ball and caught it again.

The door opened, and I sat up.

“Really Mom, I’m going to clean—”

But it was Lena.

“Oh, it’s you.” I fell back against my bed. “What do you want?”

“Hi, Sam,” she said, moving into my room. “I came over to talk to you, but when I got here Maria Ella said you were at your friend’s house. I was waiting for you—”

“I thought you and her didn’t talk anymore?”

“Who said that?” she said. “She’s my sister. Of course, we talk.”

“Not like you used to.”

“Can I sit here?” she asked, gesturing at the foot of my bed. I didn’t say yes or no, so she sat anyway. “Your mom and I don’t always see eye-to-eye. Especially when it comes to your Uncle Miguel,” she sighed. “But she’s my older sister, and I love her. And your Mom was able to help me with a problem I’ve been struggling with lately.”

“What problem?”

But Lena skipped over my question. “It’s good to have people you can talk to Sam. Which is why, I’m glad you and Eva have each other.”

“Yeah, if Eva would stop acting so weird and wasn’t mad at me all the time,” I muttered.

“What’s wrong with you and Eva?”

This time I ignored her question. “You missed my game.”

“I know,” she said. “That was one reason I wanted to talk to you. To apologize.” She reached down to touch my leg, but I turned on my side and her hand fell flat against the bed.

“We won.”

“I know.”

I felt her body fall next to mine, and the bed shifted its weight.

“*Papí* told me you hit a homerun.”

“Yeah,” I paused. “Everyone was there, except for you.” As I said this my mouth tasted like I had sucked on ten lemon cough drops.

She sighed again. “I know.” After a pause, she asked, “Do you think you can forgive me?”

I slowly turned around to face her, but she was looking up at the ceiling. “Who’s Henry?” I asked.

She looked down at me surprised. “How do you know about Henry?”

“I heard you talking on the phone with him remember? And...and...I saw you kissing him in front of the city library.” My body curled, expecting Lena to accuse me of spying or for being nosy. But she didn’t. Instead, she started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“I knew that I saw you and Eva following us that day.”

“Yeah, we were,” I said, sheepishly.

“Why didn’t you say hi?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Who is Henry, Lena?”

“He’s the love of my life, Sam.”

I fell back against the bed again. “I knew you’d say something stupid like that.”

“Stupid? Love is never stupid, Sam.”

“So does this mean you guys are going to get married and have kids and all that? Does *Papí* know about him?” I paused. “He’s a *gringo* you know.” I had heard my family use that word before, but I had never used it until then.

“Yes, he is a ‘*gringo*,’” Lena said, her voice strained. “And there is nothing wrong with that. I thought that you, Sam, as much as you adore your father, would understand that.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“And *Papí* doesn’t know about me and Henry...yet. But I am going to tell him soon.”

“He won’t be happy.”

“No, he probably won’t be happy at first,” Lena said. “But I think *Papí* will surprise us. There is more to people than what you see at first glance, Sam.”

We were quiet for a while after that, and Lena broke the silence first. “It’s your birthday next week,” she said and poked my side.

I swatted her hand away. “I know. Mom’s throwing a party for me. I haven’t asked her, but I want to invite my best friend Joanna.”

“Sam,” she said. “What’s going on with you and Eva? Rosa said that Eva lied to her, and that Eva went into the city alone. Rosa said Eva had gone to the library by herself. I didn’t think Eva liked reading that much.”

“She doesn’t,” I said. “She just likes this stupid boy named Nicholas who volunteers there. We were supposed to go back together. But she went back by herself and didn’t tell me. I was the one who met him in the first place,” I said, angrily. “He’s not even that cute. Just because he’s older and likes books and music and has really long hair that he flips over his forehead like he was a surfer or something. It’s stupid. And he wears these dumb hemp bracelets and necklaces that look ridiculous because we’re not eight anymore.”

I stopped because I realized Lena was looking at me, and her mouth was twitching.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I just see what the problem is now.”

“What problem? I told you what the problem is. Ever since Eva met that stupid Nick, she’s been acting so dumb—Why do you keep looking at me like that?”

Lena started laughing. “I’m sorry, Sam,” she said, between chokes. “I just think that Eva may not be the only who likes this boy Nicholas.”

“Oh no, no, no” I said, sitting up and hopping off the bed. “*I do not* like him.”

Lena sat up. “Okay, whatever you say.”

She swung her legs over the bed and stood up. “I’m sure you and Eva will be able to work this out.” She stretched her arms over her head, then walked over to me and hugged my stiff frame.

“She’s been crazy about that stupid diet too,” I muttered into her shoulder.

Lena pulled me back, looking at me hard. “What did you say?”

“Nothing. Well, except, that Eva’s been on this diet, only she’s not anymore, but she’s been obsessed with her weight all summer. It’s weird.”

My aunt was quiet for a moment. She looked like she was going to say something, but then seemed to think against it.

“Hmm...well, I’ll see you for your birthday,” she said, hugging me again. This time I hugged her back. I was never very good at staying mad at Lena for long.

Pulling away, Len looked around my room. “And you should probably clean your room before your mom sees it,” she chuckled.

Chapter Twenty-Six – An unlucky birthday beginning

I always liked my birthday being at the end of summer. There’s something nice about turning one year older at the end of a season. Almost like, I have a fresh start and a clean slate when entering into a new season.

I decided to wear my new jeans that I had gotten for an early birthday present.

Two days ago, my mom woke me up and told me we were going shopping. Although I had outgrown all my jeans this summer, the last thing I wanted to do in my last few days of summer was go shopping with my mom.

We went to the mall, and we ended up running into Joanna and her mom, Holli. Before we separated, my mom did something I wasn’t expecting – she invited Joanna to my birthday party. And Joanna said yes.

Turning around and looking in the mirror, I had to admit that the shopping trip wasn’t such a bad idea and that maybe my mom was right all along— I was going to be a late bloomer.

“Happy Birthday, Sam!” my dad said, as I came downstairs and into the kitchen. He placed a large chocolate-chip pancake – my favorite – in front of me with a candle.

“Hey, no fair! I want a candle,” Julio complained.

“It’s not your birthday,” Ray said, after taking a big bite of his own pancake, and as an afterthought, he said, “Happy Birthday, Sis.”

And even though as he said it, I could see a mutilated chocolate-chip pancake, it still felt nice to hear it.

“You gonna make a wish?”

A birthday wish only happens once a year. I tried to think of the most important wish that I wanted granted that year. But before I could decide, my mom walked into the kitchen and put the phone back in its cradle

“Happy Birthday, Sophía,” she said, but her smile was weak.

“Who was on the phone?”

She ignored my question and said, “You better make a wish,” nodding her head at my chocolate-chip pancake that had drops of melted wax on it now.

I closed my eyes and blew.

“What did you wish for?” Julio asked.

“She can’t tell you, stupid, otherwise it won’t come true.”

“Don’t call your brother stupid Ray,” my mom said, tiredly.

After my brothers finished eating, my dad started to clean up the plates. I was trying to decide if I could fit a third pancake when my mom said, “Sophía, that was your Aunt Rosa. She wanted to know if you knew that Eva has been sick.”

“She’s sick? Like a cold?” I said and grabbed another pancake. I decided I would chance the stomachache. “Wait!” I paused before taking another bite. “Does that mean she’s not gonna come today?” But then I thought about Joanna coming to my birthday party and started to think that maybe it would be better if Eva didn’t come.

My mom sat down next to me on the barstool. “No, Sophía. Rosalinda thinks something’s wrong with Eva, more than a cold. She said that Eva has been concerned about losing weight—”

“Yeah, she’s been on that stupid diet all summer,” I said. I felt like I finally knew what my mom was talking about now. “Eva said she was trying to lose weight for dance. Except at *Grammita’s* party, she said she was finished—”

“Sophía, Rosalinda thinks Eva’s been forcing herself to be sick...to lose weight.”

“What? Why would she do that? That’s stupid.”

My mom ignored my comment. “Sophía, I need to know if you’ve seen Eva throw up, or if she’s made herself throw up.”

I thought about what my mom was saying, and I remembered the pale look on Eva’s face on the Fourth of July. “Well...no...I don’t think so,” I said, slowly.

“Are you sure? I need you to be honest with me. Eva might be very sick.”

“Well...” I began. And then, I ended up telling my mom what I had seen at *Grammita’s* house. I didn’t want to get Eva in trouble, but I’d never seen my mom look so serious before. And even though I was still upset at Eva, I didn’t want anything bad to happen to her.

After my mom heard my story, she looked drained.

“Thank you, Sophía,” she said, patting my arm. “I know that was hard to tell me.” She looked at my dad. “I’d better call Rosa.”

“Is Eva going to be okay?” I asked, as my mom moved toward the phone. “I didn’t get her in trouble, did I?”

My mom turned back around. “Eva’s very sick right now, but she has so many people that love and care about her, like you Sophía, that she’ll get better. I promise.” She walked over to me, gave me a hug and kissed the top of my head. “I’m sorry that this happened on your birthday. Try not to worry too much about it. We’ll have a good time this afternoon, and then tomorrow, we’ll go visit Eva together.”

My family started arriving around one. I wouldn’t say our house is small, but with everyone arriving, it definitely felt like it had shrunk in half. Dad set up lawn chairs outside in the yard, and soon people got the idea to head outside where there was more breathing room. Joanna’s parents dropped her off promptly at one. And I knew it was her because the doorbell rang. My family never understood the concept of a doorbell.

“Got it!” I yelled, running for the door.

When I opened the door, Joanna stood on the porch with a big-blue box tied with a yellow bow.

“Happy Birthday!” she said, holding out the box.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the box from her.

“You can open it later.”

“Um, okay,” I said, then added, “You can come in.”

I was nervous as she stepped inside. Joanna was the first friend to ever meet my family. Actually, she was the first friend to even come over to my house, and I wasn’t quite sure what to do. But then, Julio and Ricki came zooming down the stairs followed by Jose. Joanna had to jump back to avoid being knocked over.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “That was my little brother and my cousins. They never watch where they’re going.” I started to feel like inviting Joanna was a big mistake.

We made our way into the kitchen where my aunts were arguing about something in Spanish and guessing by the decimal level, it seemed to be getting heated.

I looked at Joanna and tried to explain, “Sorry, my family is a little crazy—”
“Happy Birthday, Sam!”

I looked from Joanna to see Carmen walking toward me. She crushed me with a hug.

“Sorry I had to leave right after your game last Saturday,” she said. “I had to get back to the city for work. But I wanted to tell you congratulations!”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling. “I didn’t know you would be there.”

“Neither did I, but mom called me and told me that everyone was going to see you play. And I had to see my little cousin who I taught to throw a softball. So I got someone to cover my shift. And I’m really glad I did!”

“Me too,” I said, then remembering Joanna standing next to me. “Sorry, this is Joanna, she’s—”

“Number eight,” Carmen interrupted. “I remember. First base. That was my position.”

“Really? You played?” Joanna asked, excited.

“Yeah! How else do you think Sam knows everything that she does?” Carmen said, smiling. “I used to play softball when I was your guy’s age, but I stopped after high school.”

“Carmen goes to the university in the city.”

“Does your dad tell you that I say hi? I see him every now and then when I go to the library to study.”

“Girls! What are you standing there for?” my mom called from behind the counter. She looked a bit frazzled from the crowd. Then spotting Joanna, she said, “Oh Joanna! Sophía didn’t tell me you arrived.”

I shrugged my shoulders, helplessly.

“Well, grab a plate and help yourself to whatever you like,” she said, pointing to the food on the table.

“Come on,” Carmen whispered to us. “I know when your mom means business.”

Joanna stayed close to me throughout the party. But towards the end, she was cracking jokes along with my uncles and teasing my cousins like she had been doing it all her life.

I went back into the kitchen to get a second piece of cake when I heard my mom and Lena talking in the kitchen.

“You need to tell him, Lena. It’s getting too serious.”

“I know. I know, Maria Ella. I will.”

“Soon.”

“*Orale, Orale.*”

I held up my hands when I entered the kitchen. “I’m just getting another piece of cake,” I said.

But instead of stopping their conversation or switching to Spanish now that I entered the room, Lena and my mom continued talking. I didn’t think turning one-year older would change everything overnight, but I realized, as I cut myself another piece of birthday cake, that maybe things do change a little at a time.

When it comes to family parties, my family believes in celebrating long after there is no more light to see anything or anyone. It wasn’t until eleven rolled around that people got ready to leave. *Grammita* and *Papí* were the first of my family to leave.

Papí squeezed me extra tight when saying goodbye. So tight that my heels came off the floor.

“¡*Feliz Cumpleanos, Nena!*”

“Ow, *Papí* you’re hurting me,” I laughed. But if I had known then, that was the last hug *Papí* would ever give me, I wouldn’t have complained.

I passed Uncle Emilio on my way up the stairs carrying a sleeping Ricki to the car. My dad had just picked Julio up off the living-room floor where he had fallen asleep.

Joanna left around seven. I could tell that she was a little sad to leave when everyone else was still around.

Getting ready to go to bed, I remembered walking her to the door when her mom arrived to pick her up.

“I had so much fun, Sam! Thanks for inviting me,” she said. “You’re family is *so* cool!”

“Really?” I asked, dumbfounded. I wanted to ask her, “But what about all the noise and constant shouting and bickering?” But I didn’t get the chance.

“Really!” she said. “My family is soo boring. At our parties, everyone just eats and then leaves. Or we sit around and watch T.V.”

We heard a car horn honk.

“I better go. Call you later, okay,” she said, waving her hand as she made her way down the steps.

“Okay!”

And I couldn’t help smiling as I waved goodbye.

Turning out my light, I thought, Joanna was right. My family was *pretty* cool.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Another kind of ending

Before that summer, I’d only been to one funeral in my life. Ray was six, I was four, and Julio wasn’t even born yet. My dad’s great-Aunt Mary died, and I don’t remember any of it. But I remember the day *Papí* died.

Papí died a week before the end of summer. Uncle Emilio called my mom with the news from *Grammita*’s house.

For once that summer, Ray, Julio and I were playing cards together in the kitchen. I was about to throw in my last card and win the game of “Crazy Eights,” when the phone rang. I heard my dad shout to my mom.

My mom came into the kitchen to pick up the phone. “¿*Hola?*”

“I win!” I said, throwing in the Queen of Hearts on the deck.

“¡*Ave maria purisima!*!”

My dad entered the kitchen when she said that, and all four of our heads snapped up. My mom was pale, and the phone fell from her hand to clamor against the floor. We were quiet.

“It’s *Papí*,” she choked to my dad. “He’s in the hospital.”

The rest of the afternoon was a blur. Ray, Julio and I stayed behind as my dad rushed my mom to St. Vincent's Hospital where *Papí* had been taken to the emergency room. They hugged us all and made us promise to be good before leaving.

"Is *Papí* —is he—is *Papí* going to be okay?" I asked my dad when he hugged me. His blue eyes grew small and were no longer quite so blue.

"I don't know, Sam," he said. "I don't know."

When my parents arrived at the hospital, the doctors said *Papí* suffered from a massive heart attack, and he died later that night.

The day of his heart attack, *Papí* was caught mowing the grass. It was near a hundred degrees outside that morning, and he was pushing around a beaten-up reel mower. It was one he had found abandoned in the barn because its blades were orange from rust. That same morning, Lena finally told my grandparents about Henry.

After thirty-seven years of refusing to cut the grass, *Papí* took to cutting the lawn that day. And it was *Grammita* who found him, clutching his chest and leaning over the mower's crooked handlebars.

Back then I didn't understand how a heart as big as *Papí's* could have failed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Being an Oreo

I followed my brothers up the walkway to our house. They left the front door open for me, and their ties lay on the carpeted stairs.

I heard Aunt Vicki's quick steps behind me. As I turned in the doorway, I could see Uncle Emilio and my cousins waiting in the car over her shoulder.

"Thanks for the ride."

"Maybe we should stay until you mom gets here," she said, reaching out to touch my arm.

My parents had stayed behind at the funeral site to help clean up, letting *Grammita* and everyone else go home.

"It's okay, Aunt Vicki. We'll be okay."

She put her thin arms around me, “Well, Maria Ella shouldn’t be too long. But call me or your uncle right away, if you three need anything, okay?”

“Okay,” I promised.

I made my way to the kitchen when my aunt and uncle left. For once I couldn’t hear Ray and Julio upstairs. I headed toward the cupboards. It took longer than usual, but I found them— the bag of Oreos.

I have loved Oreos ever since I could remember. Sometimes when I couldn’t sleep, my dad would find me in the kitchen. We would open up a bag of Oreos, and he’d pour two tall glasses of milk. We’d pile the Oreos into a tower and take turns to see who could make the cleanest break. My dad was really good, but I was getting better. Between the two of us, we could finish a bag in one night, so my mom started to hide them.

I found a bag stashed among pots and pans. I grabbed them and a glass of milk before settling down in a kitchen chair. The black taffeta of my dress that my mom told me to wear, crunched beneath me. I failed to kick off my shoes because unlike my normal sneakers these had skinny straps around my ankles. It took me longer, but they finally came off.

I took five Oreos from the bag and starting building a tower. I took a cookie from the top, and slowly, with pressure, just like my dad taught me, I twisted. Peeling the Oreo apart, I smiled. All of the cream remained perfectly intact on one side.

The best part of an Oreo is the center. I imagined that the cream tasted like what clouds must taste like— fluffy and sweet. But the cream was always smashed and hidden between two dark cookies.

Holding the two parts, white and black, in my hands, I remembered what Eva had said that day we went to into city. I was a girl with light skin and light hair creamed between two dark-skin brothers – I was always the odd one out. And like Eva said, it was easy for me to blend in outside our family.

I licked the cream. I realized that maybe I was eating Oreos the wrong way.

I heard the front door open and shut.

“Ray, Julio, Sophía?”

“They should have made it back by now.”

I listened as her heels clicked toward the kitchen.

“Oh, Sophía! You *are* here. Why didn’t you answer? Where are your brothers?”

“They’re upstairs.”

My parents looked tired.

“I’m going to go change, and check on the boys,” my dad said, pushing his glasses up and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

But before he left, he kissed my head and snatched an Oreo before kissing my mom’s cheek and heading upstairs.

My mom wore a black dress and a necklace that my dad gave her on their first wedding anniversary. It was a small, emerald pendant. She said that she would give it to me one day because it matched my eyes.

Her eyes shifted to the bag of opened Oreos. “You found them.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it took longer this time.”

She looked like she wanted to laugh but didn’t. Instead, she sat down next to me and reached down to take off her shoes. And we sat there with our feet bare.

“Want one?”

She waved her hand. “Why do you and your father like these cookies so much?” she asked. “In *Mexico*, the cookies *y pan dulces* taste like heaven, Sophía. The sweet breads from *la panadería* melt in your mouth.”

She watched me pick up another Oreo. “*Dame uno*,” she said.

“Really? You want one?”

“*Si, si*, let me try.”

She took the Oreo and took a big bite.

“Stop! You’re doing it all wrong,” I said, and gave her another Oreo. “You have to open them first. Like this, see?” I showed her.

She smiled. “It tastes just the same.” And popped the rest of the Oreo in her mouth before reaching over and drinking from my glass of milk.

“Mom...what’s going to happen now?” I asked.

She nibbled on another Oreo. “Well...we keep on living, Sophía.”

“But what about *Grammita*? What will she do?”

This time my mom laughed, really laughed. The first time I heard her laugh since *Papí* died.

“Your *Grammita* is one of the strongest women I know. You watch, she’ll be the one to carry us through it all.” She paused. “Besides, Miguel and Lena are still there to look after her—for now at least.”

I thought about *Grammita*, and I knew my mom was right. But something else still bothered me.

“Mom...”

“Hmmm?”

“Was *Papí* mad at Lena? Was that why he—” I said, quietly, looking down at my plate.

“*Sophía* look at me,” she commanded.

I felt her eyes on me, but I couldn’t look up.

“*Mirame*,” she said, more gently.

“Lena told *Papí* about Henry that day, but that didn’t mean she caused *Papí*’s heart to fail. Your *Papí* knew his heart was failing,” she said, and her eyes started to become translucent. “More than he let any of us know. *Grammita* knew. She tried to get him to slow down and to take better care of himself. He shouldn’t have been outside that day. He knew better.” She put her head in her hands. “But your *Papí* was stubborn. That’s just who he was. He made everyone else’s business his own but didn’t let anyone into his.”

She looked up from her hands, and I could see the tear tracks on her cheeks.

“You’ve grown up so much this summer, *mija*. I remember bringing you home and being scared to death that I would break you. You looked so fragile with your pale skin.

“I hate being pale,” I said, angrily. “I’d rather be dark like Julio or Ray or Eva! Why do I have to look so different?”

“We can’t all look the same,” she said. “The color of your skin doesn’t change you. You’re still you. And no matter what how different you may look from everybody else, you’ll never escape your roots. They’re stubborn and run too deep.”

I grabbed another cookie from the plate, but this time, I failed to make a smooth break. I still needed to ask one more question.

“Mom—”

“Hmmm?” Her cheek rested in her palm.

“Was... was your grandmother’s name really *Sophía*?”

Her eyes grew wide. “Yes,” she said, nodding. “I barely remember her because we left *Mexico* when I was still young. But I can remember her voice and when she sang.”

“Like *Grammita*.”

“*Si*.”

“Do you really hate that I go by Sam?”

My mom sighed. “Your Grandma Martin was right. You’re old enough to choose what name you want to be called. And if you want to be called Sam—” she took a deep breath, “then, I’ll call you Sam.” She stood up. “It’s been a long day. I think I am going to check on your brothers.” She kissed me on the forehead. “Don’t eat the whole bag... Sam,” she said, it softly, but with equal firmness.

“I won’t.”

There was one more Oreo left. I thought about what my mom said. And I remembered the conversation on the back porch swing with Grandma Martin. And then, I thought of *Papí*.

Maybe I didn’t need to pick one half over the other anymore.

I picked up the last unbroken Oreo on my plate and dipped it into the last of the milk. I started to think that maybe I could just be me. All of me. *Sophía Annalicia Maria Martin*.

I popped the Oreo into my mouth, whole. Cookie. Cream. Cookie. And it did taste good.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – A confrontation

We went to *Grammita's* house the Sunday after *Papí's* funeral. It was the last day of summer. School started the next day.

Cars lined up along Maple Street. They crammed into the sidewalk and the driveway. Nothing had changed.

I followed Ray and Julio into the yard. I didn't see the lawn mower. My uncles stood outside along the barn with our family and friends, and I could hear my aunts' voices coming from the open kitchen window.

I looked at the screen door, but I couldn't bring myself to open it. I could hear *Grammita* inside and other voices talking, like normal, but it wasn't normal.

When I finally opened the door, I was surprised by the smell of tamales. *Grammita* only made tamales around Christmas time, and then, she made them in hordes to give to friends and family. Of all the foods *Grammita* made, *Papí* loved her tamales the best.

I walked into the living room. My eyes gravitated to the empty overstuffed chair in the corner that was coming apart at the seams. It was *Papí's*. *Grammita* always begged to mend it, but *Papí* didn't let her. My mom said it used to be blue, but now the cushions were grey – a dull, faded grey. Sometimes when *Papí* wasn't talking or socializing with everyone else, he'd sit in that chair and watch, smiling.

"It makes me happy to see so many people come together because of family," he said.

"Sam!"

I looked up to see Lena waving as she came down the stairs. And right behind her was the man Eva and I saw at the park – Henry.

Lena came up and gave me hug. "How are you?"

I must have grown that summer because when Lena hugged me our cheekbones met. She smelled like she always did – like lilacs and lemon.

"Sam, I want you to meet Henry," she said, pulling away and putting her arm around my shoulders.

"Hi, Sam," he said, and held out his hand. "It's so nice to finally meet you. Lena has told me so much about you."

"Hi," I said. I shook his hand because I didn't know what else to do.

Aunt Vicki came into the living room. “Lena, your mom needs you—” she stopped talking when she saw Henry.

Jose came into the living room, and Aunt Vicki turned to him and said, “Jose, go get your father.”

“Why?”

“Just go!”

Aunt Vicki turned back toward us and looking at Lena, she said, “What is he doing here?”

Jose must have done his job right because soon Uncle Emilio came inside followed by Uncle Robert, Uncle Pablo, Uncle Antonio and Uncle Miguel.

“What is it, Vicki?” Uncle Emilio asked, coming inside.

“Look,” she said, pointing her finger at Henry.

“Really Vicki, you don’t need to make a scene—” Lena began.

“Rosa! Cynthia! Sonya! *Ven aqui*,” she called.

Pretty soon all my family was crowded into the living room, staring at the three of us. I wiped my hand on my jeans, embarrassed to know that I shook the hand of the person who my family looked ready to throw out the door and onto the street.

“What is he doing here?”

“Lena, how could you bring him here?”

“After everything that has happened!”

“Maybe we should let Lena explain—” Uncle Miguel started, but he was interrupted by Aunt Cynthia.

“*Papí* hasn’t even been gone for—”

“He’s here because *I* invited him.”

Everyone stopped talking when they heard my grandmother’s voice.

“Mama, you invited him here?” Aunt Cynthia asked.

“Yes,” she said, looking directly at my aunt. “Welcome, Henry,” she said, walking over to us still wearing her patchwork apron. Over her shoulder, she said, “And where are your manners, Cynthia? All of you? I am ashamed. Your *Papí* and I taught you better when it comes to welcoming people into our home.”

“But Mama,” Aunt Sonya said. “What about *Papí*? Wouldn’t he be—”

“Sonya, your *Papí* would be upset, but he would get over it. *Papí* didn’t do well with change, but that didn’t mean, he didn’t know when change was good and good for this family. He just had too much pride in him to admit it,” she said. “Now all of you go back to what you were doing before this inquisition started.”

And like that, my family started to obey, emptying the living room. After they all had left, *Grammita’s* attention came back to us.

“*Gracias*,” Henry said, which made my grandmother’s eyebrow rise. He looked sheepishly at Lena. “Lena has been teaching me a little Spanish.”

“She needs to help you more on you accent.”

He laughed. I liked his laugh.

“Lena, I wanted you to take Henry into the kitchen. Introduce him to your sisters,” she said, then looking at Henry, “Henry, I hope you don’t mind getting your hands dirty?”

“Not at all.”

“Good! Then you can help us make tamales.” She paused. “They were Lena’s father’s favorite.”

“I am so sorry to hear about your recent loss, Mrs. Ramirez,” Henry said, quietly.

After a moment, my grandmother said, “*Gracias*. He was a good man. And for all his *defectos*, and *Dios* knows he had many, I loved him very much.” Her eyes were wet and she said, “Now go.”

“Thank you, Mama,” Lena said, hugging her in passing. Lena turned back to me, “Are you coming to the kitchen, Sam?”

I shook my head. I watched Lena lead Henry into the kitchen. But I waited until they were gone before asking *Grammita*, “Did you really mean all those things you said about *Papí*?”

Grammita wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron. “*Si*. I loved your grandfather, but he was a stubborn man and set in his ways.”

“That’s what mom said.”

“*Aye*, Maria Ella would know. She had to deal with his stubbornness when she married your father,” she chuckled. “Oh, your *Papí* was so upset at her. *Pero* overtime, he saw how much your father loved his family. How much he loved Maria Ella, Ray, Julio

and you. Your *Papí* was like that overgrown grass he tried to cut. I tried to tell him that some things are meant to grow wild. We shouldn't try to tame things or cut things down because they are unruly. We should just accept who they are and love them more."

Her eyes were still wet when she turned to hug me. Her hands were warm and soft and smelled of sweet tomatoes and tortillas as she pulled back to hold my face.

"*Ven aqui*. I need to teach you how to make tamales now."

I let her guide me into her kitchen. And if I had looked back, I imagine I would have seen *Papí*, sitting in his chair, smiling at us.

Chapter Thirty – The last story about the summer I turned thirteen

I started school at Lakecrest Jr. High School on Monday. The night before I was nervous as I packed my backpack for school. I put clean sheets of notebook paper in my new purple binder. I made sure to sharpen my brand-new pencils, and I put two extra pencils in my bag just to be safe. Earlier that week, Ray offered to show me around the school. I was skeptical since Ray never offered to do anything without a catch. But he showed me where my all classrooms were, how to open my locker and a good spot to eat lunch. And event though, he steered me clear from the table he said him and his friends sat at, that day, Ray acted like my older brother again. And right before I went to bed, Joanna called and we talked about meeting up at the water fountain after third period to go to lunch together. I remember going to bed that night feeling the happiest I had since *Papí's* funeral.

I had set out to tell the story about my summer. And I started to tell a story about my family. But I realized that in telling the story about Eva, Ray and Eddie, Julio and Ricki, my mom and dad, *Grammita* and *Papí*, Grandpa and Grandma Martin, Lena and Henry and all the other people in my family that I ended up telling a story about myself.

A lot happen during the summer I turned thirteen. And there was a lot more that I didn't know was going to happen that year. Would I make new friends? Would my classes be too hard? Would I make the softball team? Would I finally "bloom" like my mom said?

That summer, I learned that I could never know what's going to happen next. Like Eva trying to lose weight. Like Lena finding a boyfriend. Like winning the junior league softball championship. And, like *Papi's* heart failing.

But after everything that happened that summer, it seemed like everything would work itself out in the end because my mom was right about family roots. You can never break them. They're stubborn and just grow deeper.

At 7:30 a.m., the final bell rang and my teacher, Mrs. Jorgenson, welcomed all of us to our first day of homeroom. Just like at elementary school, Mrs. Jorgenson started calling roll. Sometimes things aren't so different.

“Sophía Martin?”

And then sometimes, they are.

I didn't correct her or say I go by Sam. Instead, I just raised my hand and said, “Present.”