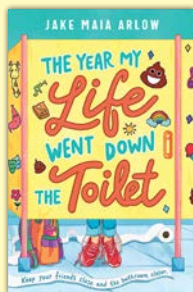


# ALL TOGETHER NOW

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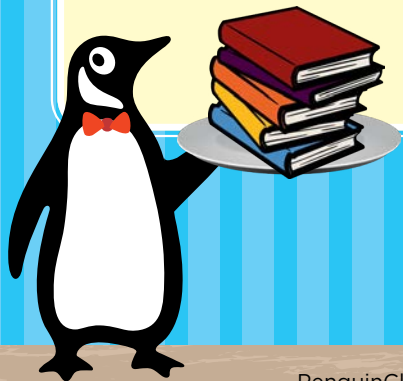
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# PENGUIN BOOK TASTING



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By Veronica Chambers; Illustrated by Sujean Rim

*An illustrated middle-grade series about a Panamanian American girl who uses humor and a little mischief to navigate her best friend moving away and her sister's overbearing and all-consuming quince preparations.*



## **The Islands of Elsewhere ..... Page 54**

By Heather Fawcett

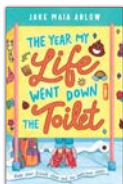
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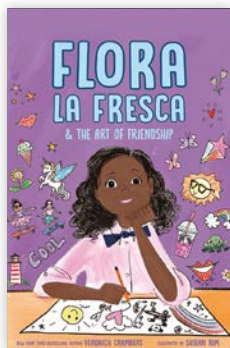
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*A sweeping fantasy about a part-Hawaiian girl who must save her best friend and her island from an angry fire goddess.*



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## Flora la Fresca & the Art of Friendship

By Veronica Chambers; Illustrated by Sujean Rim

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Given the choice of a friend who's honest, loyal, or the Most Fun Ever, larger-than-life Flora Violeta LeFevre and her steadfast sidekick Clara Bayano would obviously pick option three. So when the sad news breaks that Clara's moving, the girls roll up their sleeves and get to business: finding Flora an exciting new BFF to continue the adventures in Clara's stead. In between Flora's sister Maylin's neverending dress try-ons and dance practices for her upcoming quinceañera, Flora and Clara come up with a list of all the important traits that Flora's next buddy has to have, like being able to code, speaking (or at least trying to learn) another language, and making jaws drop at the skate park. But when newcomer Zaidee Khal surpasses Flora's expectations in surprising ways, Flora realizes that replacing one friend with another isn't quite as simple as it seems . . . Especially as Clara starts making new friends of her own and preparations for Maylin's quince take a disastrous (but hilarious) turn.



## CHAPTER I

### Chica, Chica, Chica

**Flora Violeta Lefevre** despised a great many things, but few of them as much as Saturday Spanish school. They called it a school, but it was really just a classroom at the Westerly Education Center. The class was roughly a dozen students, all between the ages of seven and twelve. Like Flora, they all had Latine parents who wanted their kids to speak better Spanish but were too busy to teach them at home.

Their teacher was an indefatigable young woman named Señorita María José who was so energetic that Flora suspected that her gold hoop earrings and jangly bracelets were actually solar panels. They were allowed to call her by her first name because it was Saturday school. They were not allowed to ask her why she had a girl's name and a boy's name.

“It’s just one of those things,” she had said.

Señorita María José, or Srta. MJ for short, had grown up in Puerto Rico and was now getting her master’s in teaching at Brown University.

All of the parents in Westerly, the town where Flora lived, said *Brown University* in a hushed and reverent tone, the same way the priest said *our Lord and Savior* during Sunday service. Flora’s mother said, “We are so lucky to have María José teaching you Spanish. That woman is brilliant!”

Flora didn’t have anything against her teacher. What she did have a problem with was spending practically half of one of her two days off doing extra school just because her parents were from Panama. But her parents made her go from nine a.m. to twelve noon, every Saturday no matter what excuse she could invent, from the time her eyesight “disappeared” to the violent stomachache that was really excellent acting for a ten-year-old, as anybody would tell you.

It would have been the worst except for the girl sitting next to her, who was the very best. Flora, who was ten and in the fifth grade, looked over at her best

friend, Clara. Clarita slowly and deliberately rolled both of her eyes to the center of her head.

Flora tried, and failed, to stifle a giggle.

The lesson that day was about reflexive verbs, which made no sense to Flora. *Cállate la boca* was the only reflexive phrase Flora could say with confidence. But if she ever told her big sister to shut her mouth, she would get into more trouble than she knew what to do with.

“A verb is reflexive when the subject and the receiver are the same,” Señorita MJ told the class. “For example, I washed the plate, not reflexive. I took a shower, reflexive.”

Flora laid her head on the table. It didn’t make sense. None of it made sense.

She was hoping to settle in for a teeny-tiny nap when she felt a note come sliding across the table.

Flora opened it up and grinned. It said:

*Perk up, buttercup.*

Flora looked over at Clara, who pretended to nap on the table, snored loudly, then pantomimed waking up and looking around as if she were completely disoriented.

Flora’s Spanish was far from perfect, but she knew

that Clara was muy graciosa. Perhaps even the very funniest of all BFFs.

When the clock struck noon, Srta. María José said, “Okay chicos, you are free to go. Disfruten de su sábado.”

Flora grabbed her navy-blue peacoat and dashed for the door. “¡Hasta whenever, Señorita María José!” she called out as she exited the classroom.

“Wait for me, Flora la Fresca!” Clara bellowed.

It was Clara’s nickname for Flora and it had started the previous summer when Clara had taken the wind-breaker that she wore around her waist and tied it around her shoulders. Then she took out a golden paper crown from the back pocket of her denim shorts and put it on Flora’s head. She said, “I, Queen Clara, now residing in the realm of Westerly, have found you, Flora, to be the embodiment of all that is fun and good. From this day on, you shall be known as Flora la Fresca.”

Sometimes the kids at school called her Flo, which Flora hated. But she liked Flora la Fresca. Even her parents called her that sometimes. If she wasn’t exactly fresca—meaning fresh with a little bit of attitude—she definitely aspired to be.



\* \* \*

Flora thought of that day as she waited for her friend.

Clara threw her quilted silver vest over her bright yellow sweatshirt and did a TikTok dance out of the room.

Flora said, "Come on, Clara!" but she didn't really mind waiting for her to start walking home. Everything was more fun when Clara was around. It was mid-November, but the day was warm like September as the girls walked through Wilcox Park and headed toward the ocean.

Westerly was a pretty little town on the coast of Rhode Island. Two and a half hours from New York and ninety minutes from Boston, it was a popular summer getaway. Most of the year, there were fewer than twenty thousand people in the town. It sounded like a lot, but it wasn't really. There were only thirty kids in the fifth grade of their public school, and Flora and Clara knew them all, as well as their siblings and parents. Once Memorial Day rolled around, the town's population doubled. The girls noticed that the streets filled with the faces of strangers as the big summer houses on the ocean's edge, which sat empty

most of the winter, swelled with wealthy families and their guests.

Flora's uncle Rogelio, her mother's oldest brother, had moved to the town thirty years before to work at the quarry. Westerly Quarry was famous for its natural pink stone. Tío Rogelio had done well there and as he rose in the company, he got jobs for more and more Panamanians. Soon there were more than two dozen Panamanian families living in the small New England town.

Her uncle said that Westerly reminded him of Panama—not the cold or the snow, but how on a warm summer day, you could wake up and smell the briny saltiness of the Atlantic Ocean. Even if you couldn't see it, you could smell it. Tío said, "Where the sea is, we're home."

Flora stood in the middle of the park and took a big sniff.

Clara looked over at her and raised one eyebrow, then the other.

"Oh Flora," her friend said. "Are you smelling the sea again?"

Flora nodded.

Clara said, "Then I'll just have to take you there in my boat."

She pretended to drag an invisible canoe across the park gravel, then stopped midway and mimed dropping the end of the canoe. "Flora! It's heavy. Aren't you going to help?"

Flora went to where she imagined the back of the boat to be. She pushed at the air and Clara pulled.

Clara looked up and said, "Come on, Flora. Being invisible doesn't make the boat any lighter. Put some muscle into it."

Flora smiled and took a step back and pushed as if her life depended on it.

Clara looked up approvingly and said, "Chica, that's how it's done."

She stepped oh-so-carefully into the invisible canoe and gestured for Flora to join her.

Flora stepped in and sat cross-legged behind her friend.

Without needing to say a word, the girls began to move their invisible oars in unison. Sure they knew they looked goofy, but they were busy creating their own world.



“A la derecha,” Clara whispered softly. “A la izquierda.”

They sat that way, legs crisscrossed, moving their hands in semi-circles as if their fingers were oars and the gravel was the deepest blue ocean.

Flora said, “My dad said that when I’m sixteen, I can take sailing lessons.”

Every summer Sunday, early before her mother and sister woke up, Flora and her father would walk to the Westerly boat yard and look at the boats heading out for the day. Her father, Santiago LeFevre, was tall, with a scraggly beard and a smile that was never far from his face. He would drink coffee, she would drink a babyccino—steamed milk with cocoa powder—and they would talk about boats. Flora dreamed about being able to sail a boat, the way her sister talked about getting a driver’s license.

Clara kept paddling. “Great, I’ll take sailing lessons when I’m sixteen too.”

People passed them in the park, but no one seemed to notice their invisible canoe.

“Do you remember that girl Liba Daniels who used

to pick us up from school when we were in the third grade?"

Flora said "third grade" as if it had been eons ago and not just two years before.

Clara nodded and said, "Claro, Liba was cool."

Flora said, "My dad told me that Liba got her sailing license and she's taking a gap year from college. She's sailing some rich person's boat from Rhode Island to the Caribbean."

Clara looked confused. "Why doesn't Señor Rich Person take his boat to the Caribbean himself?"

Flora said, "It could be a she."

Clara pursed her lips. "Fine, Señora Rich Person."

She shrugged. "I guess it's a thing. They're too busy or something, so they hire people to sail their boats from here to their homes in the islands."

"You get *paid* to sail someone else's fancy boat? How much?"

Flora said, "I have no idea. But I want that job."

Flora felt her phone buzz. It was a text from her mother. "¿Dónde estás?"

She stepped out of the boat. "It's my mom. I better get home."

“Me too,” Clara said.

They walked home, talking the whole way about boats and how they couldn’t wait until they were old enough to take a year off of school and get paid cold, hard cash to lounge about on a boat all day. Being in the fifth grade was fun. But being teenagers together was going to be *everything*.

## CHAPTER 2

### Flora's House

The brown shingled cottage where Flora lived with her parents and older sister looked almost like every other house in their little seaside village. But what Flora liked about her house was that there was a secret behind it. When you went into the house and through the back door, there was a stone path that led to another brown shingled house, one that was much bigger. That house belonged to her uncle Rogelio and his family—and *that* house had a private path to the beach.

Sunday dinners were always at Flora's house, even if it was smaller. The kitchen was cozier and it spilled onto a patio that they used nearly year round. That November afternoon was no different, Flora's mother calling out, "¡Maylin! ¡Flora! Necesito su ayuda."

Maylin was Flora's older sister. She was awful. Flora was convinced that if they ever performed surgery on her only sibling, they would find out that there was a hard, cold rock where Maylin's heart should be. To say Maylin was mean was a gross understatement. She was stingy. And a tattletale. And of course, Maylin was their parents' favorite. Flora wondered what you called someone who was the teacher's pet, but with parents. "Parents' pet" didn't sound right. But there had to be a word. Whatever it was, Maylin was it.

Flora's sister came into the kitchen and said, "Pero Mami, no puedo. I just painted my nails."

Her mother said, "Okay, Flora, you'll be my helper today." Flora couldn't believe it. Maylin was fourteen going on full-blown diva. She was a genius at doing as little around the house as humanly possible.

This time, however, Flora wasn't having it. "Mami, her nails? Really?" Then, just to prove that there was hateration where her heart should be, Maylin winked at Flora as she floated up the stairs to her room.

\* \* \*

Flora's mother stood at the kitchen island, chopping potatoes.

"Come, sit," she said, gesturing to the high-back stool next to the island.

"What are you making?" Flora asked, feeling thankful all of a sudden for the time alone with her mother.

Damaris Delfina LeFevre was a cardiothoracic surgeon, which meant she operated on hearts. She went to bed early during the week and spent long hours at the hospital. The weekends were usually all for family



time. But Maylin was turning fifteen that spring and so every Saturday, it seemed, Flora's mother was tied up with quinceañera planning.

To be fair to Maylin, the whole quince setup had built-in telenovela level drama. The birthday girl is attended to by a court of fourteen friends and family members—seven damas and seven chambelanes. The court all wore matching outfits, there was a DJ, choreographed dances, catering, gift bags for guests. It was a *thing*.

"What are you making for tonight?" Flora asked



as her mother handed her a bowl of meat that Flora began to roll into tiny meatballs. “Besides these albóndigas?”

“I thought I’d keep it simple,” her mother said. “Just tapas: patatas bravas, croquetas, albóndigas, a cheese and meat plate, and an arroz negro with seafood.”

Flora grinned. “Mami, your definition of simple and my definition of simple are not the same.”

Her mother said, “I like cooking. It relaxes me.”

Flora looked at her mother and asked, “Mami, does your work stress you out?”

Her mother lined the perfectly cut potatoes on a tray and paused before she answered. “Yes and no. It’s delicate work, and that’s stressful. But créeme Floracita, there is nothing like holding a human heart in your hand. It’s the most beautiful thing in the world.”

Flora thought for a second and said, “But when you’re holding the heart in your hand, it’s covered in blood, right?”

Her mother nodded.

Flora shook her head. “That’s just disgusting.”

Her mother laughed and shook her head. “Es un



milagro, but I can totally see how you might find it a little disgusting.”

At that moment, Maylin the Maleficent walked into the kitchen.

“What’s disgusting?” she said, reaching for a bag of tortilla chips on the counter.

“Your face,” Flora whispered, smiling sweetly.

“Mami!” Maylin called out plaintively. “Did you hear that? Did you hear how she talks to me?”

“Kidding,” Flora said as she jumped off the barstool.

But as she went to the kitchen sink to wash her hands, she felt a swell of pride.

By her count, the day’s score was Flora-i. Maylin-o.

## CHAPTER 3

### La Familia

**It was Flora's** job to set the table for family suppers. She placed each dish on the long oak dining table in front of the door that led out to the garden. Her father made that table, as he had made almost everything in their house. He liked to say he was a carpenter, but she thought of him as an artist. He designed all kinds of furniture and his work was so popular that just the year before, he'd been able to open his own shop on Canal Street, the main street in town.

Flora ran her finger along the pale wood grain. There was something about her father's furniture that felt even more beautiful to her, as if he had made it just for her.

As she placed the forks on top of the navy-blue linen napkins, she could hear the family and friends

arriving through the back door of the house. There was her tío Rogelio—tall and handsome, with the same dark skin and wavy hair as her mother. There was her uncle's husband, her tío Luca—he was a former ballet dancer and everything about the way he moved was smooth and elegant. Luca was holding their baby girl. The baby was named Damaris Delfina, after Flora's mother. But everyone called the baby Delfina or Fina, for short.

Next to arrive was her grandmother. Abuela lived nearby in a town called Mystic. Flora ran up to her and gave her a squeeze. Even when it was freezing out, her grandmother smelled like summer, like *agua de pipa* and fresh cut ginger and how in the summer, in Rhode Island, everywhere you looked there were trees that sprayed white and yellow blossoms across bright green lawns.

"Bienvenida, Abuela," she said, taking in her scent.

Her grandmother pulled her away and looked at her in disbelief. "Ay niña, you're almost as tall as me!"

It was true. At ten, Flora was nearly as tall as her grandmother. But as she pointed out: "Abuela, I hate

to be the one to break it to you, but you're also super short."

Her abuela puffed out her chest and said, "¡No me digas! When I stand on the ladder that is my heart, I'm six feet tall."

"Oh Abuela, you're so silly," Flora said, kissing her on the cheek.

The door creaked open again and the kitchen filled with more guests. There was her tía Janet and her husband, Tío Aarón. They weren't really her aunt and uncle, but she'd been taught to call every adult from Panama aunt or uncle. Flora didn't mind—she liked the idea of being from a place so small and tightly knit that anyone who lived there could be considered family.

Abuela had brought along the guy she called "my gentleman friend." His name was Mr. Carter. Since he wasn't from Panama, Flora's mother said it was okay to call him Mr. Carter and so she did.

Mr. Carter sat in the living room with Flora's father, examining a piece of wood that Papá was crafting into a side table.

“Flora! Maylin! Cozy, cozy!” her mother called out.

Flora knew that meant she and her sister were to add the four folding chairs that were kept in the basement to the dining room table.

Maylin called out, “Tía Janet is braiding my hair, can’t Flora do it?”

Flora didn’t even wait for her mother to respond “No hay problema.” Sometimes Flora wondered if Maylin was not actually her sister but a real life princess that her parents had been charged to raise, like Princess Leia in the Obi Wan Kenobi series. It was like she could Jedi mind trick everyone around her. After she’d squeezed the folding chairs in between the wooden chairs with the cloud-gray cushions her father had made, Flora went to the cabinet with the dishes. She counted out ten bone-white plates and ten blue ombre napkins.

Her mother brought a tray of patatas bravas to the table and looked at Flora’s handiwork approvingly. “So good,” she said, kissing her on the forehead. “Flora, tú eres formidable.”

The guests all poured into the dining room and Flora sat between her dad and her tío Luca.

As they passed serving platters back and forth, her abuela asked, “Ay, Flora, dime. ¿Cómo está tu español?”

Flora shrugged. “Pretty good. Tomo clases cada sábado.”

Maylin looked at her scornfully. “And yet, your accent remains tan feo.”

Flora flinched. It was true, her accent was a little different from the rest of the family’s. She’d never be truly bilingual, but at least she tried. It wasn’t her fault that she’d been born in Boston and raised in Rhode Island. Just because her accent wasn’t flawless didn’t mean it was ugly.

Nobody criticized Maylin for being so hurtful. Rather her tía Janet just encouraged her by asking, “And Maylin, how goes planning for your quince?”

Flora wanted to do one of those slow-motion dives across the table to stop the words from coming out of her tía’s mouth. Once Maylin started talking about her quince, there would be no way to put the quincezilla back into the bottle. But it was too late.

“Gracias, Tía,” Maylin said, as if she were on stage and someone had just handed her a big, shiny gold

award. “I don’t have to tell you, but planning a quince is a full-time job. There are so many damas and chambelanes to dress and instruct what to do. One of my damas has already missed two dance classes. I called her up and said, ‘Chica, if you think I’m going to let you embarrass me at my quince, you have another thing coming.’”

For the rest of dinner, it was the Maylin show, and Flora wished there were a trapdoor beneath her seat, a way to escape the room that had, all of a sudden, started to feel *Alice in Wonderland* small.

Finally, when the platters were filled with nothing but crumbs and the remnants of fresh herbs that her mother had used to season each dish, she was sprung free. Her father said, “Flora, help me clear the table, querida.”

Flora nodded and collected the plates as Maylin pattered on. “I’ve had no luck finding a dress. Tú sabes, tengo un estilo muy refinado and I don’t want to just recycle a poofy prom dress the way so many girls do.”

As Flora stood side by side in the kitchen with her father, he said, “It’s not easy being in the middle.”

Flora was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Maylin is the oldest."

Flora said, "She's also self-centered más que nada. Continue."

Her father said, "You have Maylin on one hand and now Delfina is the baby."

Flora was going to be starting middle school in a year. She certainly wasn't worried about not being the baby of the family.

Her father was nothing if not perceptive. He said, "I know I'm not explaining it perfectly, but I guess what I'm trying to say is that when I was a kid, I felt stuck in the middle. My brother Ben was older and a soccer star. My little brother Dimitry was younger but he was a musical prodigy from the age of four. It took me a while to find my thing. But I also came to realize that there's kind of a magic to being in the middle. I was surrounded by a lot of love."

Listening to the orchestra of voices coming from the dining room, Flora knew her father wasn't wrong. She did feel surrounded by love.

Then Maylin called out from the dining room, "Flora, bring us some water."





Her father gave her a look that said “Cálmate.”

She wanted to take the jug of water out of the fridge and slam it on the table. But instead she handed it to her father, who took it into the dining room.

She opened the calendar on her father’s iPad and did some quick math. Only 912 days until Maylin went to college. Then she would be the only kid/teenager in the house. She could hardly wait. It was going to be awesome.

## CHAPTER 4

### Clara's House

**Flora and Clara** both liked drawing—which they were good at. And skateboarding—they could only do one or two tricks, but they liked to tape each other on the half-pipe and record voice-overs like they were smashing it in a big fancy competition. Every Saturday, to help blow off steam after Spanish school, they would take their boards down to the skate park and practice their moves. They were the only girls who ever showed up, which made them feel a little lonely, but also kind of cool.

At the skate park, Clara put on her helmet and did a quick flip on the half-pipe. Flora's mother made her wear a helmet, elbow pads, knee pads, and wrist guards. "Why don't you just wrap my whole body in bubble wrap while you're at it?" Flora groaned every time.

But her mother didn't seem to get that she was joking. "Don't tempt me, *niña*," she said, "I just might."

Even though her mother wasn't at the park, Flora dutifully put all the pads on. Clara laughed. "All you need is a pillow wrapped around your belly and you would be, like, totally protected."

Flora looked annoyed. "Don't laugh, Clara."

Clara said, "Your mom is nowhere to be found. You look like you're shipping yourself special delivery halfway around the world."

Flora shook her head, "Uh-uh. The day I don't wear these things is the day my mom decides to do an unannounced drive by—or send Maylin to spy on me."

"Can you come over to my house for a snack when we're done?" Clara asked.

Flora texted her mother and gave the thumbs-up when she quickly got the response saying okay.

Flora often thought her house was the unofficial Panamanian embassy of New England. In contrast, she could count on Clara's house to not only be a Maylin-free zone, but to be a bastion of peace and quiet. Clara's house was rarely crowded and hardly



ever loud. Clara's parents were from Argentina, which meant their food was a little different from Panamanian, but equally delicious.

In the notes app on her phone, Flora kept a running list of all the cool things about Clara. She was proud of the list even though whenever she offered to show it to Clara, Clara just laughed and said, "Flora LeFevre, the only cool thing about me is that I get to hang out with you."

Clara was that way—always humble and kind. Which reminded Flora—she needed to add those to her list.

### CLARA COOL THING #1

Clara was an only child, which meant she had no big sister and no adorable baby cousin who might, in the middle of a delicious dinner, drop a stinky diaper so big that you could—and would—lose your appetite.

Once, Clara told Flora, "I know Maylin is the worst. But sometimes being an only kid gets lonely."

This was something Flora had a hard time believing.

“I live five blocks away,” she said. “If you get lonely, just call me. I’ll be right over.”

Clara had not made one of her trademark funny faces then. She just looked at Flora seriously and said, “That’s not what I meant, Flora la Fresca.”

Flora asked her, “Well, what do you mean?”

Clara shrugged and said, “Forget about it.”

Flora was quiet then. As much as she hated having a truly self-absorbed older sister, she did love that her uncles lived right next door and her abuela was never far away. Her house might feel like a zoo sometimes, but it was her zoo. She knew that Clara’s abuelos lived in Buenos Aires and only visited once a year. She couldn’t imagine seeing Abuela just once a year.

## CLARA COOL THING #2

Clara’s mother, whom Flora called Tía Mariana, was a cartographer, which is a fancy word for mapmaker. Clara told Flora, “You’d think there wouldn’t be a huge demand for new maps. But it turns out, there is!”

Clara’s mother worked from home in a beautiful art studio with three ginormous skylights and filled with

easels, a big artsy computer screen, colored pencils, and paints. Flora sometimes thought that when she grew up, all she wanted was to have an apartment that was just like that studio. She wouldn't even need a kitchen. Clara's mother had a little kettle and fridge in the studio and sometimes when they came over after school, she made Clara and Flora big steaming mugs of ramen noodles with that kettle, and it was the best after-school snack ever.

Mariana drew maps for textbook publishers, but she also made maps of cities with little drawings that symbolized all the best places to visit and eat and shop. She sold those maps online and they were even featured in magazines.

Sometimes, after they were done with their homework, Clara's mom would show them how to sketch faces or how to use different kinds of watercolors. Both Flora and Clara had become pretty good artists. They always got an A in art. In fourth grade, Clara had come in first at the school art fair with her model of a house with an entirely green roof. She'd made the roof out of real moss and written a whole report on the environmental benefits of green roofs—how they



improved air quality and helped reduce the carbon footprint of the home.

Flora had done a portrait of her parents in traditional Panamanian clothes—her mother in a brightly colored pollera dress and her father in a montuno shirt and a straw hat. She'd come in second in the art contest and the girls had celebrated by going out for boba tea in town.

### CLARA COOL THING #3

(SPOILER ALERT: IT'S REALLY COOL.)

The third thing on Flora's list was the coolest thing of all. Clara's house had a pool. *Inside* the house. The first time Flora saw it, she and Clara had already been friends for weeks. Which was good because Flora would've never wanted Clara to think she was her friend just to get access to a pool.

They were well into second grade when Clara first invited Flora over for a play date. She said, "Bring your suit, we can go swimming."

Flora put her hand on Clara's forehead and said, "It's November, loca! The water is *freezing*."

Clara said, "I know. We have a pool."

Flora didn't get it. "Chica, do you know how cold it is outside?"

Clara looked like she was getting frustrated. "Ya, yo sé. It's an indoor pool." Those were two words Flora had never heard put together—*indoor* and *pool*. But it turned out, Clara wasn't loca after all. In the back of *her* brown shingled cottage, where a lot of people had a sunporch, Clara's family had a pool. On the inside.

Clara's dad, Joaquín, designed pools for rich people. So when they moved into the house, he designed one for them. The pool was long and thin. Clara's dad called it a lap pool, and it had the most beautiful black tile that sparkled when the sun hit it just right.

Every once in a while, after they'd had a swim on a cold winter day, Flora would say to Clara, "Are you sure you're not rich?"

Clara would say, "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure my parents would tell me if we were loaded."

But the last time Flora asked her, Clara said, "Maybe we're rich adjacent."

Flora laughed and said, "What does *that* mean?"

"It means we're close to it. So, like my dad designs pools for rich people. So he's adjacent to their richness and I'm adjacent to him."

Flora sat wrapped in a big beach towel next to Clara, their legs dangling in the heated pool as they looked out on the garden, where every branch looked wintry and bare.

"Oh, I get it," Flora said. "So I'm monster adjacent because my bedroom is right next to Maylin's."

"Exactly," Clara said, nodding.

Flora said, "Did I tell you her new thing is refusing to help with chores because her nails are painted?"

Clara looked at her nails, which were short and unpainted like Flora's.

"Does that actually work?"

Flora nodded.

Clara shook her head. "*Insoporable*."

That was one of their favorite Spanish words. It meant, incredibly, you-had-to-see-it-to-believe-it, so bad it was practically criminal, unbearable, and unjust.

Flora thought again about how lucky it was that Clara was an only child. She said, "If it gets worse

and she goes full-tilt quince loca, can I come and live with you?"

Clara nodded. "Pues, tengo que preguntar a los padres, but it would be totally cool with me."

## CHAPTER 5

### How'd We Get Kicked Off the Nice List?

On the first Sunday in December, Flora went over to Clara's to swim. Swimming in Clara's pool was always fun, but swimming when there was snow on the ground was always an extra thrill. When Flora got home and saw that Clara was FaceTiming her, she answered the call and said, "¡Hola Clarita! What did I forget?"

Clara's hair was still wet from the pool and the skin around her eyes looked red and sore, like she'd rubbed her hands in poison ivy, then rubbed her eyes.

"Chica, what's wrong?" Flora asked, worried.

"It's my . . ." Clara could barely get the words out. Flora had never seen her so upset. "Take a deep breath, Clara," she said. Flora's mother said that when people came to the hospital, the first thing they forgot to

do was breathe. So she was always reminding them, "Take a deep breath."

Clara inhaled and exhaled audibly. "It's my mother . . . She got a job in California and we're moving after New Year's."

Flora heard the words come out of Clara's mouth but they sounded far away, like when they used to try to make walkie-talkies out of tin cans and string. She was sure she didn't hear Clara right.

"I think I still have water in my ears from the pool," Flora said hopefully, tapping one ear toward the ground and then the other. She knew she didn't, but the gesture felt comforting.

"It's true," Clara said.

They stood there, silently. Staring at each other over the phone. Flora didn't know what to say. She'd never had a problem of this magnitude before (*magnitude* had been on their weekly spelling quiz at the start of fifth grade). Before, she could spell the word, but now she felt how big the word was, the *magnitude* of Clara moving away was like a giant construction wrecking ball had knocked a crater-sized hole in the center of her gut.

\* \* \*

Flora's dad loved to watch old-school crime shows, especially the ones with a gazillion episodes and the ticking clock theme. Flora noticed that when things went wrong, it was very important to pay attention to the time. On the show, people were always saying things like, "He walked in the bar, it must've been around seven p.m." And "She was never late for work, so by ten a.m., I started to worry."

On her last birthday, Flora's parents gave her a pink leather book with a lock and a key. She'd never used it because she hated the color pink. But she also never thought she had anything that important to say. But now the unimaginable was happening. Things were getting bad and all indications were that they were only going to get worse.

She opened the sickly pink book and began to write: *Clara's mother got a job in California and the whole family is moving after New Year's.*

She added, although it hardly seemed necessary: *My life is ruined and this is about to be the worst Christmas ever.*

Then she closed the book and wiped away her small but steady stream of tears.

\* \* \*

The next day, after school, Flora and Clara met up at their favorite hangout place, Bruce Lee Boba, to think up a plan.

Normally, the photos of the iconic martial arts star would cheer them up, but the idea that Clara was moving, all the way to the other side of the country, was bad news on the level that even Bruce Lee and his fists of fury couldn't fix.





“Maybe my parents would let me come live with you so I can finish out the school year here,” Clara offered.

Flora’s heart leaped. “If you lived with me, it would be like having a sister and a best friend rolled into one.”

“I like the way you think,” Clara said, smiling at the idea. Then she slurped the bubbles at the bottom of her glass.

“Why, thank you.”

“I’ll ask my dad as soon as he gets home,” Clara said.

“Me too,” Flora said.

It went without saying that for a plan like this to work they needed to start with the fathers. Latina moms had a reputation for being tough to crack, and the girls’ mothers weren’t exceptions to the rule.

When Flora got home, her father was in the kitchen. “Your mother’s had a long day at the hospital,” he said. “I thought I’d make dinner. Tacos work for you?”

*Perfect, Flora thought. I’ve got him cornered.*

“Papá,” she began. “Clara really doesn’t want to start a new school in the middle of the year. Would it be okay if she lived with us so she could finish out the fifth grade here, in Westerly?”

Her father didn't even turn around from the pile of fresh tortillas he was baking in the oven. "Of course. Clara's always welcome here. She's like family."

Flora jumped up. It had been surprisingly easy. Could it really be that easy? "Thank you, Papá," she said, trying to control her excitement lest she jinx the whole deal. "You're the best."

He called out after her, "It's really up to Clara's parents, though."

But Flora couldn't see how that was going to be a big deal. Clara's parents were ruining their lives. They *had* to say yes.

Flora went up to her room and texted Clara:

*My dad says you can live with us (!!!)*

Clara texted back a GIF of a dancing cat.

Flora looked around her room. There was plenty of space for a second bed. Maybe she and Clara could even get bunk beds. She'd always wanted bunk beds. She didn't want Clara to move, but if she could stay with them for the rest of the school year, they might be able to squeeze in just enough fun to make it all bearable.

Flora tried to get her homework done, but she couldn't. It was all too exciting. So she opened her tablet and decided to watch her favorite Studio Ghibli movie until it was dinner time.

She was halfway through *Howl's Moving Castle* when she got an alert. It was Clara:

*We're on our way to your house. My mom called your mom.*

Then a second message:

*It's not good.*

For all her fresca ways, Flora hadn't gotten in very much trouble before. So when she heard the doorbell ring a few minutes later, she was more curious than scared. Clara's family was already moving to California. What could be more *not good* than that?

But when she came down the stairs and saw Clara's family and her parents sitting in the fancy living room, the one with the big vase of fake flowers and the off-white couches that no one was ever allowed to sit on, she knew that things were serious.

Her mother looked tired and mad.

Clara's mother looked frustrated and mad.

The dads looked like if they could make a quick escape to the basement to watch soccer and avoid whatever was coming next, they would.

Clara sat crisscross applesauce in front of the bay window. She patted the floor and indicated that Flora should sit next to her. Flora's mother sighed and said, "Mariana, do you want to start?" Clearly the mothers had been plotting against them before the girls even knew they were in a battle.

"Sure," Mariana said. "Look, chicas. I know that this move is hard for you to take. If I could change the timing, I would, but I cannot."

Her voice caught in her throat then, and Flora thought she might cry. Mariana took a deep breath and continued, "It's hard when something that is good news for you is bad news for the people you love. But Joaquín and I think that in the long term, this is a huge opportunity for our whole family."

Clara looked at her mother without a dash of sympathy and said, "If it's good news for you, then just leave me here."

Her mother shook her head and said, "Eso no va a pasar."

Flora jumped in to defend the plan she and Clara had. “But Tía Mariana, my dad said it was okay.”

Flora’s father looked at Clara’s parents apologetically. “Lo siento, amigos. Ustedes saben. She misunderstood my comments. All I meant was that Clara will always be welcome in our home.”

Mariana sighed. “And Flora will always be welcome in our home. Tal vez, when they’re a bit older, they can even spend some of their summer vacations together.”

Clara was not appeased. She said, “But why not let me finish the school year here?”

Mariana’s voice turned from weary to forceful. “Because you are ten years old, Clara Beatriz Lucía Ocampo Londra.” Flora knew it was bad then because Mariana had used all five of the names on Clara’s birth certificate. It was like both of their mothers had taken the same course for Latina Moms on Discipline and Expressing Abject Disappointment.

Clara started to cry, the kind of crying you did when you fell off the jungle gym and you hit the ground so hard and fast that everything hurt. Flora put her arms around her friend, felt the sleeve of

her t-shirt go from dry to wet in seconds. Then she looked at the parents accusingly. “Do you see what you’ve done?”

Flora’s mother snapped to her feet. “Flora, ven conmigo a la cocina.”

Flora followed her reluctantly to the kitchen as Clara fell into her father’s arms.

“Flora, you have to stop,” her mother said, her voice as sharp as the special set of knives she used for cooking. “You are making a hard situation worse. You are not in charge here. The Ocampos are. Stop making suggestions. Stop acting like you can control any of this.”

Flora thought this was wildly unfair, but she said nothing.

“Do you hear me?” her mother asked, her voice thick with irritation.

Flora nodded.

“I’m going to need to hear actual words,” her mother said.

“Te escucho,” Flora whispered. On the list of things that were the absolute worst, her mother being

mad—like really mad—at her was definitely in Flora’s top five.

“And?”

“And I’m sorry.” Flora let the untrue words come out of her mouth.

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to Tía Mariana and Tío Joaquín for being so bad-mannered.”

Flora nodded again.

Back in the living room, Clara’s tears had slowed down and Flora sat on the edge of the leather armchair next to her. She looked at Clara’s parents and said, “Lo siento. I’m sorry for being rude.”

Mariana said, “Ay Flora, it’s okay. This isn’t going to be easy. But at least we have the holidays together. Why don’t you both focus on enjoying the time you have together instead of trying to stop the inevitable?”

“Okay,” Flora said softly.

Clara shrugged, defeated, and said, “Okay.”

Clara and her parents stayed for dinner. Under normal circumstances, that would have been a treat.

Plus, they were having tacos. Flora's dad's tacos, with the homemade tortillas and special sauces, were better than any restaurant within driving distance of Westerly—everyone said so.

But Flora could barely taste her food and when Clara and her parents left, she went straight to her room.

She took out her diary and opened the girly pink pages to record the evidence that she had gathered that day: *December 2nd, 7:15 p.m. Christmas is canceled and my life is ruined.*



# Flora la Fresca & the Art of Friendship

By Veronica Chambers  
Illustrated by Sujean Rim



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

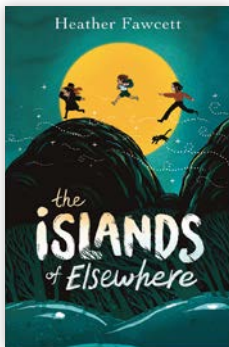
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# The Islands of Elsewhere

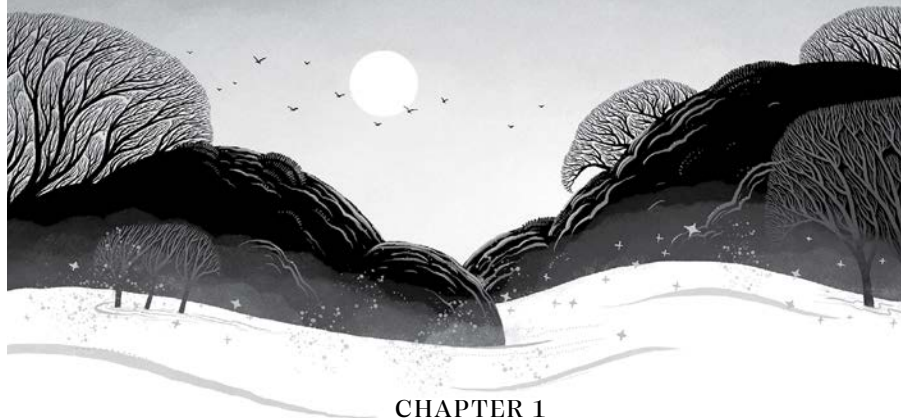
By Heather Fawcett

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This seaside story of siblings on a hunt for treasure is just right for fans of *The Penderwicks* and *The Vanderbeekers* series.

Not many kids have an island in their backyard, but suddenly, the Snolly sisters have three. They're staying at Granddaddy's seaside property for the summer, which includes the mysterious Fairy Islands: Fairy, Little Fairy, and Ghost. The people in Misty Cove call them "in-between places," and say they're full of magic—a magic that gets inside you.

But ten-year-old Bee Snolly doesn't believe in magic—she just wants to help her ill Granddaddy. And if she and her sisters can unravel the mystery of the Fairy Islands in time, they may discover a long-buried secret that could help them all.



## CHAPTER 1

# *The Sometimes Island*

“Here we are,” Mom said, turning the car off.

In the front seat, Hattie stuck her head out the window, her eyes wide. “Are you serious?”

“*This* is Granddaddy’s house?” Bee demanded.

“Oh no, of course not,” Mom said. “Your brother and I are going there now. *This* house belongs to a wicked witch who eats little girls for dinner. Out you go!”

“Mom!” the Snolly sisters groaned in unison. Theodore, their baby brother, gave a snort of laughter from his car seat, as if delighted by the idea of a sister-eating witch.

Bee poked his tummy teasingly. Dore giggled and waved his tiny fists, which Bee carefully avoided. Dore

always seemed to have something unpleasant in his fists—sometimes a sticky glob of food saved from his last meal; other times a dead worm or beetle. Once, he'd had an actual frog, still alive and springy, which had leaped into Hattie's hair as soon as he opened his hand. None of the other Snollys could figure out where he'd found it. They hadn't known they *had* frogs in their dull suburb, which was mostly concrete and shopping malls.

"Well, three girls are a handful, you know," Mom said with a sigh. "Your granddaddy will miss you. Not too much, of course—abandoning you to the witch was his idea."

"Mom!"

"All right, all right." Her hand hovered over the unlock button, but she didn't press it. "Now, remember what I told you. Your grandfather may be a little different, but he's still your grandfather. The illness is in the early stages, and it's slow."

The Snolly sisters nodded. Bee didn't know why Mom kept saying that Granddaddy's illness was "slow," as if that was supposed to make them feel better.

"What are the three rules?" Mom said.

"Don't argue with Granddaddy if he says something wrong," Hattie said.

"Don't be too—noisy?" Plum said. Mom nodded.

“Good luck with that,” Bee muttered. Plum was like a four-foot-tall tornado. Mom looked at her, and Bee sighed. “If Granddaddy gets confused and needs help, come and get you.”

Mom nodded again. She unlocked the doors, and the Snolly sisters piled out. Literally. Hattie tripped on Mab, their one-eyed black cat, and tumbled onto the ground. Then Plum was so excited for the long drive to be over that she tried to jump past Bee and ended up on top of both sisters.

“Girls!” Mom said. This was one of Mom’s favorite words. Sometimes it simply meant *Come here*, sometimes it meant *You’re making me laugh so hard, my side hurts*, and other times it meant *If you keep that up, I’m going to tear out my hair*. This time it was a combination of the first and third meanings, Bee thought.

“Get off,” Bee grumbled, giving Plum a shove. Bee was a whole two years older than Plum, but she was short for a ten-year-old and Plum was tall for an eight-year-old, so they were almost the same size. Additionally, Plum was bony and seemed to have more knees and elbows than most people.

Bee hitched up her green backpack, which she carried with her everywhere she went, and helped Mom unload

the car. The house itself wasn't what had astonished her, though it was a pretty house, small and seashell-white with lots of windows and a somewhat overgrown garden. It was the *where* of the house that was the astonishing thing: It sat on the edge of a low bluff overlooking the sea.

And, oh, the sea! It stretched out and out, blue and green and black all together, wrinkled with waves. A thick fog hovered offshore, stretching its tendrils out like an octopus, and the wind was cool and salty. Below Granddaddy's house was a perfect beach that went on and on until it faded into the fog.

"Mom!" Hattie exclaimed. "Granddaddy has a beach in his *backyard*. In his backyard!"

"What if the waves hit his house?" Plum said.

"They don't," Bee said. "You can tell by the driftwood down there—see? That's as high as the tide gets."

Plum looked disappointed. Knowing her, she probably *liked* the idea of being woken up in the night by waves splashing through her window.

"Look!" Hattie said. "There's an island out there."

So there was. The fog had parted, revealing a dark mound of trees and rocky banks poking up out of the water. The fog closed up again before Bee could get a good look, like a curtain drawing across a window.

“That’s Fairy Island,” Mom said, bending over the bags in the trunk. Her dark hair was spilling out of its bun. “It’s part of your grandfather’s property.”

Plum’s eyes bulged. “*Fairy* Island?”

“Yes—bit of a silly name, if you ask me. It’s not even an island. Well, sometimes it is.”

“Granddaddy owns an island?” Hattie demanded. “Is he a millionaire?”

“Does it have coconut trees?” Plum said.

“You can’t have a *sometimes* island,” Bee said. “That’s impossible. Things are either islands or they’re not.”

“Yes, no, no, and yes, you can,” Mom said, tucking her hair behind her ear. “It’s an island at high tide. At low tide, it’s connected to the cove. And I’m afraid it’s not worth much, Hattie. It’s protected by law, which means you can’t build anything on it.”

Bee and Hattie exchanged looks. A beach in their backyard, and a mysterious island all to themselves? Things just kept getting better and better.

“Did you play on the island when you were little, Mommy?” Plum said, pushing up her hairband, which was part of her dinosaur costume—it had a row of papier-mâché horns glued onto it. Plum wore Halloween costumes all year, most handmade by Mom or scavenged

at local thrift stores, and the dinosaur costume was one of her favorites. In addition to the hairband, it consisted of a green vest that zipped at the front and had a row of stegosaurus scales made of felt and wire running down the back, and a long green tail stuffed with cotton batting.

“No, I never really liked going there when I was a girl.” Mom paused, and a frown passed over her face. “I don’t remember why—isn’t that strange? I suppose it was because I preferred to stay inside with my books. That’s enough chattering, now—Hattie, hon, give me a hand with this stuff.”

Hattie picked up a suitcase and a bag. Bee picked up Mab, who had wandered off to sniff the garden. “You’ll have to be careful here,” she told the cat. “You can’t wander far. Mom says there are wolves *and* bears in Misty Cove.”

Mab regarded her with an equal measure of calm and pity in her big green eye, as if to say, *Wolves and bears would gobble you up easy, but they’re no match for ME.* Bee, on the other hand, wasn’t calm at all—she was bubbling with excitement. Like the others, she’d been looking forward to spending half the summer at Granddaddy’s for months, ever since Mom had started making plans. They hadn’t been to Granddaddy’s house since Bee was



little, too little to remember—it was far away, a long drive that included an expensive ferry, so Granddaddy usually flew to Vancouver to visit them.

Plum did cartwheels up the lawn, which was bumpy from the roots of two towering cedars. “Where does dew come from, Mommy?” she said between leaps.

“Dew?” Mom paused to adjust one of the bags slung over her shoulder. “That’s what comes out of clouds when they sneeze. I thought you knew that.”

“Mom,” Hattie groaned.

“I know,” Mom said, shaking her head sadly. “*There is no darkness but ignorance*, as Shakespeare says. I must do a better job of teaching you girls the ways of the world. Imagine not knowing where dew comes from, at your age!”

Plum turned to Hattie. “Do clouds really sneeze?”

“Of course,” Mom answered. “You think I would lie to my own offspring? Perish the thought!”

“They don’t sneeze,” Hattie said.

“Where *does* it come from, then?”

“I don’t know. Ask Bee.”

Bee knew that dew came from water in the air, because she’d read it in one of her science books. But Mom had already given her a wink, and she had winked back, so

she said loudly, “Gosh, look at all this dew. The clouds in Misty Cove must have a cold.”

Hattie groaned even louder. Mom smiled, but then her expression grew serious. “Don’t forget, girls: Your grandfather is still your grandfather. If he misplaces a memory once in a while, it doesn’t change that.”

“You said that, Mommy,” Plum said.

“Like two minutes ago,” Hattie said.

Mom let out a slow breath. “It’s important, so I’m saying it again.”

Plum nodded solemnly. Bee felt a knot tighten in her stomach, a knot that had been there since Mom had told them that Granddaddy was sick.

The door of the house flew open, and there stood Granddaddy. His gray hair was as messy as Bee remembered, and he was wearing an apron that said *Cookies Are a Food Group*. “Alice! Children! Good grief, it’s like having a traveling circus turn up at your door. I’m sorry, but you won’t all fit in the cottage—you’ll have to find a hotel.”

Mom laughed and hugged him. Despite his gruff voice, Bee could see that Granddaddy’s eyes were warm. He looked and sounded like the same old Granddaddy, and Bee felt relief wash over her.

Like the other Snolly children, Bee had once been

afraid of Granddaddy. He was tall and round and quiet, a large shape in the corner at family gatherings, gazing out from beneath his joined-up eyebrows. He taught junior-high science before he retired, though Bee could never picture him in a classroom full of kids, looming over them all. Then one day at the park near their house, Bee had been stung by a wasp (though afterward, whenever any of the Snollys told the story, the wasp became a bee). Granddaddy had found her sobbing by the pond, and after quietly examining the wound, he had wandered off to the garden part of the park and returned with a handful of different flowers. These he crumbled in his palm with a little water and applied to the sting while Bee watched in amazement. The pain had lessened right away. Later that day, he had shown her his collection of pressed leaves and flowers from around the world, and had taught her how to press her own.

Granddaddy hugged the sisters first, then gave Dore a kiss. Dore grinned enormously and held out his fist. Before the Snolly sisters could shout a warning, Granddaddy opened his hand, and Dore dropped a large, hairy spider onto it.

“Ah,” Granddaddy said. Bee couldn’t help admiring how quickly he hid his shock. The spider had alarmingly

thick legs. “Thank you, Theodore. But I think we should set this little fellow free, don’t you? I’m sure he’ll enjoy his new home.”

He bent down and put his hand against the lawn. The poor spider staggered about for a moment and then wandered off in the direction of the roses, swaying as if it had been through a washing machine.

Granddaddy ushered them into the house. They found themselves in a living room with a lot of old, squashy furniture and a wall of windows facing the sea. The sound of the surf filled the room, and Bee sighed happily. It was like being inside a big, cozy seashell.

Next to the living room was a kitchen. The counter was entirely filled with chocolate chip cookies in a variety of shapes and sizes, cooling on racks. Plum’s eyes went beady, but Granddaddy deftly blocked her way.

“Not yet,” he said. “Let’s help your mother with the bags first. Then I’ll need you all to do a taste test. I think I’ve made a breakthrough in my experiments.”

The sisters grinned at one another. For as long as they could remember, Granddaddy had been on a quest to discover the world’s best chocolate chip cookie recipe. Whenever he visited their apartment, he made batch after batch with slightly different ingredients, insisting

that the Snolly sisters provide him with detailed reviews. With some exceptions, they were all delicious (one key exception being the peppermint-and-peanut-butter-flavored batch of two summers ago, which had made Plum sick).

“We liked your last recipe, Granddaddy,” Hattie said. Bee nodded. When Granddaddy had visited for Christmas, he had baked a batch with cotton-candy icing. They’d been so good, it had been as if an enchanted candy shop had been crammed into each cookie.

Bee glanced at Hattie. She could tell from the smile on Hattie’s face that she was thinking the same thing—clearly, Mom had been exaggerating. Granddaddy couldn’t possibly be *that* ill.

“Why don’t you girls put your things away?” Granddaddy said. “I don’t have enough bedrooms for everyone, so one of you will have to be out in the bunkie.”

“What’s a bunkie?” Plum asked.

“It’s like a very small house,” Mom said. “*Very* small. They’re usually just for sleeping in.”

“Oh, wow!” Bee raced to the window. Sure enough, at the edge of the sloping lawn beside a path down to the beach was a little one-room building. The roof was covered in moss, and if not for the door and the windows,

it would have looked like a shed. An ancient apple tree leaned over it, its branches all pointed away from the sea like a person slowly falling over backward. It was wonderful, Bee thought: a little house just for one person.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Mom said to Granddaddy. “That thing looks like it’s falling apart. Maybe the girls can share a room.”

“Nooo,” Bee and Hattie moaned in unison.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Granddaddy said. “Believe it or not, my parents used to live there. This property has been in the family for generations.” He gazed at the bunkie in a way that made Bee think he was seeing something she couldn’t.

“Mom can pick a number between one and a hundred,” Bee suggested. “Whoever’s guess is the closest gets the bunkie.”

“I think the oldest should get the bunkie,” Hattie grumbled. “I’m the only mature one around here. I mean, I’m almost a junior high schooler.”

Bee rolled her eyes. “You two can guess first,” she added virtuously. Maybe a little too virtuously, for Hattie gave her a suspicious look.

“Fourteen!” Plum said.

“Thirty-three,” Hattie said.

Bee grinned. “Thirty-four.”

“Well done, Bee,” Mom said. “The number was seventy. You win.”

Hattie glared at her. “You cheated!”

“It’s not cheating,” Bee said. “It’s strategy. You’d think you’d know all about that, being the only *mature* one around here.”

Hattie threw a sofa cushion at her.

“What is that smell?” Mom said.

Suddenly, they were all noticing it. “Smoke!” Hattie exclaimed.

Mom dropped her suitcase with a clatter and ran into the kitchen. She yanked open the oven and all Bee could see were bright yellow flames, though when Mom reached inside and pulled a tray out, she realized the flames weren’t actually that big after all. It was a tray of cookies, or what used to be cookies—two were burning, and the rest were black and smoking.

Mom gave a startled cry. She dropped the tray into the sink and turned the water on, and the kitchen filled with the hiss of steam.

“How long has the oven been on?” Mom said in a voice that was more high-pitched than usual. “Cookies don’t burn like that in a few minutes.”

“It’s not on,” Granddaddy said. He was standing in the doorway, frowning, but his expression was strange, as if he was trying to peer through clouds.

Mom didn’t reply. She just reached out and turned the oven off. The sudden mechanical *beep* made Bee jump. *Don’t argue with Granddaddy*, she heard Mom’s voice saying in her head. Mom wasn’t arguing, even though they all knew Granddaddy had left the oven on.

Bee’s heart was still thundering from the shock of the fire. She remembered how Mom had reacted that time Hattie had made cheese toast in the oven and been distracted by a phone call from one of her friends. Mom had said she could have burned the house down, and Hattie hadn’t been allowed to meet her friends that day.

“Let’s get a move on.” Mom’s voice was too loud. “Come on, girls, the car isn’t going to unpack itself.”





## CHAPTER 2

# *The Bunkie*

Ten minutes later, Bee flopped onto her bed.

The bunkie was indeed perfect. Yes, it was drafty, and the rafters were probably full of spiders, but it smelled of wood and salt, and she could lie in bed and gaze at the sea. At their apartment back home, she had to share a room with Plum, and the view was of the other apartment across the alley. Now she had an entire house all her own? She felt like pinching herself. If she weren't so worried about Granddaddy, she probably would have done a little dance. She could still smell smoke—it seemed to be clinging to her hair.

In one corner of the bunkie was an old woodstove with a flat top meant for cooking on in the olden days, and

in the other was a tin bathtub that Granddaddy said his parents had used to bathe in. Bee wondered how old the bunkie was.

She placed her green backpack on the nightstand next to the bed. The backpack was her most treasured possession—she prided herself on keeping it well stocked with everything that was useful, from Band-Aids to rope to felt pens to emergency snacks (particularly Tootsie Rolls, her favorite), and nothing that was not. Whenever she discovered another useful item—most recently, duct tape—she carefully found a place for it in the backpack. Hattie claimed it was a magical backpack, for it seemed to hold an endless number of items. She had even given the backpack a name—*Misdirection*, which was something magicians used to conceal their tricks.

This was all ridiculous, of course. Bee didn't believe in magic—the backpack fit so many things because she kept it well organized, of course. Still, *Misdirection* had stuck.

The door swung open, and Mab nosed her way in. She gave Bee an indignant *meow*. Mab didn't like it when she couldn't find one of the sisters right away.

Bee patted the bed, and Mab jumped up. She scratched Mab's cheek just the way she liked, and the cat curled into her hand with a purr.

Suddenly, Mab whirled around, her body rigid. She had that pricked-ear posture that suggested she was listening to something.

“What is it, girl?” Bee said.

But then Bee heard it. A *tappity-tap* sound, like rain-drops. But it wasn’t raining.

Bee stood. As soon as her feet touched the floor, the sound stopped. She looked at the old apple tree, wondering if its branches had brushed the roof. Yet the tapping had sounded like it was *inside* the bunkie.

Someone knocked on the window. There stood Plum, already in her polka-dot swimsuit, although she had put her dinosaur costume over it. She stretched her mouth wide and pressed it against the glass, revealing a disgusting mess of chewed-up cookies. She giggled and ran off, and Bee ran after her, leaving Mab staring intently at the floor.



### CHAPTER 3

## *Code* Shooting Star

By the time the Snollys had finished unpacking, and Mom had wrestled four snails, two crabs, and one confused ladybug away from Dore, it was past suppertime.

“I’m famished,” Granddaddy said. “Why don’t we all go to OOO?”

“To *ewww*?” Hattie said.

“No—*Oooh*. Oh-oh-oh. That’s what we locals call it. Octopus Octopus Octopus is its full name.”

Hattie looked dubious. “Is that a restaurant?”

“The best one in town. Come on.”

Bee and Hattie hung back from the others as they all walked down the road. Puffs of sea mist floated by, as if the waves were breathing on them.

“We’ve got to do something to help Granddaddy,” Bee said. “He’s all alone here. What if he forgets about the oven again? Or something else important? What if we go away, and he forgets about *us*?”

“But what can we do?” Hattie said. “We lost the blue birdhouse.”

Bee chewed her lip. When Mom had found out that Granddaddy was ill, she had tried to find a bigger apartment that they could all live in together. But the only one they could afford, which had filled the top two floors of a blue townhouse and had a yard full of colorful bird feeders, had been rented before Mom could even fill out an application.

But Bee was good at plans. She made plans for everything, from mapping out shortcuts to school so that she didn’t have to walk past the neighbor’s scary dog, to making the boy who kept pulling her hair in class move to a different desk (at lunchtime, she had taken the screws out of his desk so that it collapsed when he sat down). Whenever something made her scared or upset, she came up with a plan to make things better.

Now she was going to make things better for Granddaddy.

“I have an idea that’s better than the blue birdhouse,” she said.

“What’s better than the blue birdhouse?” Plum demanded loudly. She had been running back and forth between the two sisters and Mom, Granddaddy, and Dore. “It’s the best house ever. I want to move there!”

“*Shhh*,” Bee said. “We can’t move there. Somebody else rented it, remember? But what if we could convince Mom to move *here*?”

Hattie’s face lit up. Plum clapped her hands together and let out a shriek that made Mom turn her head.

“*Shhh*,” Bee said again. “You don’t get to be part of the plan if you can’t keep quiet about it, Plum.”

“But what *is* the plan?” Hattie said. “We can’t move here. Mom would have to quit her job. If she quits her job, she won’t have any money. We need money. Everybody does.” Her face had gone pale.

“I’ll figure something out,” Bee said. “I just need time to think.”

“The problem is, we only have three weeks,” Hattie said. “That’s not much time to come up with a proper plan.”

Bee bit her lip. Dad was coming to pick them up in three weeks to take them camping. The Snolly sisters had all been looking forward to that, but now Bee also felt a pang of anxiety. Hattie was right—three weeks wasn’t much.

“Maybe we could find Mom a job here,” Hattie said doubtfully. “Though I don’t know how to find jobs.”

“I have a job,” Plum said.

Bee snorted. “No you don’t.”

“Yes I do! My lemonade stand.” She bounced up and down until her horns went lopsided. “I made four dollars last summer.”

“Four dollars isn’t very much money,” Hattie said.

Plum thought it over. “I could sell lemonade ice pops too.”

Bee shook her head. “Mom’s waiting for us. We’ll finish coming up with a plan later. Code *shooting star*.”

Hattie and Plum nodded. *Shooting star* meant keeping something secret from Mom. It was one of the Snolly sisters’ most serious codes, along with *blackout* (which meant that one of them was in danger) and *gummy worm* (used to identify enemies). Bee would have liked for their codes to make more sense, but they had agreed to take turns choosing the words and she could never get Plum and Hattie to pick sensible ones.

Misty Cove had only one street. The street followed the curve of the bay and had a lot of potholes in it, but the

buildings were tidy and interesting in an old-fashioned way. The post office was the biggest one and had a conceited look about it, painted bright red with a gable on each side. Bee had never seen a post office that big before, but Mom had said it had been built back in the days when the post office was the most important place in town. There was also a surf shop, which had a carved surfboard with a bite in it outside; the town hall, which was made of logs; a thrift shop called Pirate's Booty; and a pub called the Musty Cave.

At either end of the cove was a headland reaching out into the sea like arms flung wide. Turning right at the Musty Cave brought you onto the lane that ran up the southern headland, with the sea roaring on both sides. The headland had three houses on it: a tiny one that Mom said belonged to an eccentric couple who didn't believe in electricity and kept three grumpy sheep in their yard; a big fancy mansion owned by people who were never there; and at the very end, with the ocean on three sides, Granddaddy's house. The northern headland had no human homes on it at all, only the dens of wolves and owls and possibly a bear or two, hidden away deep in the trees.

Looming up behind the village was a forest of dark



cedars, mossy from the mist that always hung in the air, even in summer. The cove faced the open Pacific, and the waves were wild and ferocious from their journey across the deeps.

Everything about Misty Cove was wild, Bee thought. The village seemed out of place, plunked down between the endless dark trees and the endless roar of the sea, as if it had wandered away from the other human villages and gotten lost in the wilderness, poor thing.

Bee loved it already.

Octopus Octopus Octopus was, it turned out, not just the best but the *only* restaurant in town. It was an old-fashioned brick building next to the Misty Cove post office, with a wooden sign that had a rather threatening octopus painted on it. Above the painting were the words OCTOPUS OCTOPUS OCTOPUS OCTOPUS OCTOPUS OCTOPUS OCTOPUS OCTOPUS. Bee wondered if the owner had wanted to add more Octopuses, but ran out of room.

They were led to a table by a bored-looking teenage boy. There were only eight tables, six of which were full. Granddaddy stopped at each of them for a chat on the way to their seats. He seemed to know everybody in Misty Cove.

“How are the roses, Vi?” he asked an elderly lady sit-

ting alone in front of an enormous plate of french fries covered in swirls of ketchup.

“Spotty!” she replied, licking ketchup from her thumb. “It’s been so foggy this year. Can’t grow good roses in the fog.”

“And yet yours are always magnificent,” Granddaddy said. He turned to the table beside Vi, where two police officers were seated, drinking coffee. “Looks like you two are about as busy as a beaver in a desert.”

The closer police officer gave a hoot of laughter. “We haven’t had one call today. Except from Roy Shepherd, of course—he’s been hearing strange noises in the woods again.”

They laughed together in a way that puzzled Bee. “Noises in the woods?” she asked Granddaddy. “That sounds scary.”

“The thing about woods,” Granddaddy said, “is that they’re full of strange noises, every single one. Some people just aren’t cut out to live next to them.”

Bee couldn’t help noticing there were a lot of people in Misty Cove that Dad would call *characters*, like the woman in their building back home who went everywhere with her pet cockatoo on her shoulder. Bee didn’t see any cockatoos in OOO, but there were several people

with interesting hair colors, including bright purple with green stripes; two women sitting across from each other with their eyes closed, meditating; and a group of teenagers in wet suits who seemed to be playing some sort of silent game involving invisible musical instruments.

*“There you are!”* A woman burst through the back doors alarmingly, almost slamming the Snollys into the walls. *“Thought you’d keep them from me, did you?”*

*“They only arrived today, Rainstorm,”* Granddaddy said. *“Ladies and Dore, this is Rainstorm Galaxy, the owner and head chef of OOO.”*

Rainstorm grinned at them. She had an enormous quantity of grayish blond hair that looked as if it hadn’t seen a comb in years. Her skin was tanned and leathery, and she was dressed in so many layers of sweaters and shawls and skirts and leggings that Bee couldn’t guess where they all ended and she began. *“Lovely to meet you all. Your grandfather’s told us so many stories about you girls that you’re rather famous around here. And Alice! I remember you coming in here when you were just a teenager.”*

Mom extended her hand, but instead of shaking it, Rainstorm clapped her on the shoulder. *“Let’s see . . . Theodore, of course. Then there’s Hattie, Plum, and—ah,*

the middle-sized one beside me must be Phoebe.” Rainstorm gave Bee a slightly gentler clap on the shoulder. “What a pretty thing you are! And clearly an Aquarius too. I’m right, aren’t I? I always get along with Aquariuses. What’s your birthdate?”

Bee found it hard not to groan. There was nothing sillier than astrology, in her opinion. “March fifth,” she said.

“Ah!” Rainstorm clapped her hands together. “A Pisces! Yes, my dear, you are quite *clearly* a water sign. I knew it.”

“Not really,” Bee said. “You thought I was an Aquarius.”

“What’s the special tonight, Rainstorm dear?” Granddaddy said.

“Octopus!” Rainstorm said. Granddaddy joined in as she went on, “Octopus, octopus, octopus!” They burst out laughing.

“There you go,” Granddaddy said, nudging Bee. “Can’t visit OOO without getting the full experience.”

Bee wasn’t sure that *the full experience* was entirely necessary in this instance, but she kept that to herself. She stared at her menu. “Does *everything* have octopus in it?”

“Why not?” Rainstorm said, which struck Bee as a particularly unhelpful reply.

“I’m a vegetarian,” Hattie said, frowning. “I guess I’ll just get a milkshake. That can’t have octopus in it.”

Rainstorm nodded. “Little to none.” She paused. “Wait—which milkshake do you mean? Chocolate or vanilla?”

Dore chose that moment to let out one of his ear-splitting seagull squawks. Far from looking alarmed, Rainstorm beamed.

“Marvelous!” she said. “Does he do any other sounds?”

A dog *woofed* somewhere outside. Dore let out his own *woof*, so realistic that several customers turned to stare at him. Dore could impersonate anything. His favorite sounds were cat sounds—he could purr so well that it was often difficult to work out whether the sound was coming from him or Mab. It was probably why he was the cat’s favorite Snolly.

Rainstorm laughed. “Isn’t that just like a Juniper? Well, well, I’ll be back soon with your food.”

She gathered up the menus and bustled off.

“We didn’t order anything,” Hattie said.

Granddaddy waved this aside. “Rainstorm has her own way of doing things.”

“She’s weird,” Plum said.

“I hope you mean that as a compliment, daughter dear,” Mom said. “As I’ve told you, there’s nothing wrong with standing out from the crowd. Taking the road less traveled by, as the poets say.”

Plum was frowning. “I don’t want her to put an octopus in my milkshake.”

“Why did she call Dore a Juniper?” Bee said. “That’s a tree.”

“It’s also our old family name,” Granddaddy said.

“But our family name is *Snolly*,” Plum said. They had the same last name as Granddaddy, because Mom had kept the name Snolly when she got married, and then she and Dad had decided that the four of them would take Mom’s last name instead of Dad’s.

“Yes,” Granddaddy said, “but my grandmother’s name—before she got married and changed it, which most women did back then—was Lucy Juniper. She’s rather famous around here. She was a little—unusual. Our family has a reputation for that sort of thing.”

“*You’re* not unusual, Granddaddy,” Plum said.

“Well, sometimes it can skip a generation.” He tilted his head toward Mom, wiggling his eyebrows. She rolled her eyes.

“Now, where did I put my wallet?” Granddaddy patted his shorts.

“It’s right here, Dad.” Mom pointed to the wallet Granddaddy had placed on the table when they came in.

“Thank you, Alice,” Granddaddy said. “No need to look

at me like that. Everyone misplaces things on occasion.”

Granddaddy’s voice had a sharp edge to it. Suddenly, the restaurant seemed cold, and Bee felt a knot form in her stomach. Hattie’s gaze was flicking from Mom to Granddaddy. Plum didn’t seem to notice anything amiss—she was gazing into the distance with a frown, and Bee could almost *see* her imagining a milkshake dotted with suckers. Dore *woofed* again. He was always most partial to the sounds that attracted the maximum amount of stares.

“Mab!” Hattie exclaimed. The cat hopped into her lap with a feline grunt. She must have slipped in without them noticing. “You’re not supposed to follow us into restaurants.”

Mab gave her a wide-eyed look of pretend innocence and kneaded her leg.

“It’s all right,” Granddaddy said. “We’re lucky if folks remember to put on shoes around here. A cat won’t raise many eyebrows.”

Rainstorm reappeared a few moments later. Unfortunately, she had brought milkshakes, three vanilla and three chocolate.

“Thank you,” the Snollys mumbled. Bee was the first to brave a sip.

“It doesn’t taste like octopus,” she said with relief.

“The octopuses in these parts are sweet-tasting,” Rainstorm said. “Something about the water, or maybe it’s the currents. Anyway, they go with everything.”

“Oh,” Bee said faintly. She had really been hoping Rainstorm would say that the milkshake didn’t taste like octopus because she hadn’t put any in.

Rainstorm pointed at Mab, who had folded herself up in Hattie’s lap. “Do you know this one?”

“Sorry, Ms. Galaxy,” Hattie said in the over-polite voice she always used to sweet-talk grown-ups. “She’s ours. She follows us everywhere.”

Rainstorm smiled. “Isn’t that just like a Juniper? Black cat following you around. Little witch’s familiar, is she?”

Hattie and Plum grinned, predictably pleased by the comparison. They both gobbled up books about witches and magicians like candy. Bee said, “We’re not witches.”

“No, I’m sure you’re all perfectly ordinary.” Rainstorm gave an exaggerated nod. “Just as the Fairy Islands are perfectly ordinary islands.”

“Islands?” Bee said. “You mean there’s more than one?”

“The other two are very small,” Granddaddy said. “More like islets, really.”

“What’s so strange about them?” Hattie leaned so far



forward she got milkshake in her hair. Mab sniffed at her with interest.

“Has your grandfather told you nothing?” Rainstorm gave Granddaddy an astonished look. “Really, Harry. They’re going to hear stories eventually.”

“Yes, and most likely from you, Rainstorm dear. The stories are just that, girls—stories. Local superstition.”

“Why are they called the Fairy Islands?” Hattie said.

“Those aren’t official names,” Rainstorm said. “They don’t *have* official names, neither in our language nor the local First Nations tongue—those are the people who were here first; Misty Cove’s part of their traditional territory. *Fairies* are what the early colonizers called those islands.” She paused, and her voice got quiet. “Something funny happens in the waters around them at night when the moon’s out. I’ve seen it myself. A sort of *glittering*, like a doorway to another world.”

Even Mom looked intrigued. Bee exchanged a look with Granddaddy. He seemed to be suppressing a smile, and winked at her. She hid her own smile and winked back.

“Very poetic, Rainstorm,” Granddaddy said. “I should note, though, that plenty of things can explain such a phenomenon. The moonlight reflecting on the water, for instance.”

“Or bioluminescence,” Bee said. “Fireflies have bioluminescence—that just means they light up—but some algae do too. I have several species of algae in my collection back home—”

“Oh boy,” Hattie muttered, rolling her eyes. “We’re back to smelly green things again.”

“Has anyone seen any fairies?” Plum demanded. She was downing her milkshake in steady slurps, octopus forgotten, her gaze fixed on Rainstorm.

“That I can’t say,” said Rainstorm, which Bee guessed meant *No*. “But the Fairies are a funny place. An in-between, elsewhere sort of place. Caught between land and sea, islands and not-islands. All such places are sources of magic—everybody knows that.”

“Oh, everybody,” Granddaddy agreed. Bee smothered a laugh behind her hand.

“Don’t let this old skeptic put you off,” Rainstorm said, poking Granddaddy in the arm. “I’ve traveled all over the world, and rarely have I seen a place with as many stories attached to it as the Fairies. Your family’s part of those stories, and I think that’s something to be proud of. Why, at least half of the tales are about old Lucy Juniper—she’s a real legend if I ever—”

“Thank you, Rainstorm,” Granddaddy said. His tone

was light, but a frown had come over his face at the mention of Lucy Juniper. “My grandmother was a firecracker, all right. But I’m not sure the girls need to hear the tall tales people tell of her—they’re not all kind, as you know.”

Rainstorm sniffed at that, but she didn’t argue. She gave Mab a pat, then went to check on another table.

Hattie leaned toward Bee. “We have *got* to go to those islands.”

Bee nodded. She glanced at Granddaddy—he was still frowning slightly. Every fairy tale had a bit of truth in it somewhere—that’s what Mom always said. What truths were the Fairy Islands hiding?

# The Islands of Elsewhere

By Heather Fawcett



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

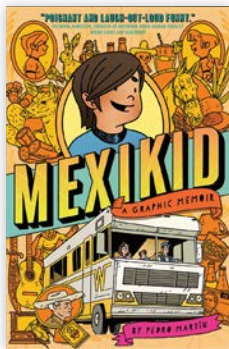
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## Mexikid

By Pedro Martín

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A poignant, hilarious, and unforgettable graphic memoir about a Mexican American boy's family and their adventure-filled road trip to bring their abuelito back from Mexico to live with them.

Pedro Martín has grown up hearing stories about his abuelito—his legendary crime-fighting grandfather who was once a part of the Mexican Revolution! But that doesn't mean Pedro is excited at the news that Abuelito is coming to live with their family. After all, Pedro has eight brothers and sisters, and the house is crowded enough! Still, Pedro piles into the Winnebago with his family for a road trip to Mexico to bring Abuelito home, and what follows is the trip of a lifetime, one filled with laughs and heartache. Along the way, Pedro finally connects with his abuelito and learns what it means to grow up and find his grito.

# CHAPTER 1

## READY. SET. GO?!



They call me **PETER**...

but my  
**REAL** name is  
**PEDRO**.

If your family's  
from **MEXICO**,  
like mine is, you  
usually have a  
couple of names  
you can go by.

Some people go full-on Mexican  
and keep their real names.

Some of us slip and slide  
between an **AMERICAN-STYLE**  
**NAME** and a Mexican one.



I come from one big  
**MEXICAN AMERICAN** family,  
and I mean **BIG**. I'm the  
seventh of **NINE** kids!

**NINE!**

Let me introduce you:

The hastily prepared,  
beginner's guide to:  
super superficial

# The MARTÍN FAMILY!



Hey, hold on!  
Isn't "Martín" an  
American-style  
name?

Not when you pronounce it  
"Mar-teen" and roll your  
"r"s" like a fancy Spaniard.



**APÁ**  
Pedro Sr.  
(A-S.N.) \*  
**DAD**

Inventor,  
farmer, and a  
crackshot with  
a slingshot.



**AMÁ**  
Mercedes  
(A-S.N.) **MOM**

She knows how to  
heal any wound,  
real or imagined.

Plays  
harmonica!



**SALVADOR**  
AKA **CHAVA**  
(A-S.N.) **SAL**

Science  
enthusiast.

He can grow a  
beard...if he  
wanted to!



**LIDUINA**  
AKA **LILA**  
(A-S.N.) **LILA**

Historian  
and tree hugger.  
The nice one.



\*AMERICAN-STYLE NAME



**LEÓN**(A-S.N.): **LEON**

(Some of us get off easy on the name-switch thing.)

Half of the "Leon and Noe punching and pranking team."

**NOÉ**(A-S.N.): **NOE**

(pronounced "No-ee")

He loves flowers!

Kidding.  
He loves **PUNCHING.**

**RUTH**(A-S.N.): **RUTH**

(In Spanish it sounds like "Root.")

Business-minded adventurer.  
Ghost whisperer.

**HUGO**(A-S.N.): **HUGO**

('Cuz in Spanish it's "Oogo." It's a no-win scenario.)

Best guitar player in the family. Also the only guitar player in the family.

**ALEJANDRO**(A-S.N.): **ALEX**

The baby.  
All-around lovable smart-ass and poop-stirrer.

**ADÁN**(A-S.N.): **ADAM**

Half of the "Adam and Alex team of Amá's favorite kids."

He's almost totally unflappable.

**AND THEN THERE'S ME...**



Fair is fair. Here's the Martin family guide to



# PETER AND/OR PEDRO

AND/OR



**LEON & NOE**

He's not fast.

And he's weird.

**LILA**

Leave him alone. He's just creative.

That's code for "He lives in a fantasy world."

**RUTH**

That's my fault. I took him to see Star Wars once and he's never been the same since.

**SAL**

He likes comic books too. And he can draw pretty good.

**HUGO**

Except for the hands.

He sucks at hands.

**ALEX**

He collects dolls.

**ADAM**

He calls them "action figures."

**APA**

We think he should become a priest or maybe a mariachi.


Both make hundreds of dollars a weekend!

**AMA**

<He's a great translator when I have to go to the doctor or shop for a bra.

He knows a lot about bras now.>

**NOT TRUE. MOVING ON.**



Our house was built to comfortably fit a family of five. But we were a family of eleven! And we were about to get **EVEN BIGGER.**

**THE YEAR WAS 1977,  
DINNERTIME.**

"Dinnertime" was just a concept, really. With that many people in our house, you ate when you could, where you could.

We almost never ate at the dinner table at the same time.



Not because there was no room, but because we did not enjoy eating together.

Dame tu plato.

NO. NO quiero más arroz, Amá.

If you're finished, **GO!**

Are you still talking? Why are you still talking?

I have two more bites, **DUMMY!**

Because I have **INTELLIGENT** things to say.

Oooh, he called you "dummy." That's a slapping offense!

Shh. Slap him during the commercial!

Personally, I would rather focus on TV than my big brother **NOE** while I eat.

**NOE** had the most to say about...well, everything.



Especially about my **WEIGHT**.



I was the "**ROUNDEST MARTIN**," and my older brothers would never let me forget it.



Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie *Pumping Iron* had just come out, and NOE was all about muscles and fitness sayings.



Are you **STUPID NATURALLY** or **NATURALLY STUPID**?



They weren't all amazing zingers, but if you were quick enough, they could sting.





Making dumb comments about what each other looked/smelled/acted like was **SO** common in our house that it didn't really bother me.

Being **DEFINED** by what I looked/smelled/acted like was a different matter.

I am a richly layered cake of a human being once you get to know me. My **SMELL** does not define me!

**FINE!** I like sitting over here anyway!

The bar seat was really the best seat for watching TV. Unfortunately, it was also the greeter position. If anyone came through the front door, you and your dinner had to say "Hello!"

If it was a family member coming through the door, the greeting was typical big-brother stuff.

**FWIP!**

**BLOOP!**

Dude!

**BUT** if it was a guest or "compañía" that came through the door, you had to stand up, swallow fast, and make them feel welcome...



...even if you weren't sure who they were.



With compañía in the house, the next best place to sit was on the living room floor.



\*hello, hello! Come and eat!



One of my favorite shows was **HAPPY DAYS**. It was the perfect show to have on when adults were talking about **SEEMINGLY SERIOUS** matters.



All the clapping and catchphrases nicely drowned out almost all the bad news you might overhear.



But that night, two words did get through.  
**"MÉXICO"** and **"ABUELITO."**

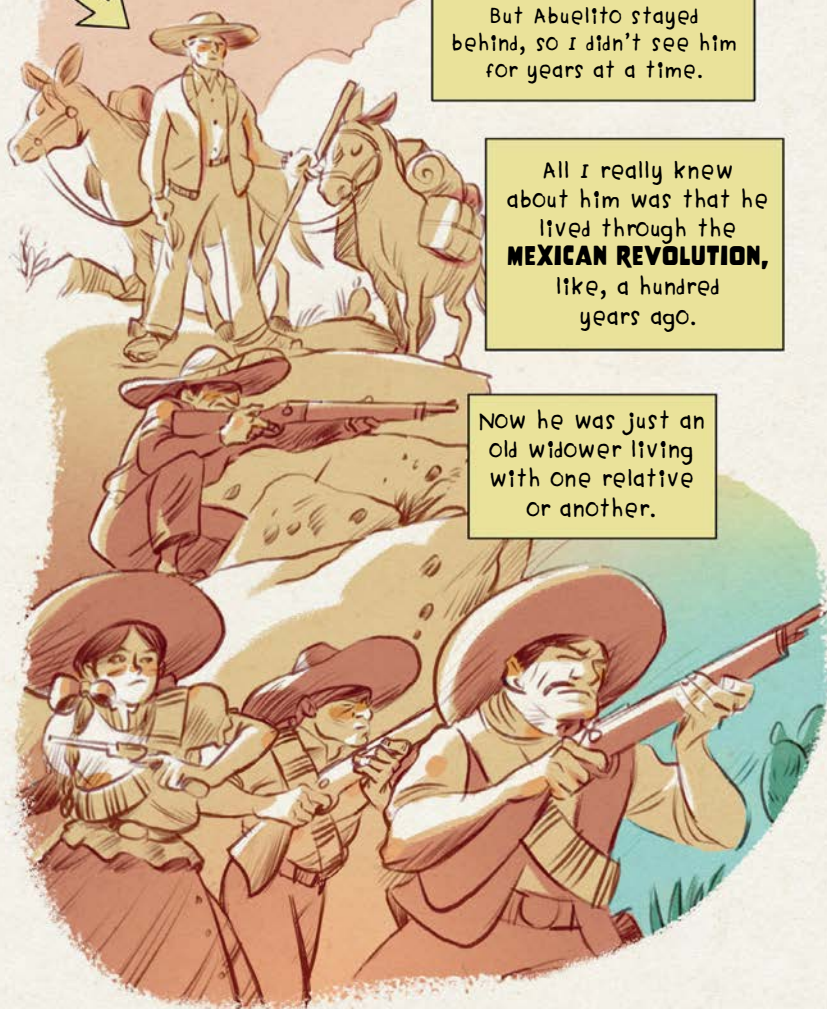
My **ABUELITO** lived thousands of miles away in **JALISCO, MEXICO.**

We'd been living in California, USA, since before I was even born. Our family moved up here to pick strawberries and start new lives.

But Abuelito stayed behind, so I didn't see him for years at a time.

All I really knew about him was that he lived through the **MEXICAN REVOLUTION**, like, a hundred years ago.

Now he was just an old widower living with one relative or another.





Suddenly, the old guy was the topic of some really **INTENSE CONVERSATIONS**.

**¡ÓRALE! NOS VAMOS EN SEIS DÍAS!\***

\*Agreed! We leave in six days!

**WAIT!** What's happening?

I think Apá said something about **GOING TO MEXICO?!**

¡Abuelito nos necesita!  
**¡ARRÉGLENSE!\***

**WHAH?!**

\*Abuelito needs us!  
Everyone get ready!

From what I could tell, we were going to **MEXICO** in six days to bring our Revolutionary War-era abuelito **HERE!** To California! **TO THIS HOUSE! TO LIVE WITH US!**

**THIS IS CRAZY!** Why does he need to come here? There's **NO** room here!

He can have the **TOP BUNK!**

I hope he brings his mules.

He's bringing his **MULES?**

Where are they supposed to sleep?

The **TOP BUNK** is free.

Yeah, Adam's bunk already smells like **"MULE."**

They'll feel right at home!

This always happened around here. **BIG DECISIONS** were made, and suddenly we all had to adjust our **ENTIRE LIVES!**

You'd think my vote would count for something here in the **USA!**

I'm kidding, we didn't vote in this house. This house was a Mexican-family-style **DICTATORSHIP.**

Ya dije, vamos a hacer espacio. Verás.\*

But why now? Why not wait until Sal moves out or Alex runs away or something?

You know, to the circus or the zoo.

Probably the zoo.

Peter, stop asking so many questions. He's our abuelito and he needs us, OK?

Get with it.

Aw, man.

\*I already said, We'll make room. You'll see.



As I walked back to my over-shared, mule-scented room, I noticed a picture of Abuelito on the fridge.



My amá had covered the fridge with all kinds of photos and souvenirs from throughout the years.

**THE BOTTOM DOOR** had pictures of all of us doing sports and wearing uniforms.

There were also pictures of aunts, uncles, and cousins from all over the place. Most of them I hadn't seen in forever.



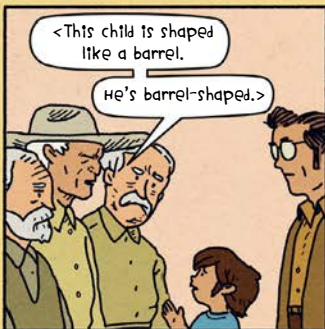
There were a couple of Abuelito too. All looking the same. Old and stern.

That was his thing. **OLD AND STERN.**



I'd see my **ABUELITO** every few years or so, but I remembered the very **FIRST TIME** I met him. I was really little and he was **SUPER OLD**, even back then.

## FAMOUS FIRST MEETINGS!



(In our family, you can either kiss an elder's hand or get pinched by an elder's hand. The choice is yours!!)



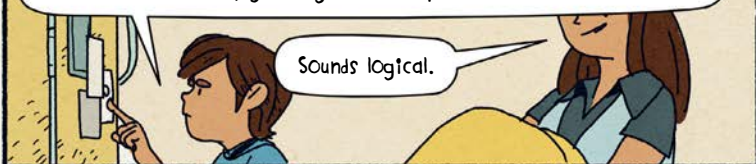
The top of the fridge had pictures too. These were mostly funeral cards and newspaper clippings. The **FREEZER DOOR** is where we displayed those of us who had **DIED**.



Are you checking to see if you're dead?

DAILY!

You always want to check and see which side of the fridge you're on. You never know, you might wake up dead and not know it.



Sounds logical.

Lila was the sibling I was closest to. She totally got me and was never mean.

You're worried about Abuelito coming to live with us, huh?

Kinda, yeah.

It'll be fine.  
It'll just take  
some time for  
him to get used  
to living here.

Well, what if he  
doesn't like us?

You mean **"YOU"**? What if he doesn't like **"YOU"**?

We won't have anything  
in **COMMON!**

Does he even like  
**STAR WARS?** Has  
he even seen it?

HOW do I even **START** to explain Chewbacca to this man?

My Spanish isn't that great,  
**AND HE SPEAKS NO ENGLISH!**

It'll be an awkward staring  
contest that will last **FOREVER!**



Dude! Star Wars has nothing on the life Abuelito has led. You should take advantage of the situation and learn about him.



I mean, if you like stories so much, there's a lot of good stuff here. Adventure, war, love...

...tragedy.

Is that Abuelita?

How'd she die, again?



It was so sad.

She ate an ice cream bar too fast and died of a brain freeze.

...

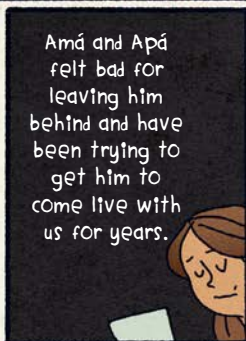
REALLY?!



Well, yes and no. It was probably an **EMBOLISM** or an **ANEURISM** that she got while eating the ice cream...

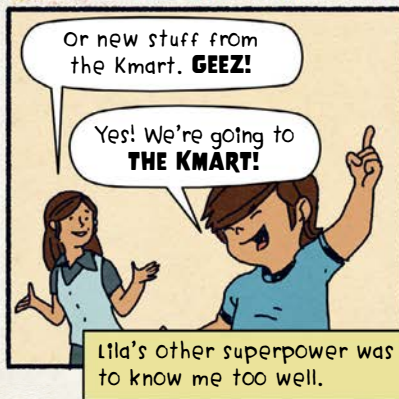
OH, WOW!











## CHAPTER 2 SOLO LO ESENCIAL

I wasn't the only one excited about going to Kmart.

We were all going to need some new stuff for the trip.

**ESTOP!**

And **EVERYONE** had their own agendas.

OK, niños, only the **ESSENTIALS**. Watch out for each other. I'll **WHISTLE** when it's time to leave!

Legend has it that all dads have this one superpower. A whistle only **THEIR** kids can hear. My dad has one, and it's crazy how well it works.

**FWEEEE**

It's not even a regular whistle. He sucks in instead of blowing out.

I can't even explain it. You kinda have to be there.

**FWip**

**FFF**

**FFFT**



When Apá told us to get **"JUST THE ESSENTIALS,"** we listened. Everyone knew exactly what was essential (to them) and scattered to the far reaches of the store to find it.



**SAL AND LEON**

"You gotta listen to the latest!"



**HUGO**

"You gotta run the fastest!"



**AMĀ AND ALEX**

"We need fresh chones\* for the youngest."



**LILA**

"I should take in the greatest."



**APĀ**


"Keep the family safest."



**PETER AND ADAM**

"This trip might as well be the funnest!"


\*Spanish slang for "underwear."

A young man with brown hair, wearing an orange polo shirt, is looking at his shirt with a satisfied expression.

Oh yeah! It's polyester!

**NOE**

"You gotta look your coolest!"

A young woman with brown hair, wearing a white and red striped shirt, is holding a green jacket on a hanger and looking at it with a disgusted expression.

Oh yeah... it's polyester!

**RUTH**

"Yuck. This stuff is the fakest."

Personally, **MY ESSENTIALS** were always superhero/Star Wars based. For the most part, everybody in our house reluctantly accepted that fact about me.

They'd even **ALMOST** gotten tired of making fun of my love of action figures. Almost.

But with Abuelito coming to stay in the same house with me, possibly even share a room with me...

...would he think I was a big weirdo?

Did the boys my age in Mexico have this sort of thing, or was it all knives and lassos over there?



Pedro, did you get everything you **NEEDED** or just everything you **WANTED**?

I'm still shopping.

**SAY**, maybe we should get something for Abuelito to make him feel more at home.

A knife or a lasso?







**He** ran a mule train between the two warring sides to make sure all the people had food to eat. It was more important and often as dangerous as shooting at people.

So he didn't fight?

**No**, but he made many decisions that changed the outcomes of several battles.



Whenever your abuelito would appear, both sides would respect a **CEASE-FIRE** in order to greet him!



Sometimes his choices in snacks would change the outcome of many important battles!







**SUDDENLY** my dad saw my mom and her loaded cart. That meant it was time to whistle for the rest of the family.



Even though most people could barely hear it, the sound traveled all over the store.





As we all walked toward the checkout, my mom called me over to show me something she was **EXCITED ABOUT**.

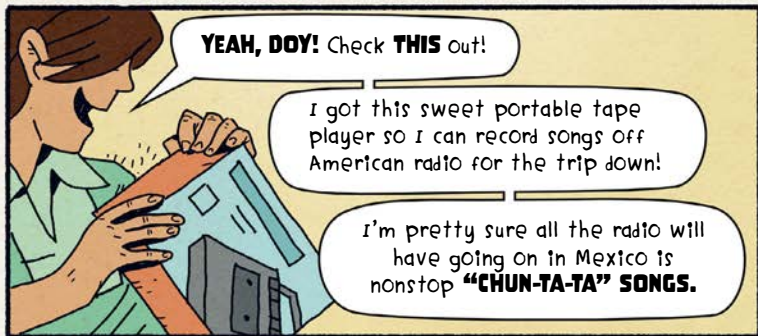
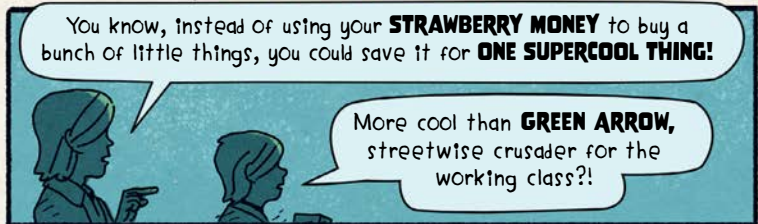


Amá really tried hard to understand my deal. She was always way off, but I loved her for **TRYING**.



\*look! I found a shirt for you! You like The Superman, right?

But because we worked really hard all summer picking strawberries, we could buy any **FOOL THING** we wanted for ourselves without **TOO MUCH** judgment.



\*No kidding, Sherlock. AKA, "Duhay" or "Duh."



# LA CHUN-TA-TA!

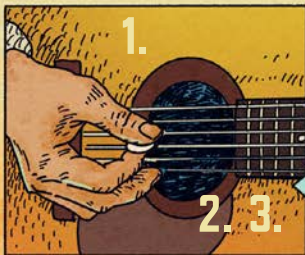
"CHUN-TA-TA" is what Mexican music sounds like to Americanized ears. It comes from the rhythm of the guitar part in a Mexican "conjunto" or a "Mariachi."

My apá **LOVES IT**. He says it's in his blood. In Leon's blood, though, is mostly "Today's Top 40 hits and R&B favorites."

## THIS IS HOW IT WORKS:

"CHUN" is the down beat on the guitar.

"TA" is what the upbeat sounds like.



"De la Sierra Morena, celtito lindo, vienen bajando, Un par de ojitos negros, celtito lindo, de contrabando."

And depending on how many "TA-TAS"\* follow, that tells you what kind of song it is!

For example:  
"Chun-Ta-Ta" (Two "tas")  
is a **WALTZ**!

And LEON famously hated **WALTZES**.

I wasn't a fan either...

I preferred a rousing TV show theme song.

So that gave me a great idea.

\* "Ta-tas." Tee-hee.



**THAT SETTLED IT!** This trip felt like it was going to be different from other trips.

This time I was going to have **THE FONZ** and all my American TV shows with me by my side!





## CHAPTER 3 EL MOTORHOME

We went to Mexico every once in a while. Usually around Christmas. School was out and there were no strawberries to be picked.

This time was going to be a little different.



Apá said I can drive us older kids to Mexico in the truck!

And Leon is adding a cassette tape deck! Oh, man. This is going to be one super-mellow musical journey!

Oh no.



Yeah! Fleetwood Mac!

Apá, for safety reasons, can you disconnect that tape player?

Yeah, we can't guarantee Sal's safety if we have to listen to that music for two thousand miles.



My parents' hometown was more than **TWO THOUSAND** miles away on the west coast of Mexico.

In the past, when we were super little, we could all cram into a station wagon like so much baggage.



USA  
California

WATSONVILLE

LOS ANGELES

TIJUANA

BAJA CALIFORNIA

SONORA

GOOD OL'

MEXICO

DURANGO

SINALOA ZACATECAS

SEA OF CORTES

BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR

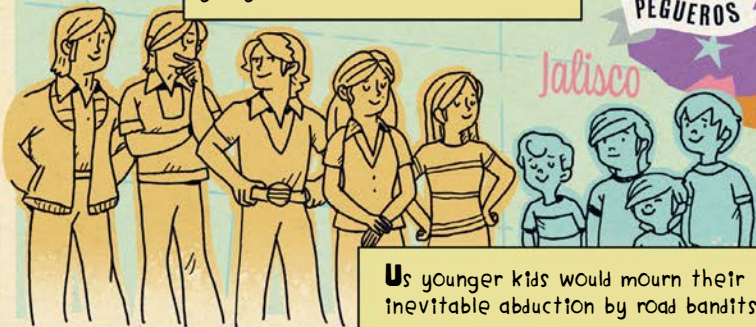
OR we would caravan with my uncle Rafa and his family.



But **THIS TIME**, the older kids were going to **DRIVE THEMSELVES!**

PEGUEROS

Jalisco



Us younger kids would mourn their inevitable abduction by road bandits.



## MY PARENTS ARE FROM MEXICO!

Pedro Sr. (Apá)

My older siblings were born in Old Mexico, but they moved to the USA when they were really young.



We had kind of a rivalry between the Mexican-born kids and the American-born kids.

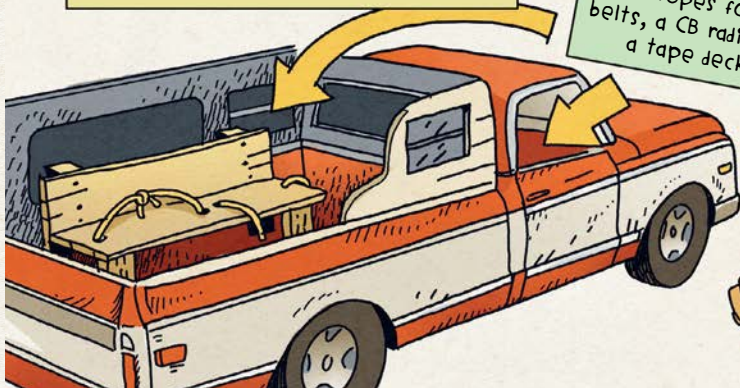


We called them the **BARN BABIES** because they were born at home in an adobe barn with cattle around. Probably.

THEY 100%  
HAD TO POOP  
OUTSIDE!

**MEXICO** was totally in their blood. They spoke Spanish before they ever even heard a word of English, so they felt confident about driving down on their own in Dad's "custom" pickup truck.

It had ropes for seat  
belts, a CB radio, and  
a tape deck!





THEY'RE 100% AUTHENTIC MEXICAN!

Mercedes (Amā)

The four youngest of us were born in the USA right after my family moved here.

Hugo

Pedro Jr.

Adam

Alex

SOMEWHAT MEXICAN

The older kids called us  
**HOSPITAL BABIES.**

WE 100%  
POOPED  
INSIDE!  
MOSTLY.

When my family got to the US, there were no good **ADOBE BARNS** in Los Angeles to give birth in, so Mom decided to give the **HOSPITAL** a try.

We had to learn English and Spanish at the same time. **AMĀ** only spoke **SPANISH**, so our house had both languages. Our Spanish was not great.

**MEXICO** could prove to be a challenge for us hospital babies and our limited "Mexicanity," so we would stick close to our folks in the **MOTORHOME.**

It was Apā's pride and joy. He considered it **VERY FANCY AND LUXURIOUS** for what he paid.

He bought it really cheap because the previous owner had recently died under suspicious circumstances.

**RUTH** swore that they had died in the motorhome itself. She said it was probably **HAUNTED.**



HEY! LET'S TAKE A FANCY TOUR OF  
THE MARTIN FAMILY'S FANCY,  
BARGAIN-PRICED...

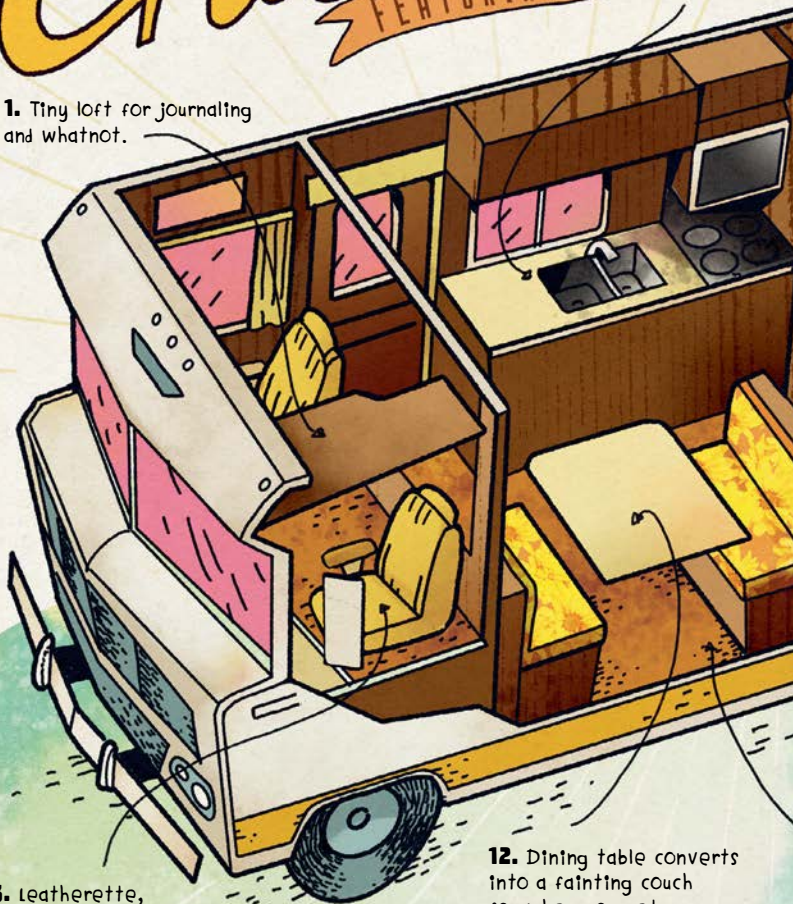
WINNER AGO

# Chieftain

FEATURING:

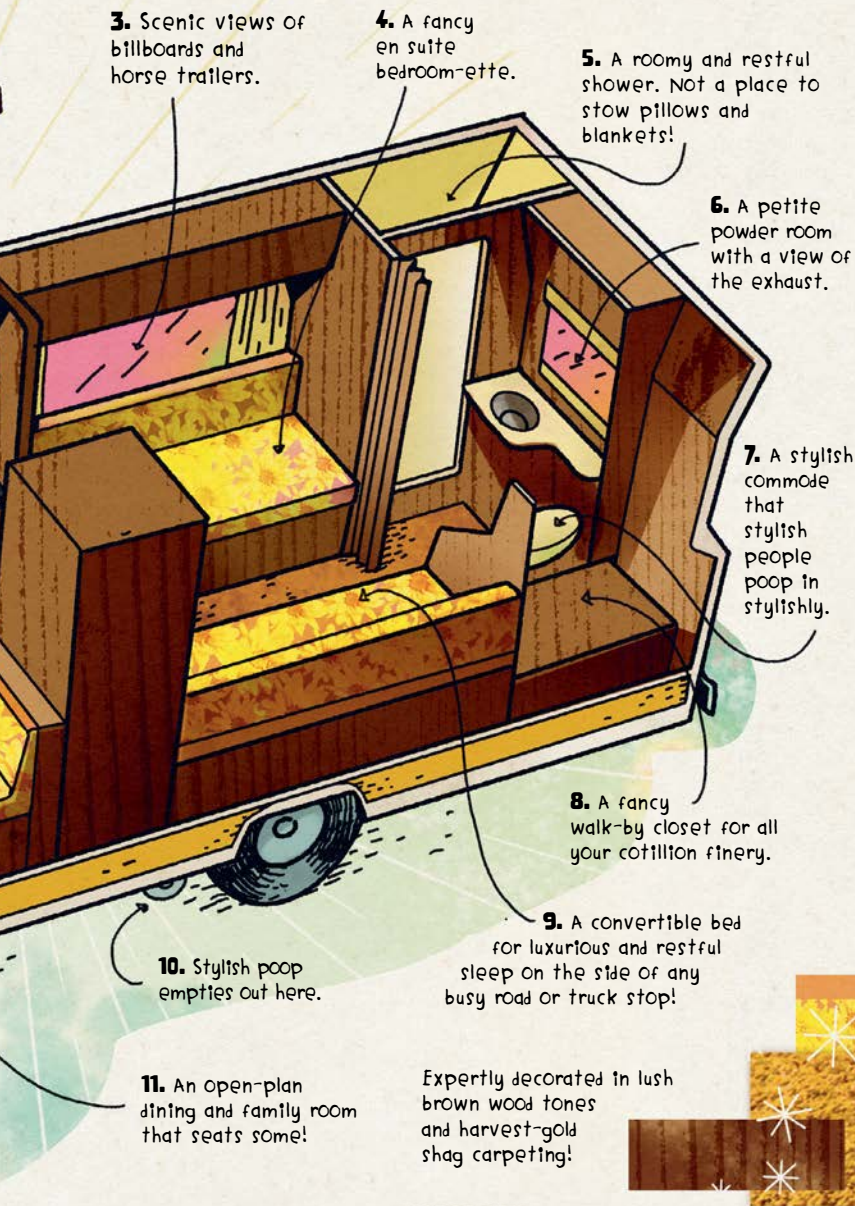
2. A fancy  
Kitchenette.

1. Tiny loft for journaling  
and whatnot.



13. Leatherette,  
comfort-plus  
Captain Kirk chairs!

12. Dining table converts  
into a fainting couch  
for when you get  
the vapors!



**3.** Scenic views of billboards and horse trailers.

**4.** A fancy en suite bedroom-ette.

**5.** A roomy and restful shower. NOT a place to stow pillows and blankets!

**6.** A petite powder room with a view of the exhaust.

**7.** A stylish commode that stylish people poop in stylishly.

**8.** A fancy walk-by closet for all your cotillion finery.

**9.** A convertible bed for luxurious and restful sleep on the side of any busy road or truck stop!

**10.** Stylish poop empties out here.

**11.** An open-plan dining and family room that seats some!

Expertly decorated in lush brown wood tones and harvest-gold shag carpeting!



My dad wasn't just into fancy stuff, he liked practical rides too.

The girls should be safe and comfortable in the front cab, not in back like animals.

HA!

He customized our pickup truck camper shell and a homemade wooden bench seat with **ROPES FOR SEAT BELTS**.

Let's see...the rabbit goes around the tree...

VROOOOM!

Like all dads, Mexican dads insist on **SAFETY PRIMERO!**

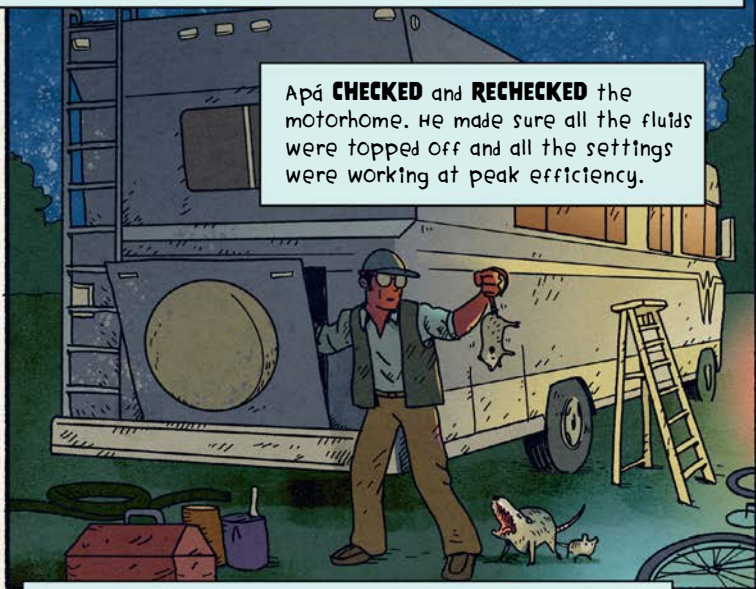
STOP! I'M NOT  
TIED DOWN  
YET!!

SMACK!

BOOM!

THUNK!

The night before we left, my parents worked for **HOURS ON END** to make sure we had everything we needed **PACKED AND SECURED** for the long trip ahead.



Apá **CHECKED** and **RECHECKED** the motorhome. He made sure all the fluids were topped off and all the settings were working at peak efficiency.

Not unlike **HAN SOLO** and the **MILLENNIUM FALCON**, my father had made a few modifications to the Winnebago Chieftain that were uniquely its own.



Please tell me you're not making seat belts out of those.

NO.

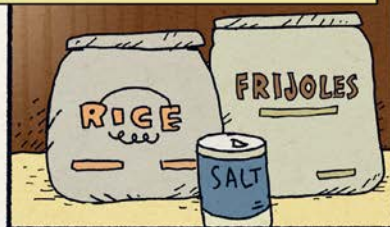
But that's a good idea!



While Apá tended to the motorhome itself, Amá organized **EVERYTHING ELSE.**



She had meals upon meals planned.



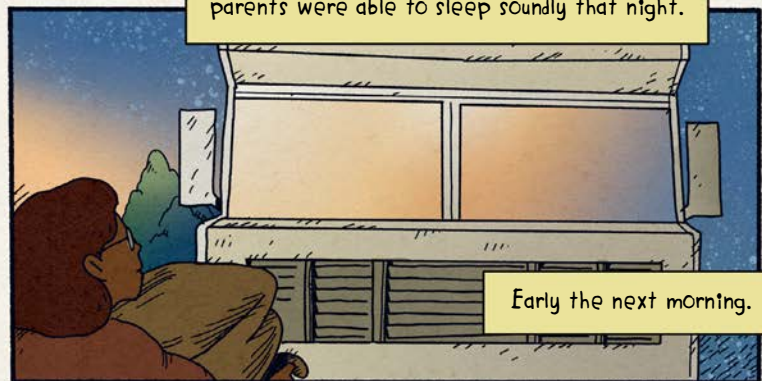
She anticipated every emergency...



And she made sure we had **ALL THE COMFORTS OF HOME.**



So, with everything stowed away in its logical place and the motorhome finely tuned, my parents were able to sleep soundly that night.



Early the next morning.



¡NO hemos ni  
saltado! ¿Por qué  
hay Cheerios  
aplastados en la  
alfombra?\*



So with everything stowed away in its logical  
place...**AGAIN!** We were good to go!

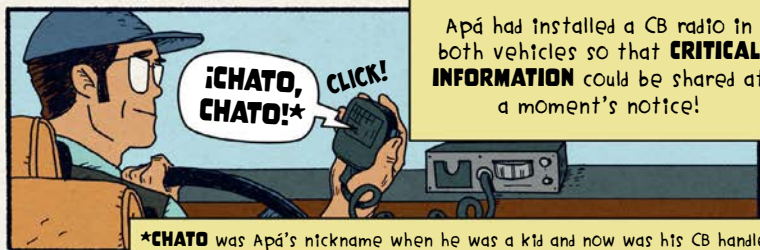


\*We haven't  
even left the  
driveway! Why  
are there  
crushed Cheerios  
on the carpet?

\*Put on your seat belts! (ironically, we passengers had no seat belts.)



Just like that, the **MILLENNIUM FALCON** blasted its way out of Mos Isley space port.



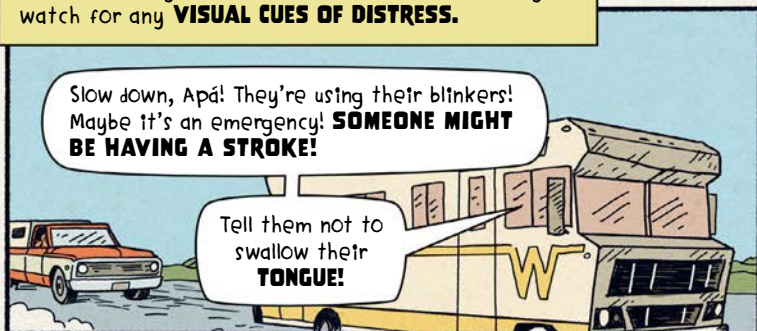
Apá had installed a CB radio in both vehicles so that **CRITICAL INFORMATION** could be shared at a moment's notice!

\***CHATO** was Apá's nickname when he was a kid and now was his CB handle.



The CB radio worked like **A CHARM!**

The other way we communicated was to carefully watch for any **VISUAL CUES OF DISTRESS**.



It was my self-proclaimed job to look out the petite powder room window and keep an eye on the truck. Whenever I lost sight of them, I would make Apá aware with the proper amount of urgency.



If it wasn't for all the shows and music we taped, we would have lost our minds. We had recorded a whole bag full of cassettes that would surely last **THE WHOLE TRIP.\***

\*Leon rented me the tape player for \$5 a day. Ruth brokered that bargain!



The **GREAT THING** about the tape player was the ability to **REWIND IT!** A thing not possible on the TV and radio. So, if you wanted to hear "Shipoop!" from the TV broadcast of Meredith Wilson's The Music Man three times in a row, **YOU COULD!**



That would make everyone go **VIOLENTLY INSANE!**



My brothers and I loved each other enough not to draw blood, but not enough that we didn't cause a bruise or some kind of psychological damage.





You can punch someone through a pillow really hard, call them a **"FAT HEAD"** all day long but still love them enough to share a soda with them.



**CHATO, CHATO!**

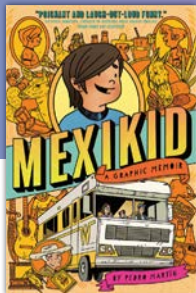
Why are you swerving?  
Is someone having  
**A STROKE?**

Don't let them  
swallow their  
**TONGUE!**



# Mexikid

By Pedro Martín



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

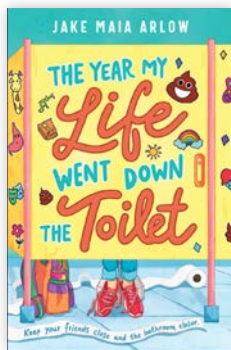
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# The Year My Life Went Down the Toilet

By Jake Maia Arlow

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A hilariously honest book about surviving middle school while navigating a chronic illness from the Stonewall Honor-winning author of *Almost Flying*.

Twelve-year-old Al Schneider is too scared to talk about the two biggest things in her life:

1. Her stomach hurts all the time and she has no idea why.
2. She's almost definitely 100% sure she likes girls.

So she holds it in . . . until she can't. After nearly having an accident of the lavatorial variety in gym class, Al finds herself getting a colonoscopy and an answer—she has Crohn's disease.

But rather than solving all her problems, Al's diagnosis just makes everything worse. It's scary and embarrassing. And worst of all, everyone wants her to talk about it—her overprotective mom, her best friend, and most annoyingly her gastroenterologist, who keeps trying to get her to go to a support group for kids with similar chronic illnesses. But who wants to talk about what you do in the bathroom?

## Chapter One

### AN UNFORTUNATE GURGLE

Some “scientists” claim that everybody poops.

Which *might* be true, but I have a hard time believing it.

I’m not saying I want to see some proof, because that would be disgusting. But if everybody poops . . . how come no one talks about it?

And even if everybody *does* poop—which, as I mentioned, I don’t believe—I’m pretty sure no one on Earth *thinks* about pooping as much as me. Not because I want to think about it—I don’t. I’d rather think about anything else, such as being mauled by a walrus or having my face eaten by a bunch of tiny cute mice.

But the problem is, my body *makes* me think about it. My stomach hurts *all the time*—at home, at school—and especially during gym class.

I wish that my brain didn’t have to be attached to my body. Having flesh and bones and arms and legs and intestines is the cause of almost all my problems. If I were just a brain in a jar connected to a supercomputer, I’d never worry about having stomach pain or pooping or doing



something embarrassing. No one would be able to tell if I was a kid or an adult or someone with a messed-up stomach or a normal one. No one would be able to tell if I was a girl or a boy or maybe something else.

But I'm not a supercomputer, so I have to run laps.

"Do you think the Addisons sweat at all?" That's Leo. He's not a fan of gym either.

We've been walking around the track for like fifteen minutes, and at this point my pit stains have pit stains.

All the other gym classes got to stay inside today, but Mr. DiMeglio used to be a professional wrestler, so he's really hard on us. He doesn't care that it's a hundred million degrees on the track.

"No, definitely not," I whisper to Leo, watching as the Addisons—Madison and Addison—lap us for the second time. "They're robots."

Madison and Addison (yes, those are really their names, and yes, it's annoying) are best friends, and they're both super athletic. They never post pictures on IG without each other, and all their posts get a ton more likes than everyone else in seventh grade, and sometimes more than people in eighth.

Leo and I are not friends with the Addisons. We're pretty much only friends with each other.

"Wanna know what my Italian teacher told us last period?" Leo asks as we walk to the outermost lane of the track to let everyone pass us.

"That you should've taken Spanish with me?"

He rolls his eyes. “No, he said it’s the language of *opera*.” Leo turns to me and grins, and then, when he’s sure no one’s listening, he imitates an opera singer, arms outstretched. “*CIAO, MI CHIAMO LEOOOOOO*.” He sings it so that only I can hear, and I can’t help but laugh.

“What does that even mean?”

He slips his hands into his khaki shorts’ pockets. He never changes for gym if he can help it, and I don’t blame him. I always wear shorts or sweatpants and a T-shirt on gym days and then swap whatever shirt I wore to school for a baggier, dirtier one that hides my body.

“It means ‘Hi, my name is Leo,’” he tells me. “It’s the only thing I know how to say in Italian so far.”

We both lose it at that, giggling so hard that we have to stop walking.

“Leonard! Alison! This isn’t the mall! I want to see you jog!” Mr. DiMeglio shouts at us from his lawn chair. Yup, his *lawn chair*.

Leo and I cringe. Neither of us likes our real first names—we’re Leo and Al, thank you very much, but Mr. DiMeglio never calls us that.

I swing my arms a little so it looks like I’m jogging, but Leo *actually* starts jogging, so I run to catch up.

“I hate him,” he mutters. “‘This isn’t the mall’? Who says that? What does that even *mean*?”

“Don’t listen to him,” I tell Leo. “Remember when they fired him from Positive Youth Development for being too negative?”

Leo shrugs, but he keeps jogging. After a minute he asks, “So, did your mom make you that doctor’s appointment yet?”

I look behind us to check that no one heard. “Not here,” I whisper, then run ahead, even though the bouncing makes my stomach clench. Because we can’t talk about this in public.

I’ve had stomach problems for a while, but they got really bad last winter. I tried to hide them from my mom, except she saw how often I was in the bathroom, and now I have to go to the most embarrassing doctor to ever exist (a *poop* doctor—yup, you read that right) even though I’m basically fine. I didn’t want Leo to find out, but my mom told his mom, and now he knows, through the mom-gossip grapevine.

After a minute of running in silence, we somehow get lapped by the Addisons *again*. And that’s when it hits me.

First, there’s the gurgle. Next, there’s that *feeling*, the one where all I can think about is what’s happening in my intestines. I want to stop jogging, or maybe scream, or just not be on this horrible, too-hot track in the first place.

I try to hold it in. I try, I try, I try. But I don’t think I can. I skid to a halt and dig my fingers into my hands and groan because what am I even supposed to do? I don’t have time to run inside the school to get to a bathroom.

Leo turns to me, his eyes wide. “Do you need me to do anything?” He must realize what’s happening even though I’ve done my best to hide my emergencies from him.

DiMeglio blows his whistle and shouts something at me as I shake my head at Leo, because I'm beyond help.

Then I see it: a porta potty off in the distance.

I take off. The only thing that exists in the whole world is the porta potty on the other side of the track and my messed-up stomach on this side. I'm sprinting, running faster than I ever have in my life.

I fling the porta potty door open. It smells like rotting garbage, but there's nothing I can do about that. I rush to put toilet paper over the seat the way my mom taught me when I was little.

Then: relief.

Pure relief.

For, like, two seconds.

Before I realize what just happened.

My entire gym class watched me run into a porta potty.  
A PORTA POTTY.

I have to drop out of school. That's my only option.

I guess I *could* say I threw up, because for some reason vomiting is less embarrassing than pooping. I bend over and put my head between my knees as a particularly painful bout of *you-know-what* happens.

I wish I could jump into the porta potty.

But I know it'll get worse the longer I stay in here, so as soon as I'm done, I pump some of the gross old soap residue onto my palm and walk out into the bright September day.

Everyone's huddled together by the edge of the track. I walk over as quietly as I can, hoping no one will notice me,

but as I make my way to the edge of the group, Mr. DiMeglio looks up and says, “Glad to have you back, Alison,” and the Addisons whisper to each other and start giggling.

Gym class should be illegal. I wish I had hopped into the porta potty when I had the chance.

Mr. DiMeglio tells us that we’re running the mile next week, and Leo leans over and whispers, “You all right?”

I stare at the yellowing grass.

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

## Chapter Two

### MY KISHKES

**“You *sure* you’re** okay?” Leo asks as we walk home from school later that day.

Gym is the only class we have together, so he hasn’t seen me since The Incident.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. I’m really not, but he doesn’t need to know that. It’s bad enough that he knows about my stomach problems in the first place. “But can you *promise* not to say anything to either of our moms?”

He looks up at me—and he has to look waaay up, because I’m a full head taller than him—and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Yeah,” he says. “Promise.”

I smile at him, relieved. At least Leo has my back, even if my mom doesn’t. She’s convinced I have a “real problem,” when the cold hard truth is I’m just a kid who poops a lot. It’s fine. I’ll go to this special doctor and she’ll fix me up and I’ll never have a porta potty emergency ever again.

Leo and I only live a few blocks from school, but my back’s already sticky with sweat from carrying all the giant books we need for seventh grade.



I'm debating just letting my backpack crush me so that I never have to set foot in our school again when Leo asks, "Did you see the club flyers in the hallway?"

I snort. Leo and I aren't club people. "Yeah, I saw," I tell him. "Who would want to be in the *Ice Cream Crew*? What do they even *do*?"

"Maybe they go out for ice cream?"

"This is why we don't need stuff like that," I say, putting a clammy hand on his shoulder. "We can get ice cream on our own, just the two of us, and we don't have to deal with other kids or the teacher advisors. I bet they don't even let you get sprinkles."

"I guess." Leo shrugs. "But maybe we could join *something*. I'm sure not all the club people are like the Addisons."

"No, some of them are like *Duke Waters*, who's even worse."

(Duke set the boys' bathroom on fire last year during a Model UN competition.)

Leo shakes his head. "I don't know, maybe there's a club that could be fun for us to join together."

"We have a club," I tell him. "It's the AI and Leo Club, and it meets daily in your bedroom."

I should probably mention that Leo and I live together. Not, like, *together* together. But we live on the same floor of the same building. Which is kind of incredible, because I'm like ten feet away from him at all times.

But the best part of living in the same building as him is

that our apartments are directly above his mom's bakery, so it smells amazing *all the time*.

"I like our club," Leo admits.

"See?" I tell him, hiking my brick-filled backpack farther up on my shoulders. "That's the only group we need."

We arrive at our building and open the door to Klein's Kosher Bakery, and we're blasted with cold air and the scent of Jewish desserts.

"Well, look who it is!" Leo's mom, Beth, says from behind the counter.

She washes her hands and runs over to give Leo a hug and a kiss, and then she pulls me in for a hug too.

People in the store always mistake me for Beth's daughter, probably because we're both white and Jewish and tall and lanky and have light-ish brown hair. (Honestly, sometimes I wish she *were* my mom. She's funny, she bakes, and she doesn't ask me about my stomach.)

But people never randomly guess that Leo is Beth's kid, which makes all of us super mad, and no one more than Leo. He looks more like his dad, who is Filipino and lives in New Jersey—he's short and chubby and has light-brown skin.

"Can I interest you two in the challah nub?" Beth asks.

Leo turns to me and grins, and I fake a grin back. Normally, I'd be super excited about the challah nub—the end of the challah that she doesn't turn into French toast or sandwiches—but today my stomach hurts too much to even think about eating.

“Yes *please*,” Leo says, and Beth brings it out for us on a paper plate.

“But save your appetites, okay?” she says before she hands it to us. “We’re having dinner together tonight.”

“*All of us?*” Leo and I exchange glances. We usually have dinner in our own apartments with our own moms. Sometimes we’ll light Shabbat candles and have dessert together, but, yeah. Dinner is separate.

“Yup!” Beth says, and her smile gets too big.

“Why are you being weird?” Leo asks.

“Not weird,” she says quickly. “We just thought it might be fun! Celebrate the first few weeks of the school year, that kind of thing.”

“Okay . . .”

Luckily, a customer walks in, and we’re spared any more of whatever that was. Leo perches on a stool at a small café table with the plate, but I tug on his shirt and usher him over to the stairwell before he gets too comfortable.

The fire door slams shut and drowns out the bakery sounds and smells, and we plop down on the concrete stairs.

“Why can’t we sit down there and eat?”

I look at the plate of food, and my stomach makes an audible gurgle.

His eyebrows scrunch up. “Are your *kishkes* still hurting?”

“A little,” I say, but my *kishkes* betray me by gurgling again. Leo calls them that because it’s what Beth says; it

means “guts” in Yiddish. “But it’s fine, you eat it. I’m not hungry.”

He gives me another look as he takes a bite of the nub. I wish I *could* eat it. Leo’s mom’s challah is my favorite food. It’s fluffy on the inside and salty on the outside and it melts on my tongue (well, it does when I can eat it without needing to run straight to the bathroom).

“Why do you think we’re having dinner together?” Leo asks.

“Maybe the landlord raised the rent again?” That’s happened before, but it’s not usually a group discussion. I don’t tell Leo that I think it’s because of my stomach. That maybe my mom is going to try to have an apartment-wide talk about how sick I am and how everyone should try to be extra careful around me. She’ll tell them they need to make sure I’m eating the “right” things, like you’d do with a baby when they have too much mush and spit up all over themselves.

But I’m not a baby; I know how to take care of myself.

“What if location scouts came by and they decided our apartment was the perfect place to film their movie?” Leo asks, getting excited. “Remember when they did that at the Main Street theater?”

I nod and laugh a little, but I don’t think that’s what this is.

When the Hollywood people came to our town, Leo freaked out. He was practically bursting with excitement, and he forced me to go down to Main Street with him so

we could casually stroll by the film set. He thought maybe if we walked back and forth enough times, one of the casting directors would spot him and shout *YOU'RE PERFECT!* and make him the star of the movie. But when we were a few blocks away from the set, he chickened out and we ran back to our apartment and ate day-old cake instead.

"Do you wanna practice the song later?" I ask, changing the subject. Just thinking about what this dinner could possibly mean is making my stomach hurt. "We could play it for our moms tonight."

"Yes!" He jumps up from the stair he was sitting on. "We *have* to."

Leo and I do this thing where we write really weird songs and perform them for our parents. Well, Leo performs. I sit in the background and play my ukulele. He's too shy to talk in class, but he's amazing when he's singing for our moms. I don't like to be in the spotlight, but I love being Leo's backing band, so we're the perfect duo.

The only place we ever play our songs is in our apartments. You couldn't pay me a trillion dollars to perform at the school talent show or something like that. It would be like having a big sign over my head that said LOOK AT ME AND JUDGE ME!

I know Leo feels the same way, like how he didn't want anyone but me to hear his opera singing on the track even though he's actually pretty good.

"Ecretsay andshakehay?" Leo asks me as we climb the

rest of the way upstairs to the hall between our two apartments.

“Ofyay oursecay.”

He just asked if I wanted to do our secret handshake, and I said of course.

Leo and I taught ourselves pig Latin last summer so that we could talk about whatever we wanted without our moms picking up on it. We mostly ended up talking about YouTubers, but it’s nice to have the option.

Our handshake starts off with a double high five, then we grab each other’s hands and cross them. Next, we release them with an explosion sound.

Leo jumps and points to me. “All!”

I point to him. “Leo!”

We wrap our bent index fingers around each other and say “Arrrr” (because they look like pirate hooks when they’re crossed like that).

The grand finale is lifting our entwined fingers toward the sky and shouting “MATEYS FOR LIFE!”

We’re both a little out of breath after doing our handshake, grinning at each other. Maybe our performance will help Leo forget about my stomach stuff.

“Meet in your room for rehearsal later?” Leo asks. “I just have to do some homework.”

“Sounds good.”

We wave goodbye, then head into our separate apartments, only feet apart. It’s the best of both worlds: He’s



close when I need him, but we don't share a bathroom. It's comforting to know that Leo's just across the hall.

When I walk into the living room, my mom's watching TV on the couch. She pauses it when she sees me and gives me her undivided attention, even though I'd prefer if it was a little more divided.

"How's your stomach feeling today?"

"Fine," I tell her, crossing my arms.

I can't believe *that's* the first thing she asks when I come home from school. Actually, I guess I *can* believe it, since all she's been able to talk to me about since my stomach started hurting is, well, my stomach.

She stands up from the couch and takes my backpack from me, letting it fall onto the floor near the kitchen table.

"I can do that myself," I mumble.

She must not hear me, because after she's done she asks, "Want a snack?" as she opens the fridge. "I got you some plain applesauce from work. I read on this cute little blog that it's easy on the stomach."

I shake my head. "I already had some challah," I tell her, even though it's a lie. I don't need a special diet just because my stomach hurts. I can eat what I want.

She frowns. "Are you sure that's good for you?"

I shrug and make an *I don't know* sound in the back of my throat.

"You don't want to hurt yourself more by eating the

wrong things,” she says, and when I shrug in response yet again, she *tsks*, which makes me want to scream.

She’s being all, “Oh, Al, do you need applesauce?” or “Oh, Al, here’s this food tip I saw from a post on Facebook” (Facebook!!) or “Oh, Al, I saw on a YouTube video that nuts give you diarrhea, so I picked them out of your salad.”

Maybe when I go to the doctor, she can fix my stomach *and* calm my mom down.

“I’m going to my room,” I tell her.

But of course, before I can settle in, my stomach clenches and I run to the bathroom.

It’s a relief to be completely alone and to sit on the toilet for as long as I want. Sometimes I rest here until my feet get all tingly from being in the same position for so long. It sounds weird, but it’s almost better to just stay put so that if another wave hits, I’m already where I need to be. When I’m done pooping, I flop onto my bed and rest on my stomach, which is the comfiest position for me. Even once I’ve pooped out most of the pain, it still feels better.

It’s also the perfect position to scroll through TikTok for hours. My mom doesn’t *technically* let me have social media, but she doesn’t check my phone.

The TikTok I’m scrolling on now isn’t even my main one. This is my TikTok that no one at school follows or knows about—my secret backup account—where I watch what I actually want without the Addisons’ dancing videos ruining my algorithm.

My For You page is a mix of stuff, but it’s mostly videos

of girls who like girls. It's kind of wild that TikTok knows I want to see those kinds of videos, because that means it knows I feel the same way.

That I like girls, I mean. That I have crushes on them. It's not a big deal, but I don't want to tell people. Not even Leo. It's one thing to have my stomach hurting all the time and be sick or whatever the doctor's going to tell me, but I don't need my best friend to know about my random crushes too.

But on my backup TikTok, I can be someone else entirely. I can be my full queer self, and comment on girls' TikToks, telling them they look cute or that I like their outfit, even if the outfit is just a giant thrifted sweatshirt with an embroidered prairie dog on it. None of them know about my stomach, they just know I'm queer like them.

It's not that I'm trying to hide any of this from Leo, it's just that it would be weird to talk about people I might *like* like with my best friend. Saying I'm queer would mean telling Leo that I know I like girls. That I know I get crushes at all. That I want to kiss someone (eventually).

I think that would be embarrassing even if I were straight. It's better to just keep it in, to live life like the supercomputer without a body that I aspire to be.

I scroll through TikTok for a few more minutes. I'm exhausted from the day, but my brain is too focused on school and cute girls and the storm happening in my stomach for me to fall asleep.

It's possible that seventh grade will be the worst year of my entire life.

## Chapter Three

### THE SQUEEZING HAND OF DOOM

I **must've fallen** asleep, because I wake to my mom knocking on my door, telling me that it's time to head over to Beth and Leo's for dinner.

Her hair is wet and she's wearing makeup, which is so not like her that I have to fight the urge to laugh.

It's not that hard to "head over," because Beth and Leo's apartment is three steps away, but I tell my mom I need a minute. I figure if my mom's wearing *makeup*, then I should put in a little more effort than showing up with post-nap hair and a rumpled T-shirt.

"Can you grab this?" My mom hands me a loaf of bread once I'm changed and in the living room. "We're having turkey sandwiches."

"That's it?"

She smooths my hair down and looks me over. "It'll be easier on your stomach."

I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes. Leo always tells me about the delicious dinners Beth makes for the two

of them, like salads and stews and brisket. I thought since we were going over there, we'd have something like that. But of course my mom wouldn't want me to eat something that actually tastes good.

I stay a few steps behind her as we walk across the hall to their apartment. She opens the door without knocking, which is completely weird. Even *I* knock on the door, despite the fact that Leo has told me a million times to just come in.

"We're here."

"Kitchen!" Beth calls out.

Leo's putting napkins and utensils on the table, and my mom and I hand the sandwich materials off to Beth.

"Idday ouryay ommay elltay ouyay at'swhay oinggay onyay?" I whisper to Leo. Translation: *Did your mom tell you what's going on?*

Leo shakes his head. "Onay," he whispers back.

That one's pretty self-explanatory.

When the table's all set and we sit down to eat, Beth lets out a long sigh. "I'm so glad we could have dinner together today."

"Me too!" my mom says, and she has on that same too-big smile that Beth had earlier.

Before we eat, Beth has Leo recite a prayer over the sandwiches.

He shifts a little in his seat and glances up at me before saying super quickly, "Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam hamotzi lehem min ha'aretz."

I turn to my mom, who meets my eye. We barely know what the blessings are for, let alone how to say them. We're not that religious, though we sometimes welcome in Shabbat with Beth and Leo.

We all say amen even if we don't all know what we're saying amen to. Then we dig in.

Except . . . I don't. My stomach's been feeling this way all day—like whenever I see food, something down there knows there's too much else going on for me to even try to digest. I know that if I take even one bite of food, my stomach's going to do something horrible. It's like there's a giant hand squeezing my intestines. So while my mom and Leo and Beth take big bites of their blessed turkey sandwiches, I nibble the crust and try to look busy.

"So," Beth says in a serious tone, and I know that whatever she's about to say is the reason we're all here. "We thought it would be a good idea if the four of us have dinner together more often."

"We live across the hall from each other," my mom adds quickly. "We should be spending more time together."

I meet Leo's eyes, and he grins. "Sounds good to me."

"Me too," I say hesitantly.

"Great!" Beth says, looking relieved. "This'll be fun."

"We could even play board games!" my mom says, even though I don't think she's ever played a board game in her life.

So . . . that's it? I don't know why Beth and my mom were acting so strange if they were just going to say they

want the four of us to hang out more. I had thought they were scheming, which is my and Leo's thing, not theirs.

After that, the giant hand squeezing my intestines lets up a bit and I'm able to eat most of my turkey sandwich.

Once everyone's done, Beth grabs us dessert—some leftover apple pie that didn't sell at the bakery today—and we sit back down to eat. Leo doesn't take a single bite though, which is weird because apple pie is one of his favorite desserts. Now that I can eat, he can't.

No one talks for a few minutes while *most* of us enjoy Beth's pie.

But then my mom asks, "So how was school?" because she always picks the moment my mouth is at its fullest to ask questions.

"Fine," I say quickly. I don't add anything about what happened in gym.

Leo kicks my foot, but I still don't mention The Incident. His eyes are pleading, and I try to communicate to him that it's all good and under no circumstances should he worry about me.

"Yeah, fine," he tells my mom. "I saw some signs for clubs, and . . ."—he meets my eye, then quickly looks away—"I don't know, I was thinking about doing drama club."

I snort a little, because obviously that's a joke. Leo's too shy to perform in front of anyone but me or our moms.

"I'm serious," he says, staring at his pie slice.

"Oh."



The hand squeezing my stomach is back, but it's more than that. It's like the squeezing hand also decided to punch me while it was at it.

"I think that's great, bubs," Beth tells Leo.

"I do too," my mom says, and she smiles at Beth.

I try to get Leo to look at me again, but he's concentrating really hard on his apple pie slice. I'm just trying to figure out what's going on, how he could do something like this when he couldn't even sing fake opera on the track without making sure he wasn't overheard.

Things are majorly awkward for a second, but then Beth starts talking like Leo didn't just drop the biggest news of the century; news he didn't even bother mentioning earlier when we were talking about clubs.

There's an even stronger pang in my stomach then, and I know I'm having another emergency, like the one I had in gym.

"I, um . . . I need to go—"

I run out of the room. My mom calls out after me, but I can't stop. The panic rises in my throat, and I want to cry.

So when I make it to the bathroom in my apartment, I do.

I put my head in my hands and let it out.

It's like my stomach doesn't know how to handle everything that's going on in my life. Especially not Leo deciding to do something like drama club, something that I would never do with him. That he *knows* I would never do but wants to try anyway.

When I get off the toilet, I go straight to my room. My whole body hurts, not just my kishkes.

After a minute, there's a knock on my door.

"Al?" my mom calls.

I don't answer.

And the worst part is: Leo and I never even got to debut our song.

## Chapter Four

### LITTLE AL'S GOTTA GO

**Every other Saturday** morning, you can find me and Leo eating our weight in semi-stale rugelach and watching old episodes of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* while we wait for his dad to pick him up.

We grab all the stuffed animals from both of our beds that we probably should've outgrown years ago and make a huge, cozy pile to watch the show. I've been trying to pretend that things are normal since the other night when Leo announced that he wanted to join drama club and *I* promptly ran away to poop and cry (in that order).

Leo turns to glance at me every once in a while, looking up from the episode playing on his phone. I purposefully avoid turning toward him—I'm worried he wants to talk to me about drama club.

But once we settle into the show a bit more and relax our shoulders into each other's, everything feels almost okay.

After the episode is over, Leo packs his weekend bag and we wait for his dad in the bakery.

"You gonna be okay while I'm gone?" he asks. "Like, with the bathroom?" He hasn't checked on me like that before, but now that he's seen my gym-class emergency, there's no going back.

"I'll be fine," I insist, reaching for a raspberry rugelach to prove it. I take a bite and it's buttery and jammy and perfect, even after sitting out for a day. My stomach will be mad at me in a few minutes, but I don't need Leo worrying about me for the whole weekend.

And once I see the special doctor, he won't have to. We can go back to being Al and Leo without stomach stuff or drama club (hopefully) or anything else to ruin it.

Eventually, the door jingles and Leo's dad walks in. Any worry that Leo was feeling for me falls from his face as he grins and throws his arms around his dad.

"Hey, iho," Leo's dad, Alec, says as he wraps Leo into a hug. He looks over at me and waves. "Hi, little Al, how's it going?"

"Pretty good, big Al." It's a joke we have, since both of our nicknames are Al. It's nice to have an inside joke with Leo's dad, especially since I only really see him when he comes to pick Leo up or on special occasions. The two of them have a million inside jokes, since both Alec and Leo are hilarious. Leo told me about one where whenever either of them says the word *surely*, like, "Surely the rain will stop soon," the other says, "Don't call me Shirley!" (It's funnier if you say it out loud. Or maybe it's not really that funny if I have to explain it. Anyway.)

I like having something that's just mine and Alec's. It makes me feel like I'm part of Leo's whole life, even if that's not *necessarily* true.

Beth comes over from behind the counter and ruffles Leo's thick black hair. "Don't forget to start your English assignment."

Leo groans. "That's not due for like two weeks."

"But don't you still have to read the book?" Alec asks.

Leo looks over at me and rolls his eyes. I roll mine back in support, but there's something about seeing his parents talk to each other in that way that makes me feel a whole mess of emotions, all of which—surprise, surprise—make my stomach gurgle and ache.

Leo's parents might be divorced, but they get along super well. And Leo's dad knows everything that's going on in his life even though they only see each other every other weekend and some holidays.

My dad, on the other hand, is some random guy named Shelly who lives in Rancho Cucamonga, which is in California. I only found this out last year when my mom sat me down to have the "Dad Conversation" that she'd been promising to have for approximately my entire life. She told me that she had had something called a one-night stand, which is when you only meet someone once and then get pregnant. (Well, I don't think everyone gets pregnant from a one-night stand, but my mom did. And that's how I came into the world.)

My mom told me that if I wanted to try to reach out to

him I could, but I don't. He's not a dad like Alec. He's just some guy.

Leo runs back over to me to grab one last rugelach. "Text me how you're feeling, okay?" he asks, and I nod.

But I'm not going to, and I know he won't check in on me. We don't talk much when he's at his dad's house, because he's always having too much fun with the other side of his family.

I've asked a few times if I could go with him for his weekend sleepovers, but Beth always tells me that it's just Leo and Dad time. Which I completely understand, obviously, but I wish he didn't have to leave me for two whole days twice a month. On the plus side, though, he always brings me and Beth back ensaymadas from his dad's cousin's Filipino bakery. They're soft and cheesy and sweet and almost make up for the fact that I have to endure two endless days without Leo.

Before he goes, I tap Leo's shoulder. "Ecretsay and-shakehay?"

He nods and reaches out his hand, and we do a silent version of our secret handshake that we came up with for when we're out in public. Then Leo leaves with his weekend duffel bag and his dad, who loves him more than anything in the world.

It's the saddest part of my week, when I have to watch Leo walk out that door.

Before I know what's happening, my stomach twists along with my heart, and I'm running to the bathroom.

I don't want this to be my life anymore, one that I spend either running to the toilet or on the toilet or worried about the next time I'll have to have an extended stay on the toilet. And hopefully, if the doctor's appointment goes well, it won't be.



## Chapter Five

### NOW I HATE WINNIE-THE-POOH

**Everyone at the** children's hospital is too nice. The doctors and nurses smile these huge smiles at me like I just learned how to recite the alphabet for the first time. The person at the front desk even asks if I want a sticker. *A sticker.*

I mean, fine, I do want it, but only so I have something new to put on my water bottle. I want to text Leo about how they're all smiling at me like creepy clowns (we're both terrified of them), but I don't want to bother him while he's with his dad. He's only been gone for like a day and a half, but I've stored up about a billion things to tell him now that it's Sunday evening.

My mom taps her foot as we wait to take the elevator up to pediatric gastroenterology, which she does when she gets nervous, which makes *me* nervous.

Eventually, the elevator arrives, and we make it to the third floor. The Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition suite has giant glass doors and signs talking about how they're the best place in the country for kids who poop too much.

Okay, it doesn't actually say that, but that's the gist of it.

My mom lets the person at the front desk know we're here, and after a few minutes a nurse in Winnie-the-Pooh scrubs comes to take my vitals and bring me to the examination room.

Then, we wait, and wait, and wait, and—

“Alison?”

I nod at the person who just walked into the room, my legs bouncing as I sit in a chair that's meant for much smaller kids. “Um, it's Al.”

“Al, hi! I'm Dr. Maltz.” She reaches out her hand to me before she says hi to my mom, which is pretty cool.

Eventually, I reach my hand out too, and she smiles at me. I have to admit that it's a nice smile.

“So, what's going on?” she asks as she washes her hands and sits in front of her computer.

“Well, I've noticed that Al—” my mom starts, but Dr. Maltz interrupts her before she can embarrass me completely.

“I'd actually love it if *you* could tell me what's going on, Al,” she says, smiling at me again. My cheeks get hot, but this time I smile back at her.

“Can you talk about your symptoms?” Dr. Maltz continues. “For instance, when did they start?”

“I guess since the beginning of the school year,” I tell her, avoiding my mom's gaze. She made this appointment after noticing I was going to the bathroom a lot, but I don't want her to know *all* the details. “I'm really fine, though,” I add. “Like, it's nothing serious.”

Dr. Maltz smiles a bit at that. "How about you tell me how you've been feeling. Is it any different than it was before the start of the school year?"

"Well, like, my stomach's been hurting a bit more," I admit. "And also I've been going to the bathroom a lot and stuff like that."

Dr. Maltz nods. "That must be really tough."

"Um, kind of?" I don't want her to tell me it's tough. I *know* it's tough, I'm the one who almost pooped my pants at school. I just want her to fix what's wrong so I never have to talk about my butt again.

"And when you go to the bathroom, is there ever blood in your stool?"

My eyes almost pop out of my skull. "Stool?"

"Your poop," she says. "Just a fancy word for it."

"Um, yeah," I tell her, because there almost always is.

"What?" my mom asks, her eyes wide with horror.

I shrug, because I sort of figured that was how everyone's poop was.

Dr. Maltz just nods and closes her computer. "Can you sit up on the examination table for me, Al?" she asks as she pulls on a pair of blue gloves. "And Mom, would you mind stepping outside? I'm going to check out Al's stomach, and our middle school patients usually like to do this in private. Is that all right, Al?"

I nod as hard as I can, because oh boy is it all right. Thankfully, my mom leaves without any comment and I jump up onto the table.

“So, Al,” Dr. Maltz tells me. “First, I’m going to press on your belly. It won’t hurt, just a little pressure so I can feel what’s going on in there. And after that I’m going to ask you to pull down your pants so I can do a rectal exam.”

My stomach clenches just thinking about that. The thought of anyone seeing me in my underwear (and then my naked butt) is almost too much to handle. “Will *that* hurt?”

“Well, I’m going to have to do a digital exam, which means I’m going to use one of my fingers to check to see if there’s any blood.”

I’m about to pass out from embarrassment. Seriously, my body’s just going to shut down. Dr. Maltz is going to have to touch. My. Butt.

She’s looking at me expectantly, though, so after a minute I take a deep breath and lie back on the exam table. Dr. Maltz starts by pressing gently on my stomach as promised, and it’s like a massage until she presses down on a tender part.

I make a face, and she asks, “Did that hurt?”

“A little,” I admit.

She nods. “Okay, Al, now can I ask you to pull down your pants and underwear a tiny bit for me, and then turn on your side?” She must notice the sheer panic on my face, because she adds, “I see butts every single day. It’s my job. And I’ll do my best to make it really, really fast.”

I pull my clothes down, wishing more than ever that I was just a floating brain with no body.

*Please, let me become invisible*, I think as Dr. Maltz does something . . . uh . . . well . . . super gross . . .

She puts her finger up my butt.

If anyone at school found out about this, I would have to infiltrate the next rocket launch and flee the planet.

When she's done, she takes the gloves off and washes her hands. I avoid her gaze.

"So, there was blood," Dr. Maltz says once my mom is back. My intestines gurgle at the words, and I'd like to be anywhere else in the entire galaxy.

My mom frowns, and looks over at me with pity in her eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It could be nothing, but it's usually a signifier of disease. I'm going to schedule a colonoscopy so we can find out what's going on for sure." She looks over at me. "A colonoscopy is when we use a tiny camera and snake it through your intestines to take a look inside of you. It's like *The Magic School Bus*, if you've ever seen that."

I nod. I'm doing a lot of nodding today, but only because there's a lot of information being thrown at me and everyone's talking about my butt and I don't know what else to do.

"What do you think it is, though?" my mom asks.

"Well, I can't say for sure until we see the lab results from the colonoscopy, but I would guess probably something under the umbrella of inflammatory bowel disease, most likely ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease," Dr. Maltz

says. “We can talk more about that if that is in fact the diagnosis.”

The diagnosis.

I’m going to have a *diagnosis*. That word sounds way too official. I don’t want my poop to require a diagnosis.

Then again, if there *is* a diagnosis, then maybe there’s a cure for everything I’m experiencing, and I just need some medicine or a little rest and relaxation and then I’ll be fine. No poop emergencies on the track, no stomach gurgling or diarrhea or Olympic-level sprints to the toilet.

Dr. Maltz is about to leave when she says, “Oh, and I just wanted to let you know about our middle school IBD support group that happens every Wednesday here at the hospital.” She hands me a pamphlet. “If we find out that that’s what’s going on, I think it would be a great resource. It can be really helpful to talk to people who are going through the same thing as you, so you know you’re not alone in all of this.” She hands me the pamphlet, her smile too bright for the words coming out of her mouth. “Plus, I’m pretty sure some of the kids from the group go to your school!”

She says that last part like it’s a *good* thing. Like I would ever want to talk to other kids from my school about poop.

“Um, thanks,” I say.

*But no thanks.*

## *Chapter Six*

### **A SQUELCH TO END ALL SQUELCHES**

**In the few** days since my doctor's appointment, I've tried to put Dr. Maltz and her pretty smile and evil finger out of my mind, but it hasn't quite worked.

When Leo got back from his dad's place, we didn't talk about my appointment or drama club. He told me about the movie he watched with his dad—some old musical from the “golden era” of Hollywood.

“Everything was so glamorous back then,” he told me. “They just don't make films like that today.”

I looked down at my giant T-shirt that had a faded picture of a dolphin from a trip my mom took to Florida when she was a kid. “You're saying this isn't glamorous?” I asked Leo, and we both laughed at that, and the awkwardness kind of went away.

Kind of.

Now, though, we're in gym class, and I'm being extra careful, because until my stomach gets fixed, I'm not risking any more porta potty excursions.



"I want to see you all kick as high as Addison here," Mr. DiMeglio shouts, pointing to Addison's leg. She's holding her heel so that she's in a perfect standing split.

I roll my eyes and then look over at Leo, who rolls his back.

We're doing a dance unit in gym, but DiMeglio is only having us work on kicking today. "Your legs are your foundation," he told us. "Strong legs equal a strong body."

The whole class is standing in the middle of the gym, spaced out enough so that we don't whack each other in the face. Leo and I are at the edge of the group, as far away from other kids' legs as possible.

"What do you think the other gym classes are doing right now?" I whisper to Leo.

"Probably something normal like dodgeball."

"Lucky them."

"I want to see those legs in the air," DiMeglio shouts to the group.

"Are we catching up with our friends tonight?" I ask Leo after a minute.

That's our code for watching all the videos our favorite YouTubers have uploaded since we've last seen them. We joke that they're our friends, since it's not like we have any others.

"Definitely," he says, kicking his leg half-heartedly. "But can we also watch the recording of last year's school musical?"

“Why?” I ask him, kicking my leg with even less enthusiasm.

He shrugs. “Just for research.”

My stomach gurgles the way it did last time he brought up drama club. I’m still not convinced he’s serious. It could all be some big joke and on the day of auditions he’ll be in his bedroom like usual and we’ll laugh and watch YouTube videos and do what we normally do, just Al and Leo. Together.

Leo and I continue kicking in silence for a minute. The Addisons and some other girls are wearing leggings that show off the shape of their thighs. I’m wearing the loose knee-length shorts I wear on most gym days, since we’re not allowed to wear jeans. After my colonoscopy is done and my stomach problems are fixed, maybe I’ll feel comfortable in my own body like the Addisons. Not that I’d want to show off my thighs, but at least I wouldn’t want to throw myself into a well and never come out.

I keep kicking even as my stomach grumbles more and more. I tell myself that it’s fine, that it’s just getting jostled from the physical activity.

Until there’s a sharp pain at the bottom of my stomach. I double over, waiting for it to pass.

Leo rushes closer to me. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I tell him as the pain migrates from my stomach to my butt, making it nearly impossible to kick without everything hurting.

“Alison, where’s that big kick?” DiMeglio shouts over as he wanders through the gym correcting people’s form.

I glare at him, and gear up for my highest kick yet to prove that I’m just as good as Addison, even with my stomach in knots.

And then, as I fling my leg up, something happens. It feels like a fart but . . . more solid.

*Oh no.*

When I bring my leg back down, there’s a squelch.

*NO NO NO.* This is *not* happening.

I need an asteroid or a large piano to fall directly on top of me so that I don’t have to deal with what I’m pretty sure just happened.

I reach my hands behind my back to cover my butt, walk as fast as I can to the edge of the gym, then push myself into the girls’ locker room.

I feel like a literal baby who can’t control when and where they go to the bathroom. But it’s worse because babies have diapers. I have cherry-patterned underwear that I bought with a gift card I got for my birthday. And now they’re ruined.

When I make it to one of the stalls, I quickly strip down and assess the situation, trying to peel my shorts off without letting the poop leak out of my cherry underwear. I stand there for a minute, staring in horror at the mess I made.

This is the end. I can’t face the outside world after this.

I pinch my nose shut, but then I can't breathe because tears are flooding into my mouth.

"Al?"

Oh no.

It's Leo. In the girls' locker room.

I don't respond, squeezing my eyes shut and waiting for him to leave. I can't have him anywhere near me while I'm like this. What if he *smells* me?

"Al, are you okay?" he asks, getting closer.

I grab my underwear and frantically throw it in the little trash can in the stall so that at least the evidence is gone. But then I instantly regret it because there's still half a day of school left and I'm going to have to go commando.

"Should I go get the nurse?" Leo asks from just outside the bathroom stall.

"NO!" I shout. "Please, Leo, don't."

"But didn't you, like . . ." Leo doesn't finish the sentence, but I know he's asking if I pooped my pants.

"That's not what happened," I say, my voice not sounding like my own.

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

*I'M NOT, I'M NOT, I'M NOT*, I want to scream.

Instead, I take a deep breath and say something I never thought I'd say to Leo. "Can you go?"

"What?" he asks.

"Can you *leave*?" I yell.

I'm standing in the bathroom stall, trying to figure out

how to get out of this situation alive. “You shouldn’t even be in here.”

“Um, okay,” he says, clearly hurt. He takes a deep breath, then walks away.

I shake my hands out and whine, clutching my stomach. I didn’t think things were this serious. I thought this *problem* might go away on its own.

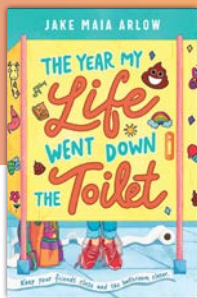
Or maybe that’s just what I wanted.

Instead, I made my best friend angry, ruined my nicest underwear, and had a real accident for the first time since I was in diapers.

So, half-naked and covered in tears and probably traces of my own poop, I sit down on the toilet and finish what I started with my high kick in the gym.

# The Year My Life Went Down the Toilet

By Jake Maia Arlow



What did you think after reading a few pages?

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What did you think of the cover?

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Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

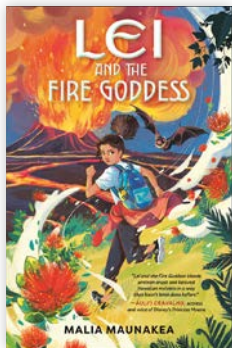
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# Lei and the Fire Goddess

By Malia Maunakea

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Curses aren't real.

At least, that's what twelve-year-old, part-Hawaiian Anna Leilani Kama'ehu thinks when she listens to her grandmother's folktales about sacred flowers and family guardians. Anna's friends back home in Colorado don't believe in legends, either. They're more interested in science and sports—real, tangible things that stand in total contrast to Anna's family's embarrassing stories. So when Anna goes back to Hawai'i to visit her Tūtū, she has no interest in becoming the heir to her family's history; she's set on having a touristy, fun vacation. But when Anna accidentally insults Pele the fire goddess by destroying her lehua blossom, a giant hawk swoops in and kidnaps her best friend, and she quickly learns just how real these mo'olelo are. In order to save her friends and family, Anna must now battle mythical creatures, team up with demigods and talking bats, and evade the traps Pele hurls her way.

For if Anna hopes to undo the curse, she will have to dig deep into her Hawaiian roots and learn to embrace all of who she is.



## Curses Aren't Real

**Curses aren't real.**

Anna repeated the mantra to herself as she spotted Tūtū on the far side of the Hilo airport terminal.

"Leilani!" her grandma called as she made her way down the escalator. The big, smiley wrinkles around her tūtū's eyes and mouth had multiplied since last summer.

Anna mustered up a weak grin, trying to hide her crankiness. She had asked her grandma not to call her by her middle name the last time she was here. But her grandma had just said, "Pah, you don't even know what Anna means, why would you want to be called that?" Then her best-friend-in-Hawai'i, Kaipo, had whispered, "I told you it wouldn't work." Anna groaned because she had to buy him a pack of dried cuttlefish for losing their bet.

She waved at her grandma but stood firmly planted atop the escalator, instead of rushing down like she normally did. She needed time to go over her plan—a plan she'd tried to come up with when she wasn't staring at a tiny movie screen on the two planes it took to get to Hawai'i from Colorado.



It was all part of the deal Tūtū struck with her parents when Anna was too young to have any say. Mom had a job offer that let her use her physics degree at a climate-research company in Boulder, and though they were reluctant to leave their home in the islands, they'd be able to afford a better quality of life in Colorado with the income Mom's new job promised. Tūtū was crushed that her only grandchild was being taken so far away, so she made her son and daughter-in-law swear to send Anna back to visit her for just shy of a month every year so she "wouldn't forget her history." Tūtū claimed to have tried to teach it to her son, Anna's dad, but for all his writing out of the family tree, he said he just couldn't remember their roots. So it was up to Anna to memorize the stories. To become the keeper of the mo'olelo.

She was twelve now and knew—KNEW!—Tūtū was gonna make a big deal about what that *meant* in their family. It was annoying, having these random extra responsibilities attached to an even randomer birthday. Thirteen? Sure. Finally becoming a teen was pretty massive. Or better yet, sixteen and having extra responsibilities that go along with being allowed to drive. But twelve? Random.

Even more annoying was how her parents had forced her to review the mo'olelo and history factoids since her birthday. Dad even had quizzed her in the car on the ride to the airport, saying hopefully the solid foundation would make it easier for her to absorb the new stories Tūtū had in store this summer. Whenever she brought up doing something else with Tūtū, he liked to remind her that she had it easy by repeating things like, "When I turned twelve, I was supposed to recite our family tree from the beginning. I only managed to remember back to the early eighteen hundreds, so she gave

up on me. You're lucky you just need to learn the stories." He wasn't going to help her out of it. She needed to convince Tūtū on her own.

Anna scratched the webbing of her backpack strap as she waited her turn to step off the escalator. The long flight gave her brain plenty of time to replay on a loop what had happened with Ridley. The last month without her friend had been the absolute worst ever. It was like showing-up-with-her-shirt-tucked-into-her-underwear-level awful on a daily basis. The final nail in their friendship coffin had been the horrible volcano incident.

They were finishing their geology unit right before spring break, and her science teacher, Ms. Finwell, asked, "Can anyone tell me why the Hawaiian Islands are formed in a line?"

They barely ever talked about Hawai'i in her Boulder school, so Anna was pumped to share what she knew. Her hand flew up, words spilling out of her mouth before she was even called on.

"The fire goddess, Pele, used her 'ō'ō to dig down deep and find a new volcanic crater to call home," Anna proudly explained. "She's on Hawai'i Island now, and people make sure not to make her mad."

Snickers immediately erupted around her, and Hennley Schinecky coughed "freak" behind a perfectly manicured hand. Heat blossomed in Anna's cheeks, and she sank lower into her seat, regretting her outburst.

"Class." Ms. Finwell had clapped her hands together to get them to settle. "Okay, that could be a theory. Thank you, Anna." She nodded at Anna and offered a tight smile before looking around the room. "That doesn't really tell us why they're in a line, though."

Anna squeezed her eyes shut and wished she could disappear.

"Yes, Ridley?"

Ridley lowered her raised hand and sat up straighter. “The tectonic plate that the islands are on is moving slowly in a northwest direction over a hotspot. Magma comes out of that hotspot and forms the islands. That’s why they are in a line, with the oldest being in the northwest and the youngest in the southeast.”

“Precisely! Very good.”

Anna peeked at Ridley in time to see her best-friend-on-the-continent’s proud smile at Hennley’s approving nod and hair toss. That was that. The deal was sealed.

Before lunch, Hennley’s flock, with their perfectly matching sneakers and perfectly parted hair, swarmed Ridley. Anna’d been held up changing after PE and had no idea that she really should have skipped the paper-towel wipe down in favor of speed that day.

By the time Anna got to the cafeteria, Ridley was at Hennley’s table, the one closest to the doors where everyone would see them. Anna stood there like the ultimate fool, blinking and holding her sack lunch, before ducking her head and hurrying past the loud laughter to the empty table near the stinky trash cans.

Their plan going into sixth grade had been “New School, New Cool.” They were in middle school, and Ridley was determined to find the right group of girls for her and Anna to hang out with. Now the year was over, and it seemed like Ridley had succeeded. Anna had not.

Anna blinked hard, the sound of rain on the airport’s metal roof bringing her back to the present, and she shivered, grateful to be in a hoodie and jeans. The painful memory of her mistake was slowly healing, but like a newly formed scab she couldn’t stop herself from picking at. Why hadn’t she just kept her big mouth shut? It was *science*

class, not mythology. She should have focused on the facts. And the facts stated that curses, legends, and all of Tūtū's gods and goddesses weren't real. Maybe then she'd still have Ridley.

Ugh. This summer's trip had to be different.

Anna checked her phone. Two new messages had appeared in reply to her letting her parents know she'd landed.

**MOM:** Be respectful and help with dishes!

Love you, sweetie!

**DAD:**  

Anna analyzed the text. Dad liked to communicate in memes and emojis. Unfortunately, it made it tough to understand him at times. This one probably meant he was celebrating that she landed in Hawai'i and loved her. Nothing new from Ridley, and she didn't click on her friend's name again. She had the last message Ridley had sent her memorized, burned into her brain.

**ANNA:** Are you going to go to the BoardRider retreat this summer

**RIDLEY:** Im going w H to Paris

That was it.

No crying emoji at missing the camp they'd been going to together for the past five years at the end of every summer. How was Ridley going to get in shape for the winter snowboarding season?

And who was Anna going to tell all about this trip during their endless cross-training runs?

And, seriously, she didn't even act excited about a trip to Paris?!

No "OMG can u evn BELIEVE" that they could both squee and gush over.

No "I really like you more, but Mom is having me expand my horizons."

Nope. She was going to freaking Paris with freaking Hennley, and there was zero chance Anna and her Hawaiian stories could ever compete. Well, maybe not zero. But it'd take some major convincing of Tūtū to change her plans. Which was exactly what Anna was going to do.

Anna stuffed her phone into the side pocket of her backpack. She straightened her spine, squared her shoulders, and prepared to go head-to-head with her grandma to earn a summer that would make her the equivalent of Paris chic in the eyes of Ridley.

Anna stepped off the escalator and weaved between groups of people reuniting, her ears filled with cries of joy and happiness. Tūtū draped a sweetly scented pīkake lei over Anna's head so it hung around her shoulders.

"Welcome home," she said as they gave each other a kiss on the cheek and a huge hug, smashing the lei between them, Tūtū's Hawaiian bracelets jangling in Anna's ear.

Anna closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, her mind skipping back along the memories of previous trips to Hawai'i Island over the years. The familiar scent wafted around her, and a real smile stretched her cheeks. It *was* good to be with her grandma again, even if this wasn't home.

“Where’s Kaipo?” Anna asked, scanning the crowd for her friend’s wavy black hair. What if he’d ditched her like Ridley did? What if he suddenly got cool, too, and didn’t want to hang out anymore? She chewed her lip. She could hardly remember a summer here without him. Maybe it would have been a good idea to call him a couple of times over the year to stay in touch. But she’d never had to do that before, and he’d always been here every summer when she returned, ready to pick up where they left off.

“He wanted to wait in the car,” Tūtū answered. Relief flooded Anna. “You know how he gets with crowds. Oh, he told me to give you these as soon as I saw you.” Tūtū rummaged through her huge purse for a minute, then pulled out a bag of li hing mui gummi bears. “He knows how *you* get after the long flight.”

“Yesss,” Anna said. She immediately ripped the bag open and popped a yellow one in her mouth, savoring the salty-sweet combo. One of the best things about her visits back here was the food.

Thank goodness Kaipo was still her friend. He was her grandma’s neighbor and Anna’s constant companion on these trips home—a friendship born of convenience that grew into something solid. More recently, he always seemed to know what Anna needed, sometimes even before she did. Gummi bears, distractions from Tūtū, a listening ear, knowledge of the best trees to climb. All the necessary things. Where things back home seemed to change all the time with invisible rules Anna never really understood (why did Ridley suddenly care about having the same shoes as Hennley and her friends?), Kaipo was constant. Reliable. And he rarely wore shoes, so he’d ignore that cool-school-shoe rule, too. She didn’t know what she’d do if she were stuck here all summer without him.

Tūtū guided them through the breezy, open-sided building over to the baggage claim. Some of Anna's dark waves escaped her ponytail and stuck to her neck in the oppressive humidity. It always took a little bit to get used to the feeling of practically drinking the thick air here at sea level compared to her mile-high home.

"Tell me everything, Leilani," Tūtū said. She was holding her elbow as if being physically connected would speed up the process of getting reacquainted after a year apart. "Whatchu been up to? So good to see you. You taller than me now!"

Anna's ears adjusted to her grandma's pidgin English. She took a deep breath. Time to jump in.

"I'm good!" she started, words flowing in a torrent. "It is so great to see you and be here again. Thanks for the lei." She paused to take a deep, appreciative inhale, enjoying this last bit of peace before coming at Tūtū's world like a wrecking ball. But maybe breaking things down meant making room for new traditions. Surely Tūtū would agree that new isn't always bad, right? Only one way to find out. Putting a lid on the jar of butterflies in her stomach, Anna pressed on. "So I was thinking, you know how we usually hang out around the house for most of the time? What if we went over to Kona and did some touristy things on the cheap? Like, checked out some of the cool resort pools or followed a snorkel tour at a discreet distance or something? Wouldn't that be fun? Kaipo could come, too. We could do something interesting for once." Oh shoot. That last sentence was too much. Anna slammed her lips together and hoped she didn't just blow it.

"You don't think things are interesting here?" Tūtū asked, glancing at Anna as the carousel of luggage chugged slowly around.

Anna kept her eyes trained on the bags, looking for her silver suitcase with the rainbow strap. "Pah. You should hear about Pele's latest curse. She went swallow one guy whole!" Then Tūtū changed directions with lightning speed. "Hooooeee, you're twelve now." *Called it on the age thing*, Anna thought, shoulders drooping. Tūtū continued, "You are old enough to start really memorizing our mo'olelo. All the parts of our family history. Even some parts I never tell you about yet. Needed you to be old enough. Things going get interesting for you."

"Well, they would if we could have a real vacation," Anna muttered. She didn't so much as blink at Tūtū's claim that the fire goddess had cursed a guy. Anna was used to Tūtū's tales of Hawaiian gods and goddesses.

"Eh? Try talk louder, Leilani," Tūtū said.

"Never mind, Tūtū. But, you know, just because I'm twelve doesn't mean things are going to magically become interesting in Volcano." Tūtū might think being older meant being able to handle more stories, but what it *really* meant was having to juggle all the expectations of being who people wanted you to be and cramming the you that you really were deep down into a little box or risk losing your friend forever. Anna kicked a lava rock wall that framed a pretty planting display full of red and pink anthuriums.

Tūtū gave her elbow another squeeze. Whoops, too much thinking. She had to loosen up.

"Unless you guys finally got a movie theater or arcade or something," Anna said with a smile at Tūtū, knowing that'd never happen in the small village. "Go on, tell me about this latest curse. Pele doesn't usually swallow people, right?" Exhaustion from the flight



seeped into her bones. *One story. I can get through ONE of her stories. Then maybe I can bring up Kona again. That's not rude, right? Dad would totally approve.*

Tūtū seemed to remember what she had been talking about and picked up where she left off before getting sidetracked by Anna's age.

"You know my neighbor down da road?" Tūtū glanced at Anna to make sure she was paying attention. Anna nodded and snapped the spare hair band on her wrist. Tūtū used the term "neighbor" loosely. Her home was tucked so deep in the rainforest that Anna had to walk for ten minutes to the next nearest house. "Well, he never showed Pele enough respect."

Anna hoped Tūtū still had a sense of humor. "Clearly he should have offered some shave ice to the snow goddess," she said as she swallowed back a smile.

Tūtū gasped. Her mouth fell open and closed, her eyes bulging. For once, she didn't have anything to say. She looked so horrified that Anna almost felt bad. Almost.

Anna was all innocence, looking at Tūtū with a straight face. Tūtū let out a strangled, "Pahhhh!" Anna dropped the act and broke into a huge, cheesy smile.

Tūtū froze for a heartbeat, eyes blinking, and cracked into cackling laughter. Anna joined in; her heart lightened at the familiar sound. "Kidding, kidding. Tell me, what did your neighbor do to tick off the *fire* goddess?" she asked as she spotted her suitcase make it around the bend.

"He knows what he did," Tūtū said, clicking her tongue in her tsk-tsk manner to show how very disappointed she was in him.

“Pele knew, too. And Pele sent a lava tube under his home and yard. When he went outside to garden, Pele opened up her tube and he fell in—*schoomp*—and got swallowed whole.”

“Hmm, I doubt Pele had anything to do with it,” Anna said as she heaved her suitcase off the moving belt and put it on the ground. “It was probably just an old lava tube that caved in when the guy pulled the wrong weed. I’d read an article online about a similar story in science class.” She pictured a tangled web of roots holding together a thin layer of soil and lava, and the web being broken when one critical plant was removed.

Tūtū reacted as if someone had just told her Hawaiian wasn’t a real language, smacking Anna gently on the arm and glaring.

“Eh! No talk like that!” Tūtū scolded. “You’re on Pele’s land now. No be disrespectful. What, you like see her curse our family next?”

“Sorry, sorry. Sheesh. Just another theory that popped into my head. Rockslides and forest fires happen practically every year in Colorado, and nobody blames it on angry gods and curses there.”

Tūtū frowned at her. Anna knew that look. *Not even home yet, and she’s already mad at me. Way to go, Anna. Dad’s gonna be thrilled to get that update.* Disrespecting Tūtū was the ultimate no-no. It didn’t matter what was going on back in Colorado; her parents made it clear that during her three weeks with Grandma, she had to do whatever Tūtū wanted to do.

Of course they sympathized with Anna when she told them about the science-class-Pele-volcano incident. They hugged her as she sniffled and tried not to cry. Told her that being Hawaiian is something to be proud of and that she’d get it when she was older. They took her bowling to get her mind off it, while going overboard

telling her about embarrassing things that happened to them in school, too. But clearly they'd never been the *only* kid in class who believed totally different things, so they just didn't get the humiliation and why she was determined to do things differently this summer.

But they did reiterate that Tūtū was going to be in charge here and that her vacation might not live up to Anna's plans. That it was still important for her to learn this side of her culture. They also reminded her that the touristy things were expensive.

Anna let out a sigh, the brief good mood gone, hidden behind clouds with the sun. They were both silent as they walked out from under the airport roof. The downpour had slowed to a drizzle, and they hurried across the street to the parking lot, toward Tūtū's lime-green car with floral seat covers that she'd had as long as Anna could remember. The bright color made it easy to spot wherever it was parked, especially in a small, flat parking lot like this one. Totally the opposite of the massive, multistory parking garages at Denver International Airport.

A figure emerged from the passenger seat, closed the door, and stood next to the car. Anna held up a hand as she approached and watched as Kaipo's smile went from bright and sunny to nonexistent as he took in Tūtū's grouchy face and whatever hers looked like. She mentally noted she now had to look up to meet his eyes when she reached him, blinking as drizzle droplets fell on her face.

His inky-dark hair stuck up in tufts like ruffled feathers, and the same old owl pendant hung on the black cord around his neck, resting on his aloha shirt.

“Hey,” Anna said, extending her fist. They bumped twice, knocked ankles, then slapped palms, wiggling their fingers. Still had it! Anna grinned. “Thanks for the gummi bears.”

“Looks like they weren’t enough to stop the hangry,” he replied quietly, darting his eyes back to Tūtū, who had stowed her purse in the back seat and was popping the trunk.

“I’ll fill you in later,” Anna muttered as she walked past him to put her bag in the trunk. They all climbed in, Tūtū and Anna in the front, Kaipo in the back seat. Tūtū started the car. “You buckled?”

“Yes,” Anna and Kaipo dutifully chorused.

“Okay, we go,” Tūtū said, and they left the airport in stuffy silence.

The sky cracked open again as they headed south, sheets of rain beating a familiar pattern against the windshield, welcoming Anna back to the rainforest. They drove out of the small town of Hilo and continued on past numerous villages that broke through the jungle on either side of the highway on their way to Tūtū’s house.

Anna pulled a carefully folded postcard from the plane’s magazine out of her pocket and jammed it into her backpack. The postcard boasted a turquoise sea and glittering white sand with *Aloha from Hawai’i* splashed across the front in large, swirling font. Maybe she could give it to Ridley. She could pretend she had a true Hawai’i experience this summer. Well, true in the way that would matter to her classmates. Too bad that image wasn’t her reality. No matter how many times she made this trip, Anna was still disappointed when she got off the plane in a gray-skied jungle with no sunny, sandy beaches of the airline’s postcards in sight. In her tūtū’s sleepy

hometown of Volcano, the weather was ten degrees cooler than the sunny beaches of Waikiki, and it was just as likely to be overcast and rainy as it was to be sunny.

Kaipo shifted in his seat.

"Your tūtū got a great parking spot, didn't she?" he said with fake cheer. "Any farther away, and you'd have been soaked."

"She sure did," Anna said, glancing nervously at Tūtū. Was she going to ignore her the whole drive?

"She made sure we got there early. Didn't want you waiting," he said.

"Thanks, Tūtū," Anna said. "I loved spotting you from the escalator." *Please take this peace offering*, Anna quietly begged in her head.

"Pah, didn't want you to wait in the rain is all," Tūtū grumbled.

"Hey, this was your first year in Intermediate, yeah? How'd it go? Did you and Ridley make it to finals in your snowboarding club over winter break again?" Kaipo swiveled in his seat to face her and asked rapid-fire questions.

Anna winced at Ridley's name. "Yeah, she placed. I made it to finals but didn't place, though."

"What was that face for?"

Anna brought her left hand up to her forehead, pretending to scratch it while she got her emotions in check. "Um, Ridley's kind of trying new things this year."

Kaipo was silent, reading into the pauses and nuances of that statement. Anna could practically hear his brain churning, attempting to decipher her tone. He knew all about Ridley, and Ridley knew all about Kaipo. In Anna's head there would be a summer someday in the future where Ridley would come to Hawai'i and Anna could

introduce her best friends to each other, her worlds melding. That vision washed away as they continued through the storm.

"That sucks," he finally concluded. Anna blinked back tears at the sadness evident in his voice. He always seemed to know just how much she didn't say. "I found a neat gecko's nest we can check out . . .," he continued, changing the subject.

"Fun!" Anna said with a snuffle. Gecko eggs *were* pretty neat. Anna loved watching them every day till they hatched. Probably wouldn't be interesting to Ridley, though, like swimming with dolphins or manta rays would be. Anna sighed, straining to see out the window.

When they finally pulled into the long gravel driveway, the pounding rain was beating so loudly on the car, even Kaipo had given up on conversation. Tūtū parked in the covered carport. Then she got out of the car and went inside, letting the screen door slam behind her.

"Yikes," Kaipo said as he closed the door and moved deeper into the carport to escape the rain.

"Yeah," Anna said. "I definitely should have given the gummi bears time to hit my bloodstream before opening my mouth." She swung her backpack onto her back and grabbed her suitcase out of the trunk. "I need to go talk to Tūtū. Wanna hang out here until—" A loud crash followed by continued banging from the kitchen interrupted Anna.

Both ducked their heads and looked toward the screen. "Nope," Kaipo said, wincing. "Last time your tūtū banged pots it was because *you* brought that feral cat into the house, and it tore up her curtains before I got it back outside. You go talk to her. I'll be back when the rain stops."

Anna looked up at the metal roof. He was right. She needed to try to fix this or it'd loom over her whole vacation. Zero chance of exploring Kona if that happened.

"Ugh, fine," she grumbled. "Chicken."

"Good luck."

Anna hauled her bags up the stairs and into the kitchen to apologize.

"Tūtū, I'm sorry about what I said. I'm just tired from the flight," she began, toeing off her sneakers on the mat outside the door. She needed to remember to just ignore Tūtū when she went on about legends and lore.

"You're twelve now," Tūtū said, chopping green onions. "Gotta start taking our mo'olelo seriously. I'm not gonna be around forever, and you're old enough to learn everything. Our stories and history been passed down for generations. This is your summer. You gotta step up and become the next keeper of the mo'olelo. Pretty soon you'll be too busy with life. Might stop coming to visit. Hafta learn it now."

Might stop coming to visit? Yeah, right. Mom and Dad would be sending her here forever.

"Okay, sorry," Anna said again, determined to make Tūtū understand. Her entire seventh-grade success hinged on the events of these next few weeks. "But, Tūtū, I don't need to memorize all these stories. There are so many others already written down that if I ever want to tell a story I can just Google it."

"Maybe you need to stop thinking like Anna and start feeling like Leilani," Tūtū snapped. "You feel the pull here, no?" She pointed to her na'au. "Try, Lei. Try breathe."

Tūtū closed her eyes, took a deep breath in, and let it out slowly.

Breathe? How could she breathe slowly when there was a very real chance that she could become a middle-school pariah? “Tūtū,” she said sharply, “it doesn’t even matter. Online—”

“That’s not our ‘ohana’s stories!” Tūtū slammed the knife down and wiped her hands on the cloth hanging from the stove before turning to face Anna. “You going to just read other stories instead of your family’s? How you going know where you came from? What you made of? Who you are? You think Hawai’i was always this way?”

“No, but—”

“No. Our kūpuna were crying in front of the palace when the haole’s men took down our flag.”

Anna flinched. She was very aware that word could also be used to describe her and hated that it always made her feel lumped together with people responsible for a painful time in Hawai’i’s history.

Tūtū continued, not noticing Anna’s discomfort. “Our kūpuna were separated from their ‘ōlelo. Talk Hawaiian in school? You get scoldings. The chants passing down our mo’olelo were almost forgotten. If that happened, we woulda lost everything. *That* is why it is important. *That* is why you need to know *our* story. The story of us: the Kama’ehus. Pah!” Tūtū threw her hands in the air. “I gonna lie down. I need one nap.”

*That was ancient history!* Anna struggled to keep her anger inside. Years of training on respecting Tūtū were about to get flushed down the toilet if she didn’t get hold of herself. *Take a deep breath and count to ten.* She made it to two.

“You didn’t even listen!” she called out to Tūtū’s retreating back. Zero reaction.

Anna spun and caught herself right before punching the wall.



*Whoa.* Definitely time to get out of this too-small house. She grabbed her suitcase and stomped down the short hallway, past the long line of family photos and the singular one of her and Kaipō, her arm slung loosely around her best friend's waist. He was pointing to the pathetically small fish she had caught and was holding on a line during their day in Hilo last summer. Ridley and Hennley would *definitely* not consider that a cool Hawai'i photo.

Throwing a glare at Tūtū's now-closed bedroom door, Anna turned left across the hall to the tight back room that was hers every summer. She dumped her backpack on the rocker that had been here since her dad was a baby. Her suitcase thudded next to the futon. Then Anna grabbed her rain jacket and slammed her way back outside to the front lānai. Trying to calm down, she paced in front of the old wicker loveseat, caged in by the storm. Pulling at the twisted hair band on her wrist, Anna barely noticed the slight stings of the elastic snapping back again and again. The drumming of rain on the metal roof eventually slowed, then stopped.

Anna fumed as the rain puddles shrank, draining into the porous lava hidden beneath the gravel drive. She had *tried* to be respectful and quiet during Tūtū's stories. But she couldn't anymore. She wasn't a little girl. She used to beg Tūtū for just one more. She found it fascinating how history here blurred the line between reality and myth. Anna's mom's parents lived in Buffalo. They were Polish and had a family tree with no mentions of gods or goddesses anywhere in their history. They didn't talk about being born from the earth mother and sky father. Totally boring. Which is why Anna used to love coming to this little home in the jungle for three weeks every summer for the last seven years.

Key words there: *used to*.

Every time she asked Tūtū why she thought Anna'd be able to remember them if her dad didn't, her grandma would snap, "Pa'a ka waha; nānā ka maka; hana ka lima," and give Anna a chore to do to distract her and keep her busy. Anna eventually stopped asking. She still didn't know what the big deal was. Why they couldn't just write it down and be done with it?

When the puddles were mostly gone, Anna jumped over the three steps to the gravel drive, eager to burn off the squeezing in her heart and muscles. She crossed the grass and made her way to the boundary of the trees.

The smell of damp earth, too-sweet rotting guavas, and the hint of ginger all blended together in a perfume that spoke to some of her oldest memories. She used to love playing in this jungle, bouncing on the spindly guava-tree branches and pretending the hāpu'u ferns were magical boats that could take her wherever she wanted to be. Tūtū didn't have cable or internet, and Anna's cell phone service was horrible out in the middle of nowhere, so she couldn't even stalk Ridley's vacation on social while she was here. Couldn't check in and see if she was having the most epic of all summers without Anna. Maybe if Tūtū took her on a drive, she'd get service somewhere. Otherwise it was the jungle and Kaipo as her sources of entertainment. She squinted into the trees looking for movement. No sign of him yet.

With one heaving sigh, Anna turned back to the carport. There was no way she'd shake off this anger on her own. She needed the machete.



## Listen to Tūtū

**A**нна tightened her grip on the machete handle, her sweaty palm warming the old wood. She swung back the semi-rusted blade and then brought it in front of her with a scream.

“Aaiiiieeee ya! Ya! Ya! Ya!” Quick chopping motions followed her mighty swing, and green leafy bits flew. The jungle outside Tūtū’s house had thickened over the last year. Tangled branches and ribbons of vines twisted into one another and pushed in on the small, manicured space Anna’s grandma called her yard. She brought the machete down again on a particularly stubborn uluhe fern with a grunt, taking her frustration out on the jungle like older black belts going at the punching dummy in her kung fu class.

“I just don’t get why the Pele thing was such a big deal,” Kaipo said.

Anna glanced at him. He’d finally returned and was keeping her company while she worked, twirling a small piece of vine between his fingers as if he didn’t have a care in the world. But the crease between his brows gave him away. He was worried for her. Again.

Anna shook her head and went back to whacking the plant in front of her. It was hard work keeping her tūtū's yard clear, but Anna was happy to help out so her grandma wouldn't have to deal with it. And it let her blow off steam. Win-win. Another strand of hair had fallen out of her ponytail, and she used her arm to get it off her face. Her whole body was sticky in the humidity.

"Sure, your classmates may not have heard about her before, but Ridley had. Why didn't she say something about Pele *and* plate tectonics?" Kaipo asked.

Anna looked at him. Apparently if everyone else in your class is brought up with the same stories, it's hard to fathom how unbelievable they sound to others. "Ridley didn't want to look like an—" Anna checked herself just in time. "We had a plan. We both were trying to expand our friendship horizons this year. Ridley's just better at it than I am."

"Expanding generally means to get bigger. Pretty sure she can keep you *and* make other friends."

Anna rolled her eyes at his literalness. "Thank you for that clarification." She hacked at another plant, remembering back to exactly when it had all gone wrong.

After a killer first half of winter break with their snowboarding team, Anna went to Buffalo to visit her mom's family and Ridley stayed in Boulder. No big deal. Well, except apparently in middle school it is a Very Big Deal because vacations are when friendships are altered: when they weaken and when they are made.

When Anna got back to school, Ridley was in with Hennley.

Anna tried. And Ridley tried, too! Anna saw it and couldn't blame her friend at all. Ridley would save Anna a seat, laughed at Anna's

jokes (even the ones Anna knew weren't great), and tried to talk about their snowboarding stories.

But Hennley wasn't interested. Which meant that *her* friends weren't interested. Which meant that by the time March rolled around, Anna's volcano outburst really pushed Ridley to make a choice . . . and she chose cool.

By May, Ridley was so busy with her new group of friends, Anna didn't even see her anymore.

"She tried. Hennley—she's the ringleader—is kinda particular about who she welcomes in. I just thought if we could do some cooler things this summer with Tūtū, maybe that'd help." She struggled to sort through her tangled-up thoughts. "If we could go to Kona, maybe check out a resort with an amazing pool or snorkel with sea turtles. Something that'll impress them."

"Why would you want to? They don't seem very nice."

She punctuated her thoughts with swings of the machete. "Ridley's"—*chop*—"nice"—*thwack*—"and she's"—*slice*—"with them."

Anna's breath caught, and stepping back next to Kaipo, she bit down on the inside of her cheek to counteract the sudden sting in her eyes. She bent to drop the machete and grab a bunch of clippings. Kaipo picked up another armload. "I don't think Ridley would stop being your friend though, right?" he asked as he led the way into the jungle to toss the scraps onto the compost pile. "Don't you think you'll just get back together when you get home? Maybe she needed a little break."

"You weren't there," Anna said, pulling up next to him at the mound of clippings surrounded by ferns and guava trees. She caught him wince out of the corner of her eye. *Dang! Tread carefully.*

"I mean, come on. You know how much I wish you were there, too. Then at least I'd have someone to sit by the trash cans with." She grinned and elbowed him, trying to get him to smile. His brow stayed furrowed. He got quiet whenever she accidentally made careless comments about him missing out. She knew how crappy that felt. "Ridley said she's hanging out with one of her new friends this summer. She'll probably forget all about me and my not-cool summer and my not-cool shoes."

"Your shoes?" Kaipo, with confusion, looked at her shoes.

Anna dumped her compost and turned to Kaipo. "Never mind, it's a Colorado thing. I have to do something awesome here to rival whatever they're doing, to even stand a chance at getting back in next year." She went back to pick up her machete.

"Ah," said Kaipo. "So, you feel like you're stuck here while everything is happening over there?"

"Yeah, kind of," Anna said. She saw hurt flash again in Kaipo's brown eyes and hurried to correct herself. "I want to be here, too!" Anna told him, scrambling. "Come on, you know that. It's just . . . it's complicated." She frowned. How could she explain to Kaipo that she really did love spending time with him and Tūtū in the heart of Volcano, the little town so perfectly named for its location on the side of an active volcano? She couldn't wait to take a trip out to the black-sand beaches in Hilo, and she loved the good Pacific Rim food she couldn't get on the continent, like legit shave ice and Tūtū's homemade kalbi ribs.

And then there was Kaipo, always waiting to hang out with her when she came back every summer. He never laughed at her.

"I love it here, too," Anna said. "But come on." He just stood there,

watching her. "Look at me!" She fidgeted as his eyes scanned her body, from frizzy hair to green-stained shirt to jeans and sneakers. He didn't say anything. "Kaipo, I'm not lōlō enough to think I fit in here. Even if I do know a couple of Hawaiian words."

"But that's why—"

"I swear, don't even come at me with reasoning Tūtū's stories. Seriously. You remember when we went to Hilo last year?"

"Yeah . . ."

"You and I went grocery shopping. Tūtū wanted us to grab stuff for musubi."

"Okaaaay . . ."

It sounded like he didn't remember, but that day scarred her brain as vividly as that volcanically craptacular day in class. It was a sunny day, and they'd finished up swimming at Waiuli and swung by KTA before heading back home. She and Kaipo were in the rice aisle, trying to find the kind Tūtū wanted. The air-conditioning was freezing, with her wet hair and damp suit under her sundress, and she was bouncing on her feet in her slides trying to stay warm. Another girl a little older than her was there, too, waiting her turn. Anna had tried to hurry, grabbing an orange box that looked vaguely familiar. The girl behind her snorted.

"Figures," she had mumbled.

"Huh?" Anna didn't know what she meant.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing."

"What 'figures'?"

The girl looked at Kaipo. "You gonna show her what kine rice she should get? Gotta help a haole out."

Anna was speechless. She just looked at Kaipō, then down at the box in her hand. It was white, wasn't that good enough? Kaipō took it from her and put it back. He grabbed the bag off the bottom shelf. Anna remembered how hot her skin felt as the girl squeezed in front of her, grabbing the same brand Kaipō had picked up, and headed to the front of the store.

"Either kind would have worked," Kaipō whispered. "This kind is just stickier. Which makes it better." He grinned, trying to cheer her up. She left the store with her head down.

Anna jogged his memory of the incident and raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, come on, Lei. That was minor," Kaipō said. "Hardly a reason to feel like you don't belong."

"Mm-hmm," Anna said, looking at her friend.

"Well, I'm sorry you feel like you don't. I *know* you do," Kaipō said. He nudged her arm with his elbow, and she half-smiled back before turning to fully face the tangle of ferns in front of her.

"I don't know." Anna sighed. "What if I don't want any of it anymore? When I try to get into it, I end up taking it home with me. And it's messing things up there. I don't want the stories. I don't want the history. I don't want the rice. Well, scratch that, the rice is really good. I'll keep the li hing mui gummi bears, too. But I just want to come and visit like a tourist. Go walk around the national parks. Go lie on a white-sand beach all day and sip a fruity drink with a paper umbrella in it. Do you know in all my years here I have never had a drink with an umbrella in it?" Anna was breathing heavily, her frustration pouring out again. "Tūtū is trying to make me into something I'm just not. She had her chance with Dad. Just because he



doesn't remember what he should about our history, doesn't mean that it is all on me now. I quit!"

She raised her arm to chop again.

"Wait!" Kaipo shouted. He darted in front of her just as she was bringing the blade down.

"What the—!" Anna cried. She pivoted quickly, trying to change the direction of the machete's momentum away from her friend's body. The blade sliced through the air, missing Kaipo's head by an inch.

Anna, hands shaking, dropped the machete and staggered back. She braced herself on a tree and took belly breaths in through her nose.

"*Kaipo!* Do you have a death wish? I could have cut your arm off!" Anna said, still panting.

Kaipo seemed completely oblivious to how close he'd come to a maiming and was focused on something in front of him. Anna craned her neck to see what it was. Kaipo slowly turned toward her and held up a leaf to expose its underside.

"Check it out—*nananana makaki'i*, the happy face spider," Kaipo said.

A little, yellowish-green spider with long legs and clown-mask-like markings on its back smiled up at Anna.

"A spider!? You jumped in front of a machete for a *spider*?" Anna shouted.

"They are native to Hawai'i. Only found here. Gotta take care of them," Kaipo said. He carried the leaf into the jungle, out of harm's way, and Anna followed along. "The mamas care for their young for weeks," Kaipo explained. "They are just like a real 'ohana, too. A real

family. Different than a lot of other spiders whose young are on their own as soon as they hatch. This mama has to pass down all her mo'olelo to her keiki, her young, so they know where they came from."

"I think I'm being taught a lesson," Anna grumbled, feeling ganged up on.

Kaipo placed the leaf gently onto a shiny shrub, another part of his world safe. He tugged at the owl pendant around his neck and looked directly at Anna. "I get that you don't care about your tūtū's stories. That you don't think the mo'olelo is important. But it is. It is who you are. It's how we carry on our history, our legacy. We can't lose that. It will help you feel more connected to this place."

"Kaipo, Tūtū's stories are just that. Stories," Anna told him, suddenly needing him to understand. To have him solidly on her side. If she could convince Kaipo, maybe he'd help her convince Tūtū, and instead of spending the next three weeks learning the mo'olelo, maybe they could explore the island and do touristy things. "There's *actual science* behind all these myths. Like"—Anna looked around, spying a red flower on a nearby tree—"Okay. Look at this flower."

"Ōhi'a lehua," Kaipo said.

Anna rolled her eyes at him. "Yeah, I know what it is, sheesh." She wasn't a *complete* foreigner. Everyone knew about the ōhi'a lehua and the myths attached to them. Their spindly, scraggly branches with their small, oval, green-gray leaves were bursting with red blossoms. Each of these lehua flowers were made of hairs instead of petals, looking sort of like one of Mom's old makeup brushes where the bristles were all spread out.

"According to Tūtū's legend," Anna said, "if I pick this flower,

Pele will make it rain. But it just isn't true. It's a story. This flower has zero to do with rain cycles."

Anna reached out to grab the blossom, but Kaipo swatted her hand away. Anna looked up at him, eyes wide.

"Sorry. Just, don't. Okay?" Kaipo said. He looked at the ground and rubbed the back of his neck, trying to downplay his reaction.

"Kaipo, come on, let me—"

He knocked her hand away again.

"You're being ridiculous. It is just a flower." She reached her hand out again.

"Come on, let's go check on the gecko eggs." Kaipo grabbed her hand and tried leading her away. His hand was warm, and a rough callus brushed her palm. Ordinarily Anna would have let him pull her wherever he wanted. But not today. Anna shook free and planted her feet.

"No! We're settling this now. Everybody here is obsessed with these stories!" Anna threw up her arms, voice rising. "I'm sick of it! I want a summer for me!"

"Okay, calm down—"

"Don't tell me to calm down!" Anna yelled, feeling the sea of anger she'd tamped down since her discussion with Tūtū swell and roil. How could Kaipo not be on her side? "I can't spend another year by the trash cans!" Kaipo's eyebrows shot up.

"I'm not even asking for a lot! I just want seventh grade to be better. I just need a break from all the stories and all the"—Anna waved her hands around the 'ōhi'a lehua—"precious flowers!"

Kaipo took a step toward her, hands outstretched in an attempt

to placate, which only infuriated her more. He wasn't even looking at her. He was still looking at the dang flower!

"Kaipo, my eyes are up here." Anna picked the red blossom, ignoring his gasp, and brought it up to her face. He tracked it as if it were a live grenade.

His eyes frantically darted back and forth between hers and the fragile flower she cradled in her palm. His normally dark complexion had noticeably paled, and his mouth hung open. Anna shifted on her feet, suddenly feeling guilty for picking the flower, if only because it bothered Kaipo so much.

"It's okay, Kaipo," Anna said softly. "I told you. The old stories and myths aren't real." She twirled the fine bristles against her palm, enjoying the feather-light tickle.

And then, suddenly, the earth started to tremble.

They were little tremors at first—barely perceptible—that easily could have been overlooked. Then the pebbles on the ground began to hop, and the leaves in the trees rattled against one another.

Anna threw out her arms and bent her knees, trying to keep her balance as she backed away from the 'ōhi'a lehua tree, the bloodred flower still clutched tightly in one hand. *No way*, Anna thought. The shaking magnified, and an inhuman groan rose up from the ground.

Plucking the flower hadn't made it rain—but could it possibly have caused an earthquake?!



## Long Walk off a Short Trail

**O**kay, okay, just a random earthquake,” Anna said. She grabbed the nearest tree, which happened to be the one she had picked the lehua from. The rough bark trembled in her hand. “Cool timing, huh?” She shot a nervous smile at Kaipo. Her friend’s eyes were wide as saucers.

“What have you done?” Kaipo asked. The tremors rattled the rainforest. A guava tree next to them shook so violently, the riper fruit flew off, becoming gooey projectiles. One hit Anna in the stomach, and she grunted at the surprising force, watching as it split on impact. Pink, wet guava meat and seeds oozed against her white shirt.

“RUN!” Kaipo shouted. They both took off, racing back down the path in the direction of Tūtū’s gravel driveway. Kaipo glanced up the mountain, but Anna couldn’t tell what he was searching for. Through the trees, she heard cracking and a crashing roar. It sounded like a rockslide Anna had been close to on one of her hikes back in Colorado with her dad. It grew louder and louder.

Anna glanced behind her to see the jungle being swallowed up into a gaping sinkhole. The burn in her pumping legs was easy to

ignore as she pushed herself faster. Tūtū's story about getting buried alive flew through her mind in a flash, and her stomach churned. She was going to puke up a rainbow of gummi bears. *What a waste!* Clenching her teeth, she focused on Kaipo. He was running ahead of her, bare feet flying over the mossy stumps and dirt.

The longer they ran, the more Anna realized something wasn't making sense. They hadn't walked that far along the trail. They should be out by now. Where was the clearing and Tūtū's driveway? The blurring trees they passed all started to look the same as the crashing got closer, and yet there was no sign of the vegetation opening up ahead of them as there should have been. Anna was positive they hadn't walked this far.

"Kaipo!" Anna shouted through her heaving breaths, chest burning from effort. "We should have made it to the house by now!"

The roaring of the earth consuming itself continued behind them. Anna's mind whirled through possible reasons they hadn't made it out yet, but each felt slippery and brittle.

All her snowboarding and kung fu at high elevations back home in Colorado made running at sea level easier for Anna, but she couldn't keep it up forever. Kaipo was slowing, too, and he turned to look back at Anna, eyes bulging as something in the sky above her caught his attention.

Anna followed his gaze and froze, her heart jumping out of her chest.

Above them was a giant flying beast. It looked like a hawk but was the size of a small plane. Its wings, white and brown against the gray sky, stretched out wide over the trees around them.

Anna's mind went blank, all logic gone.

“Io,” she heard Kaipo whisper.

“What?” Anna said, still stunned.

“Shhhh. Get down.” He tugged her hand till they were both crouching on the damp jungle floor. Anna watched the large hawk pass by overhead. This wasn’t possible! There just weren’t birds that big in the world. Not anymore, anyway.

Anna rubbed her eyes and lowered from her crouch to a kneel, and her shifting leg snapped a branch.

*Crack!*

The creature screeched, eyes zeroing in on the sound as it wheeled back in their direction.

“Oops,” Anna said, attempting to swallow the choking fear. She was seconds away from screaming her head off and making a break for it, but her tired, quivering leg muscles held her in check. Kaipo’s hand was shaking in hers, and she gave it a squeeze that was meant as reassuring but may have come off more like a death grip.

Kaipo looked at Anna, eyes wild. “Listen,” he said. His voice cracked, and he started again in a low voice. “I know this is going to seem—well, I know you don’t believe the legends, but you need to go talk to your tūtū. Tell her what happened. Show her the lehua . . .”

Anna looked down at her other hand, surprised to find her fingers still tightly clutching the fiery red blossom. “Okay, wait,” she said, still trying to make sense of everything. “I know the timing with the earthquake and all was a coincidence, and that bird thing is freaky, but you don’t honestly think . . .”

Kaipo shook his hand free from hers and took Anna’s shoulders in his hands. “Don’t give up till you find me. Till you find Pele.”

Anna frowned. "Don't give up till I find you? Pele? Kaipo, what—?"

Before she could finish, Kaipo shoved her down into a shallow hole under the log and stood. He lifted his arms out to either side of his body and cried, "Io! I am here!"

The huge hawk circled him and let out a piercing cry as it dove, enormous wings locked in tight as it plummeted toward him.

"Kaipo!" Anna screamed.

The bird spread its wings at the last minute, extending its talons and pouncing on her friend. Anna dropped to her stomach in her hiding place as dirt and debris flew in the strong draft, stinging and scratching her face and arms. She forced herself to look up and saw the hawk wrap its long talons around Kaipo's slender arms, pinning him to the ground.

"No!" Anna shrieked, crawling out from under the log.

Kaipo's teeth were clenched tightly, his hands balled in fists. *What do I do? What do I do?* Anna's mind raced. She searched the ground and found a small guava tree that had been uprooted in the wind. The hand holding the lehua shielded her face, and the other grabbed and waved the big stick in the air as she fought her way through the gusts over to the bird. It screeched at her as she connected with one of its wings.

"Get off!" Anna yelled, whacking it again. The hawk lowered its beak and snapped at her, missing Anna's arm by inches. She jumped out of the way and landed a massive swipe against the back of the bird's head. Its beak darted at her again, snapping her sapling in two. "No!" Anna cried. She tossed the stick aside and looked frantically for another weapon.



With another deafening cry, the bird pumped its wings and lifted Kaipo off the ground. Anna darted forward to grab one of Kaipo's legs.

"Gahhhh!" Kaipo shouted.

Anna immediately let go. She'd hurt him worse by yanking him through those razor-sharp talons. Blood was starting to stain his shirt where the talons had shredded the fabric and sliced the skin.

"Go tell Tūtū!" he shouted down at her, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Kaipo!" Anna cried, running after him. She was looking at the bird and not the ground, and she tripped over a branch that had fallen in the wind.

From the ground, Anna watched as the hawk gave one final screech and soared above the trees and over the sinkhole, Kaipo dangling from its steel grasp. Then it flapped its mighty wings and headed over the jungle, up the mountain. Anna was all alone.



## How Bad Could It Be?

**W**hen she and Kaipo had tried to escape the sinking earth, they had run for a long time without ever breaking through the trees to Tūtū's driveway. This time, on her own, Anna easily entered the clearing, and the gravel path came into view. She shivered. It felt as if she had been released from a hold she couldn't see, as if the jungle knew the deed had been done and freed her.

Anna ran to the house.

"Tūtū! Come quick!"

She leaped up the steps to the lānai, kicking off her sneakers mid-stride, swinging the screen door open so hard it slammed against the back wall. Her still-damp socks made footprints on the dark wood of the living room before Anna stepped onto the woven lauhala mat that covered the majority of the floor space.

"Tūtū!" Anna called again, running through the bedrooms, then back to the kitchen. The house was empty. Had something taken Tūtū, too?

A piece of paper on the counter caught her eye. Tūtū's familiar handwriting was scribbled across.

*Aunty Charlotte called. I gotta go help with her screens.*

*Musubi in container. Back by dinner. Be good.*

*Honis, Tūtū*

Anna exhaled. Tūtū was safe at her sister's. Anna paced the kitchen. Dinner was hours away. No way she could wait that long to do something. She could call Aunty Charlotte! She grabbed the ancient corded phone on the wall. Wait, no. The dial tone hummed in her ear as she thought it through. Aunty Charlotte lived in Waiākea Uka. It'd take forever for her to get home, even if she left now, and who knew how far away the hawk would be by then. Oh, the police! They'd know what to do, and they showed up fast in emergencies. She hesitated so long that the steady dial tone changed to a *beep-beep-beep* signal. She hung up, counted to two, and picked it back up again. Ugh, old tech. Okay, dial tone was back. Was 911 the right number?

Anna slapped the lehua blossom she still held onto the kitchen counter and opened Tūtū's cupboard to see the taped list of emergency numbers. She dialed the nonemergency local police.

"Hawai'i Police Department, how can I direct your call?" a calm voice said.

"Hi, um, my friend, Kaipo, um . . ." She really should have thought through what to say before dialing. Dang. Too late now, time to wing it. "Kaipo was kidnapped. He is about thirteen, five six or so, brown hair, brown skin, brown eyes, blue-and-white aloha shirt, owl necklace, bare feet—" The words poured from her.

"Slow down, you say your friend was kidnapped? When?"

"Just now."

"Where?"

"In the jungle by my tūtū's house." Anna gave them the address.

"Were you with him?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, can you describe the kidnapper? Any helpful details?"

Anna chewed her lower lip, then plowed ahead, "Well, I know this is going to sound ridiculous, but it was a giant hawk, wingspan of, I don't know, maybe seven feet? Twelve feet? It was huge! The talons were big enough to crush my head! It was brown on the top and lighter underneath."

Silence. Then a sigh from the other side of the line. "A giant hawk took your friend?"

Anna grimaced at the skepticism dripping through the phone. "Yeah, I know it sounds—"

"Listen, do you have an adult with you that you could put on the line?"

Not good. Would Tūtū get in trouble for leaving her home alone? Mom and Dad were cool with her being alone back in Colorado, but what were the laws like here? Anna panicked. "Oh! Look! Kaipo just walked in the door. Kaipo, what was all that about?" Anna pretended, her voice squeaky and strained. "Guess everything is all good here. Never mind and sorry for calling!"

"Listen, this is an official police line." The voice on the other end got stern. "It needs to be kept open for people who actually need our services. If you crank call again, action will be taken."

Anna gulped. She wanted to blurt out that this wasn't a joke but didn't see a way that this conversation could end well. She squeezed

her hand into a fist, fingernails biting her palms as a swirl of angry frustration filled her veins.

“Understood.” Anna hung up the phone and rocked back on her heels. Okay, time to think this through.

Some of her last words to Kaipo were that the old stories and myths weren’t real. She had been so sure.

It just didn’t make sense. Anna paced back to the living room, then down the hall and back up again. So she and Kaipo fought. It was their first fight, but that didn’t mean anything, right? She picked a flower and there was an earthquake. It had to be a coincidence. She was sure she’d picked lehua before. She racked her brain, trying to remember a time she would have done it but found it utterly impossible to focus.

Fact: Her friend was gone.

Fact: She yelled at him right before it happened.

Fact: She picked the flower.

Fact: . . .

Well, she didn’t know what other facts to consider. What else was important. What else there could possibly be other than that she yelled, she picked the flower, and Kaipo was taken. It didn’t make any kind of sense at all. She paced back to her room, feeling like she needed to explode trying to make sense of giant birds and earthquakes and potential connections to . . .

Her brain hit the brakes and swerved hard left.

*Don’t think about goddesses yet or you’ll curl up into a freaked-out little ball and never leave the room.*

Right. Okay, avoiding any of *those* thoughts.

Anna grabbed her backpack from the rocker, her heart beating

so loudly in her ears that it was hard to hear the jumbled thoughts her brain was yelling at her. There was no moment that she made a conscious decision. No *"I'm going to venture into an unknown jungle and find my friend"* light bulb in her brain. Her body just knew what it needed to do, even if her brain hadn't caught up yet. As she dumped everything out onto the floor then quickly rifled through it, her mind settled into the familiar rhythm of packing for a hike.

Because that's what she was going to do.

Hike into the woods and get her friend back.

How bad could it be? Kaipo had led her through this jungle a gazillion times; she'd just get back to the sinkhole and follow the route the hawk had taken up the mountain. Maybe there'd be a lava tube that would lead her straight there so she wouldn't need to deal with bushwhacking.

Anna stuffed a rain jacket into her backpack. She could protect herself from the elements. Next went her headlamp, first aid and safety kit her dad always made her pack, and metallic-looking emergency blanket she got from space camp.

Anna traded out her damp socks for dry wool ones and stashed another pair into her pack before zipping it closed and swinging it onto her back.

She hurried to the kitchen. Having the plan, even as loose as it was, ignited something inside her. She grabbed her water bottle, filled it from the tap, and stuck it in the mesh side pocket with her phone before putting her arm through the second strap. Anna took the Saran Wrapped musubi from the plastic container on the counter and a few Saloon Pilot Crackers from the cupboard. Her hands were shaking so badly, she nearly dropped them before stuffing them

into her bag. She could hear Tūtū saying she was going too fast and needed to slow down. Ground herself.

Anna closed her eyes and took a big inhale through her nose . . .

Nope. No na'au. This was just too much.

Everything seemed to be happening all at once, not computing in her brain at all because she kept shying away from the *big thing*. Ignoring it wasn't going to make it go away, though. She took another deep breath and focused on the most absurd possibility ever in the whole world.

"There is just no way a mythological fire goddess sent a giant hawk to kidnap my friend," Anna muttered, instantly feeling better but also ridiculous for even giving voice to that theory. She flexed her hands, reaching for the pad of paper under the phone.

And then the second earthquake hit.

Before Anna could react, the shaking stopped. *What in the world?*

Anna took a few shallow puffs of breath, trying to get her heart back down into her chest from its current position somewhere in the stratosphere. Two earthquakes in one day were two too many. She cautiously moved to the window, scared of what she might find. The sky was clear, pale blue with thin white clouds.

No signs of giant hawks.

But what in the . . .

A fountain of glowing lava spurted taller than all the trees on the mountainside. Anna was stunned. It had been years since Kīlauea erupted, and she had never seen it erupt from that location before. Why, that was directly uphill of . . .

"We are in its path," Anna whispered to herself.

No FREAKING way. The coincidences were piling up too fast.

Luckily, lava, unlike coincidences, moved slowly. Years ago, her dad made her stand with him next to an active pāhoehoe flow while her mom took a picture. She was scared out of her mind, feeling the heat wafting off the ropy ooze next to the asphalt road. Anna shuddered out of the memory, focusing on her priorities now. She had some time before it reached Tūtū's. Anna needed to find Kaipo and bring him back as quickly as possible. They'd figure out how to move Tūtū and all of her stuff out of her house together. If this whole mess was her fault, and Kaipo ended up hurt and something bad happened to Tūtū's place, she'd never forgive herself. Tūtū was so proud that their family had been able to hang on to the land since Hawai'i was a kingdom.

Anna rushed back to the kitchen, grabbed the notepad and pen, then scribbled a quick note to Tūtū.

Tūtū,  
~~So, funny story~~  
~~something bad happened~~  
~~Kaipo told me to tell you~~

Kaipo found a pueo nest he wants to show me. The owl isn't there now, so it's a good time to check it out. Be back in a few hours.

Love you,  
Anna  
PS Thank you for the musubi!

There. That sounded plausible and would buy her some time. Anna couldn't bring herself to say this had anything to do with Pele.



She'd have to be fast. Maybe the thank-you note would put Tūtū in a better mood when Anna got back. *If* she got back. "Shut up, brain," she muttered, looking around the house to see if she'd forgot anything.

Anna went out onto the lānai to put on her shoes. If she went back down the same footpath, would she be able to find where the sinkhole was? It seemed as good a plan as any. Standing, Anna took one last look back into Tūtū's house, then squared her shoulders and took her first steps off the porch.

# Lei and the Fire Goddess

By Malia Maunakea



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