

Chapter 1

“Moises Ignacio Gutiérrez Jiménez de la Fuente, we need to talk!”

Moises only had a moment to open his eyes and process being awake before a deep rumbling sounded as his mother charged up the stairs in the still mostly unfurnished home. For just a moment, Moises thought he was in his old bedroom back in East Oakland, living in the downstairs apartment of a duplex right next door to his *abuela's* house. His *titi* lived in the upstairs apartment, and Moises loved hearing their slippers feet going downstairs in the morning as they headed next door to check on Abuela. Titi would always come back with steaming mugs of *café* for the adults and cold *leche de chocolate* for the kids. It was nice waking up with those little gestures of care.

Moises took a moment to look at the stark white walls of his room—his own room, the first room that he'd ever had all to himself in the 15 years he'd been on Earth. He was in this big new house in the sprawling suburbs of St. Louis. As he looked around, he noted an empty sleeping bag on the floor. His little brother must have crept in and slept there. At just six years old, his little brother wasn't used to having his own room yet. Moises groped around for his phone to check the time, then groaned when he saw it was almost 7:00 a.m., time to get up, get ready for week 2 at his new school, and help his siblings get ready for their first day at their new school.

“Moises Ignacio Gutiérrez Jiménez de la Fuente!”

He heard his mom call his name again and sighed. Whenever she used his full name, he knew whatever she wanted to talk about wouldn't be good. The fact that she also threw in his second last name, Jiménez de la Fuente, meant this would be extra bad. He felt a strong urge to run and hide from what was coming.

“Oooh, what'd you do, Moises?” his twin sisters, Ruth and Maria, said in their weird twin synchronization, briefly popping their heads in his room before shining their biggest smiles at their mother, who waited in the hallway.

“Girls, come kiss me good morning, then go eat breakfast,” their mom said. The twins dutifully kissed their mom and headed downstairs, already dressed in their new school uniforms. *Great, way to have my back*, Moises thought. He sat up, made some feeble attempt at straightening the pile of sheets he slept in, and tried to put a happier look on his face. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Moises prepared to face his mother.

“Good morning, Mamá,” Moises said hesitantly, looking up at his mom with his best attempt at sad puppy eyes.

“Cut that out, you know that doesn't work on me anymore—I'm immune,” his mom said. She wasn't a big woman, but she sure could be intimidating, especially when all five feet two inches of her loomed over him. He wished his dad was here—he was bigger but less scary.

“*M'hijo*, I got an email from your math teacher, Ms. Martin.”

“Uh-huh,” Moises said cautiously, as he didn't know where this was going. He was sure he hadn't done anything wrong. There was a time to interrupt Mamá, and this wasn't it.

“She said you need to stay after school for help. Really, m'hijo? We just got here, and she's already pegged you as behind.” She paused ever so briefly to shake her head and look around at the still-packed bags of clothes, books, bedsheets, and free weights that peppered Moise's room. “I told your father that this,” she said, gesturing to the large room, “is just too much for you.” She sighed. “You haven't even made up your bed. You're sleeping in a nest. I knew you were spending too much time listening to music and reading those weird books. If you spent half the time you spend lifting weights and obsessing over your protein intake—”

“They're not weird, they're manga. You should just be happy I'm reading.” He smiled at her. He didn't frequently play the “I'm voluntarily reading” card, because it was a powerful one to play after the many nights of tears they shared during his first few years of school, when letters and sounds just didn't make sense.

“Oh, and look at this, Abel must have slept here last night. I wondered why he didn't wake me up,” Mamá commented, picking up the sleeping bag from the floor and tossing it at Moises, who was still sitting in bed. “Anyways, reading is great, but obviously you are not spending enough time on math because she says you are behind and need extra help.

What happened, m'hijo? Math was your thing when you were little. You used to be so good at it."

Moises sighed, stood up, and stretched. He wasn't a good student in the past tense—he is a good student. At his old school, he was always somewhere near the top of his class. At his new school, though, it seemed like everyone else was way ahead of him. Good didn't seem to cut it, at least not these first two weeks.

He knew how to work hard and turn in all the homework. He knew how this whole school game worked. His parents had always made sure of that. The oldest of four children, the first of his family born in the United States, Moises embodied the hopes and dreams of his mother and father alike, not to mention all the *abuelas*, *abuelos*, *tias*, *tios*, *titis*, *primos*... That's a lot of people.

Not that his family didn't do well for themselves. They made this move so Moises's mother could take her first job at a law firm so his family would be able to buy their first house. She had scraped and worked her way through law school with the grace and sleeplessness that Moises always thought characterized his mother. She would sit for the bar exam in two weeks, and it was pretty clear to all the Gutiérrez kids that they were not to stress her out. That was the last thing their father said just as he headed back to California to finish the contractor jobs he was in the middle of in the still-booming San Francisco Bay Area. He promised it was just for a few months. He kissed each kid goodbye, hugged Moises, and whispered, "You are my number one, m'hijo. Help your mother out with your sisters and brother. She wants this so bad."

"Sí, Papá."

"Especially Ruth," Moises's father said, getting into the back of the taxi. "She's so grown up that it scares me. In fact, if it's about Ruth, don't call me. I'm sure she will just take care of herself." He winked at Moises, then he left.

Moises thought of his father's words and the responsibility heaped on him. He decided to rationally explain the situation instead of throw fuel on his mother's fire. He was never one to stress his parents out; he was a much more easygoing kid.

Once more rubbing sleep from his eyes, he stepped toward her and said, "Mamá let me see the message." She handed over her phone and peeked at the screen, barely able to see around his shoulder. "M'hijo, I forget how tall you are getting," she said.

Moises scrolled through the message on his mother's phone. "Mamá, look, I'm not in trouble, see? Ms. Martin wrote, 'Some students have started an after-school math tutoring club, and I think Moises may benefit from some extra attention from these students. They are real go-getters! And they would welcome Moises to our school.'" He clicked off the screen. "This is just so I can, like, catch up or just make friends or something. There's a tutoring club, and they can help me catch up. It's no big deal." Thinking aloud, he said quietly, "Damn, it kind of sounds like she's setting me up with these nerds."

“Ay, well, OK. So maybe I overreacted a tiny bit,” his mother said, taking her phone back and stowing it in her pocket before flashing a tired smile at Moises. “I’m just so riled up from this move! It’s a lot to do alone, and I can’t wait for your *papi* to be back.” She walked to the hallway and moved to pick up a basket of dirty laundry that was at the top of the stairs.

“I get it, Mamá. No problem. I’m up now. Let me take care of this laundry.”

“Ay, m’hijo, you are a godsend. Abel is downstairs, I’ve got everyone fed, but you know how to get everyone off to school. You know I have to study, get settled in at my new job, and finish unpacking this crazy house!” she exclaimed, her voice bouncing off the high ceilings of their large home. “Wow, does a dollar go so much farther here than back home or what? We didn’t upend our lives for me to miss work, *señor*. You need to step up and help out for the family, m’hijo.”

“Yes, sir, Mamá.” Moises gave her a salute, almost dropping the basket of laundry and making her laugh.

“You crazy child. OK, I’m about 25 percent calmer. I’m getting a refill,” she said, waving her ever-present travel mug of *café con leche* before she disappeared down the stairs.

Moises sauntered down the stairs after her with the laundry basket, went to the laundry room, and started a load, as he had done countless times since he was eight years old. As the oldest child in a household with two working parents, Moises was used to keeping house. It wasn’t lost on him that his mother had referred to Oakland, where they used to live, as home. It was certainly going to take some getting used to before he called this place home. With the washer quietly doing its thing, he glanced at his phone. It was 7:05, meaning he had just enough time to do his morning weight lifting routine, slam a liquid breakfast, and get the twins and Abel off to school.

“I don’t get it,” Abel said, squirming under the wet comb his older brother was passing through his hair. “How come we have to go to the Catholic school when you get to go to regular school?”

“Oh, I don’t think the nuns would like you calling the secular school *regular*,” Moises teased his brother, focused on getting his unruly thick brown hair to lay in one direction. There was an almost 10-year difference between them, and Moises had looked out for his little brother ever since he was born. The twins, Ruth and Maria, now 12, had always been their mama’s babies. And under her progressive and fiery tutelage, they grew to be independent and mature young women. Their self-possessed nature could be intimidating to people. Though fiercely proud of his sisters, Moises also found them intimidating. But Abel—he was his brother’s brother.

Moises tilted his brother's face toward the overhead light to check for any dirt or smudges. "Besides, you know our parents can't afford to send all of us to private school. I did my time at St. Ignatius, then I got to go to public high school. Private high school is way more expensive than elementary school, so you just do your work and look forward to the future of not having to wear ugly navy sweaters to school." He patted his brother's hair playfully.

"Perfeyk-to," Moises said in an affected gringo accent, "*muy lindo tu pelo, caramba*," he continued, pretending to admire his work until Abel relented and offered a smile.

"I'm scared, Masha. The kids here are, like, a lot bigger and a lot meaner than back home."

"It's going to be fine, *Belito*. These kids are probably just like the kids back home... I mean, back in Oakland."

"No, they aren't. I saw the kids when we visited the school on Friday. They are *a lot* whiter," Abel said, rushing through his words. "I don't see half the Brown kids like there were at St. Ignatius. And they are like five times bigger. And in class, they are like all quiet and stuff. And then at recess they play these weird games—"

"Really, like five times bigger?" Moises was trying to do what his mom did, listen and ask questions. He already had an advantage that Abel confided the most in him. Now maybe he could get to the root of the fear and ease it.

"If you both are done feeling all your feelings, it's time to go. Abel, come here so I can fix your hair," Ruth said as she rolled her eyes at Moises's efforts. The brothers were out of time for their talk. While Ruth quickly repositioned Abel's coif, Maria appeared, ponytail immaculate and a perfect match to Ruth's along with matching vintage Air Jordans (a perfect white, of course), backpacks on, and uniforms ironed. The twins were identical down to their frowns. Moises had learned to identify Ruth by her slightly deeper brow furrow. She was being hella rude, but she was right: 7:45. Time to *marchar*. Sometimes Moises believed she had been the most appropriately named in the family—a biblical name, old like her soul, and damn, she was *ruthless* with her criticism.

Everyone grabbed their backpacks and headed out the door. Moises noticed his mom's car was gone. She must have slipped out while he was doing laundry. She had to be on the road to the law office fairly early to be home for afternoons with the kids. The four children walked together to the end of the driveway, then Moises parted ways with his sisters and brother, stopping for a moment to watch the twins each take one of Abel's hands and lead him to school.