



Lucky Chica

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BERTA PLATAS



St. Martin's Griffin



New York

CHAPTER ONE

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Won the lottery? Don't quit your job!

Plan before you stop that steady paycheck.

—*The Instant Millionaire's Guide to Everything*

Rosie Caballero rushed up the stairs of her apartment building, her heels echoing against the worn concrete risers, a tattered dog leash loose at her side. At its other end Tootie bunny-hopped up, poodle dreads bouncing, no doubt eager to get out of the cold that made her arthritic joints ache.

The little dog was probably nostalgic for the days when she'd been carried up and down the stairs by Rosie's mother.

Tough, Rosie thought. Tough on the dog and tough on her. Mami was gone and the two of them had to pull their own weight. She glanced at her watch.

Only fifteen minutes until Lana unlocked the front door at Cartwright Office Supply, and the knowledge made the key shake in Rosie's anxious fingers. If she was late to work it would be the third time this week and she would catch hell *and* get a letter in her file, so of course the decrepit lock was stuck.

Rosie jiggled the key, pulled on the door, then tugged up on the knob until she heard the click of the tumblers, a trick her father had shown her when she was just starting high school and was given a key of her own.



Before then her mother had been there to greet her after school, but at fourteen Rosie was considered old enough to stay by herself for a couple of hours in the late afternoon, and Mami had gotten a job with *los chinos*, what all of their Spanish-speaking neighbors called the Chinese-run dry cleaners' that had been a fixture on Buford Highway long before the rest of Asia and Latin America had discovered its cheap rents. The perfect place to start a business, a family, and a new life in America.

It had worked for her grandparents and their children, who had come in the mid-sixties and had become Americans as soon as possible, although they'd never let Rosie or her cousin Cheeto forget that they were from Cuba.

The minute Rosie unsnapped the dog's leash, Tootie ran inside, headed straight to the old bed pillow by the couch, and flopped over onto it, giving a good impression of a doggie faint. Rosie tossed the leash toward the dinette table, then glanced around at the empty apartment to make sure everything was as it should be. Too quiet, like the rest of her life.

She pictured her mother standing at the kitchen counter, chopping peppers in quick, precise strokes of the sharp knife, like the professional cook she'd always wanted to be, the smell of simmering onions and spices strong enough to make passing neighbors swoon from hunger.

"Like your Abuela taught me, when I was little in Ciego de Ávila," Mami would say, so that Rosie would remember, or maybe because she feared that she would forget her own birthplace.

Now Mami would never get old enough to forget, Rosie thought. She kissed two fingers and touched them to the beau-

tiful couple in her parents' wedding picture on the wall, careful not to touch the funeral card that was tucked into the frame.

Anamaría Suárez and José Antonio Caballero. Rosie had never read the back of the card, refused to. She'd stared at it blindly on the day it had been tucked into her nerveless fingers, just before they'd left for the church, and she'd put it in the wedding frame. Maybe it was superstitious not to remove it, but everyone had their little *manías*, as her Abuela always said.

Rosie pulled the door closed and rushed back down the stairs and across the faded, crumbling, age-pocked asphalt parking lot.

It hadn't looked this bad when her parents were alive.

Of course back then they considered the apartment a temporary stop on the road to home ownership. Papi had just been promoted to line manager at the General Motors plant and she and Mami had been busy planning her college wardrobe.

They'd been four weeks away from closing on their house, a sixty-year-old bungalow in Decatur, on the train line. Rosie would be able to get to Georgia State University in fifteen minutes, giving her time to have a part-time job at Cartwright Office Supply, too, even though Mami and Papi had objected, saying that she needed to concentrate on her schoolwork.

She stopped worrying about schoolwork the night a truck driver ran a red light while her parents' Subaru was in the intersection, killing Papi and seriously hurting her mother. Everyone had said that he'd died instantly, that it had been merciful.

Mami had lived another two weeks, although the doctors said that she was not really alive. At last Abuela had consented

to have the machines disconnected, and Mami's breathing grew harsh, then wispy, then stopped.

The coma had eaten up all of Rosie's college money. Rosie had promised God that she didn't need college if she could have her mom, and then Mami had died anyway.

The only thing she had left of her parents was the apartment and the little rituals that she'd shared with them. Eating black beans and rice on Friday nights, getting her nails done with Mami at Mirta's apartment downstairs, walking Tootie in the mornings and buying lottery tickets with Papi.

After, she'd gotten a job and although she hated it, she endured it, remembering the times Mami had come home from the dry cleaners', her face burned and hair frizzy from the steam.

"*Nena*, they can take your dignity, but your heart is inside. No one can see it. No one can touch it, unless you let them." Mami had winked at her, a hint of the sassy girl she'd once been. "*Los chinos* work just as hard. They are not mean, it's just hard work."

Rosie heard her mother's voice repeat those words often, in her memory, and she used it to shield herself from pain. When the other girls at work all went to lunch together and didn't invite her, when her boss Lana yelled at her because she'd gotten some detail of a spreadsheet wrong, or passed a phone call to the wrong person, Mami's voice soothed and armored her.

She was going to need that strength this morning, because she was not going to postpone checking her weekly lottery ticket, especially after last night, when a five-dollar bill had magically blown onto her shoe just as she'd thought she'd hit the lowest point ever.

The sun had just topped the trees now, and their silhouetted branches were dotted with buds that would soon swell. Spring in Atlanta was lush and beautiful, but today's harsh wind made it seem far away.

She hunched her shoulders against the unusually bitter March cold and hurried along the uneven dirt path that bordered Buford Highway. The city's big push to build sidewalks hadn't reached here yet. On the opposite curb was her destination, Mr. Kim's bodega, open for business and already busy.

She waited to cross the street, picturing Mami beside her, holding her hand, making her feel safe, just as she'd done when she was a little girl. It had been two years since the accident, but sometimes it felt as if it had happened yesterday. Or worse, that it would happen tomorrow, and she wouldn't be able to stop it.

Rosie glanced at her watch. Eight twenty-five. Lana, her clock-watching boss at Cartwright Office Supply, would be standing in the reception area at eight thirty sharp, arms crossed over her skinny chest and eyes shifting from her wristwatch to the front door.

Lana's bad temper was legendary. Rosie would have to slink in, smile an apology, and slide into her chair. She had extra reason to suck up to Lana.

Today was payday, and Rosie was so broke that yesterday she hadn't thought she'd have enough money to pay for Tootie's dog food. Luckily, when she got off the number-30 bus in her little dance dress on her way home last night, a sudden gust had slapped a damp five-dollar bill around her ankle. It was a sign from God, she'd thought, and she'd raced into Mr. Kim's to buy a lottery ticket two minutes before the ten thirty P.M. cutoff.

Afterward she'd regretted it, although she had enough left to get a couple more cans of discount dog food.

That she could afford to give Tootie a meager supper didn't offer her any consolation or make her feel better about the night's events. Her crush Rick had ditched her long before their date had ended, as if she'd been a casual pickup at the dance club and not someone he'd known for months.

She'd had a crush on Rick ever since she met him at the diner where her cousin Cheeto hung out with his landscaping coworkers. He always paid attention to her, looking right into her eyes when they talked. He was thrilling, five years older, already working at a job that paid a lot of money. A catch, she'd been told, although Cheeto warned her that he was a player. He couldn't be. He was handsome and classy, and very different from the other men she knew. Not rough like most of the other guys in the area. He was no mega-hot star Brad Merritt, either, but who could complain about that?

Cheeto laughed at her movie star obsession, but then, he laughed at everything, and Rosie had been the one smiling when Rick had finally asked her out. She'd totally forgotten her Brad Merritt craziness as she prepared for the date. Mami's friend Mirta had lent her a nice dress, and her high-heeled sandals from Payless were only three years old, and she'd coaxed her straight hair into a cute updo with Mirta's help.

Rick's eyes had been wide with surprise when she opened the door, and she'd felt confident that this would be a date to remember as she'd followed him down to his car. Two hours later, he'd spotted his old girlfriend, Nieves, on the dance floor, and he'd ditched Rosie. He'd turned away from her as if he

didn't even know her, and when she'd followed him to ask why, he'd glared at her and told her to take the bus home.

She'd been too humiliated to tell anyone. She'd whispered Mami's words as she waited for the bus. More of her typical bad luck—get what you want, and lose it anyway.

She knew she should wait until noon to check her ticket, when she walked to Tower Liquors to cash her check as usual, then rush to el Value—the Big Value Supermarket—to pay her utility bills so that her power and phone wouldn't get cut off. She'd have just enough left to pay her overdue rent, and if she ate some meals at Abuela's house, she could make it to next week's paycheck.

She hesitated, stepping aside for a woman pushing a stroller over the rough ground to pass her, her baby bundled up in blankets. Rosie pulled her old quilted nylon coat closer to ward off the wind. What would it hurt to check it now? She was already late for work.

Music blasted through the bodega's glass door and front window, weird for this early in the morning. She knew the inside would be warm and steamy with the smell of nuked burritos, the favorite breakfast food of hurried workers, but usually Mr. Kim played the news.

Her mouth watered at the thought of a hot burrito, limp from the microwave and leaking orange grease, but until she cashed her check at lunchtime she had no money. She'd grab a cup of coffee at work and put extra creamer and sugar into it.

She pulled the little paper lottery square from her pocket

and held it up to compare it to the winning numbers Mr. Kim had posted in his window.

This morning, Mr. Kim's big block letters read: 14-23-03-16-7 MEGA BALL 5. Below he'd scrawled, \$600 MILLION! Six hundred million dollars, a ridiculous amount. Enough for six hundred people to be millionaires. The ticket fluttered in the wind and she grasped it more tightly and compared the numbers to Mr. Kim's impromptu poster.

It was a match.

She stared at it for a second, then checked the number again and again, holding the ticket with fingers that no longer trembled just from the cold.

"Let it be real," she whispered. Her shaking fingers smoothed the crumpled MegaBucks lottery ticket and held it higher. Had her eyesight gone blurry?

She glanced around. The neon signs of the liquor store on the opposite corner, dim now in daylight, were in sharp focus. So was the check-cashing store and the *botánica* next to it, the vacant discount shoe store and the cars pushed against the white crosswalk, edging forward, waiting for the light to change. There was nothing wrong with her eyesight.

Her heart beat faster and her fingers trembled. She blinked and focused on the numbers in front of her again, holding the crumpled slip next to the posted winning numbers. She wasn't seeing things. *Dios mío*, it was true. Her mind raced with all of the ways her life would change. She wouldn't ever have to skip paying a bill, or sigh over clothes she couldn't afford.

She could tell Lana that she'd never answer the phone for her again. And her grandmother wouldn't have to be a hotel

maid, and her cousin Cheeto could give up landscaping, working outdoors in all kinds of weather. She had to tell them. Joy turned to paranoia, and she snatched the ticket back down and looked around quickly.

None of the bored drivers in the city-bound morning logjam seemed to be looking at her.

Life seemed normal. Next door, a small knot of guys huddled together in the parking lot of the gas station, waiting for day jobs. On the opposite corner, Dog the crack dealer was lurking, sipping from a fast-food coffee cup, seemingly impervious to the chill wind. No one looked at her or the lottery ticket in her hand.

She hitched her tote bag higher on her shoulder and stuck her head in the bodega's door, and was immediately hit with the scent of spicy meat and corn tortillas from the corner microwave, and the blare of trumpet-heavy salsa. Mr. Kim was dancing with his wife, hands in the air. The narrow aisles of the store were crowded with well-wishers. Of course, she thought, the store that sold the ticket would receive a cash bonus.

"Mr. Kim, may I use your pen?" Rosie's voice had a little quaver, but not bad.

"What? I can't hear you. Come in. The burritos are on me this morning." Mr. Kim twirled his wife. "I sold the winning ticket, Rosie. Jenny and I are rich!"

Jenny Kim waved at her, grinning, still dancing her Charleston/salsa boogie.

"Congratulations." Rosie reached around the register for the blue ballpoint next to the "give a penny" tray. She turned the ticket over and signed the back, then tossed the pen onto the counter.

Her hand trembled as she refolded the ticket and shoved it back into her pocket, anxious to get away. She had to tell her grandmother and her cousin.

“Hey, that’s the Fox News truck,” someone behind her called out.

A camera crew? She pictured waves of people chasing her for her ticket and shuddered. She had to get out of here. She backed out of the door and pushed it closed before Mr. Kim could remember that he’d sold her a ticket late last night.

Should she go to work? Lana would yell at her, a good incentive to call in sick, but at the moment she was still broke, and she couldn’t just abandon her job, especially on payday.

She’d work until lunch, collect her paycheck, then go to cash it and stop by Abuela’s afterward to tell her the good news. This wasn’t the kind of news you could tell someone over the phone.

It was her grandmother’s day off from her hotel housekeeping job, and by noon her little apartment would be filled with her canasta buddies, but she could pull her aside to tell her she could quit her job. No more pushing the laundry cart, not ever again.

Rosie hurried down the street, the ticket seeming to burn in her pants pocket, her mind awl with plans. *Sign, redeem, and disappear.* That’s the advice she’d heard in every TV interview she’d ever seen with lottery winners.

She needed a financial planner. And she needed to keep her mouth shut. Despite the cold, she felt sweaty, almost feverish. She glanced at her Timex. Eight forty. If she’d hung around the front of Kim’s bodega a moment longer Dog would’ve thought that she was a competitor.

Doubt struck her. What if she'd imagined it? The light had changed, stopping traffic. She hurried across to the Quik Mart on the opposite corner. They sold lottery tickets, too. She'd double-check the numbers, just in case Mr. Kim had written them down wrong.

At the Quik Mart, she grabbed a preprinted lottery slip from the pile on the counter next to a display of the latest tabloid magazines. Brad Merritt, her favorite movie star, grinned at her from the cover, more luck. She knew everything about Brad, and it seemed he was smiling right at her.

"Hey, Rosie, heading to work?" Jorge Canoso's easy smile met her from above, where he was stocking the overhead cigarette rack. He climbed down from the ladder.

Darn. Jorge *would* be working today. She'd gone out with him occasionally, mostly because he looked like Jake Gyllenhaal, if she'd had a few drinks and squinted.

"What can I get for you?" Jorge asked.

She opened her mouth, and then quickly shut it again. She'd almost started to tell him. Instead, she snatched the tabloid with Brad on the cover and dropped it on the counter. "Just this."

The magazine flopped open to a story titled, "Won the Lottery? Ten Things You Should Do from *The Instant Millionaire's Guide to Everything!*"

She slapped her hand down on it, closed it, and smiled at him.

Jorge rang up her purchase, and she paid him with coins she'd dug out of the couch the night before, then shoved the magazine into her tote and ran around to the side of the building, away from the bustle of people pumping gas and buying coffee.

She glanced at the slip. No surprise. The MegaBucks numbers matched hers. She inhaled shakily and leaned against the red-brick wall.

As of this morning, she, Rosa Maria Caballero, was worth six hundred million dollars. Now what did she do?

CHAPTER TWO

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Sign that ticket, and don't tell anyone!

—*The Instant Millionaire's Guide to Everything*

There were three things Rosie wanted to do now that she was richer than anyone she knew:

1. Quit her job and tell Lana Cartwright and her brown-nosing Cartwright Office Supply employees that her days of being treated like a low-class intruder were over.
2. Shop at Tiffany's. Just the sound of the store's name was enough to make her heart beat faster. Her fingers, neck, and ears felt naked, but she'd soon make them sparkle. No more flea-market jewelry for Rosie Caballero.
3. Make Rick regret that he'd ditched her for Nieves. What should have been special had turned into one of the worst nights of her life.

She had no idea what to do next, except get to the office as fast as she could, then face the scolding awaiting her. She'd already been warned about her tardiness. Lana was probably drawing up Rosie's termination papers for job abandonment. She felt the old twinge of panic, even though she'd never again have to rush



into the office, coat off and purse in her hand so that she could pitch them under her desk and look as if she'd gotten there earlier.

She'd only been working at Cartwright for a month when her parents had been hit by the truck that killed her father and put Mami in a coma. Lana's piggy eyes had narrowed when she'd asked if she could leave early to relieve her grandmother at her mom's bedside. She'd acted as if Rosie wanted to leave early to hang out with her girlfriends, instead of to sit by her mother, listening to her gasping breath as the ventilator pushed air through her dying lungs.

Despite the doctors, Rosie was sure that her mother would wake up, if only to say good-bye. Lana looked at her disapprovingly and said, "Do what you have to do." Which turned out to mean "I won't forget what a slacker you are."

Rosie imagined stepping out of a stretch limo and walking into the office wearing furs and diamonds, and not the little rings and earrings her boss flaunted as if they were the crown jewels. Rosie would wear real carats, and lots of them.

She laughed, a strangled chortle that made a passing woman walk a little faster. Rosie stepped carefully around her, not wanting to pitch into traffic and become a hood ornament before claiming her prize.

At the corner, she waited impatiently for the light to change, thinking how ironic it was that she was sitting on millions, yet she was on foot, her rent and utilities were overdue, and she was in danger of losing her job.

She had a quick image of going to the Cash Advance store to get a fast 50 percent interest loan against six hundred million.

Not likely, and she'd have nothing until she claimed her winnings at the lottery office downtown. She needed this paycheck, or she'd be living under the bridge at Jimmy Carter Boulevard, a homeless multimillionaire.

Storm clouds followed her as she hurried up Buford Highway. The coming rain meant that Cheeto was probably at Harold's Diner up the street. Landscapers usually got rainy days off, with no pay, of course. She walked faster, feeling lighter on her feet. Cheeto's landscaping days were over. She couldn't wait to tell him, but first she had to get to the office.

Cartwright Office Supply occupied a squat gray concrete building with offices in the front and a warehouse in back that was filled mostly with the photocopy paper that was their bread and butter.

The dark-tinted glass hid the interior. Rosie hurried up the short sidewalk and pushed open the jingling door. No hope of sneaking in.

As expected, Lana stood under the wall clock that read nine o'clock. She looked at her watch, then pinned Rosie to the floor with a glare, pivoted on her short heel, and stomped back to her office.

Rosie took off her coat, carefully transferring the ticket and the winning-number slip to her wallet, then stashing it in her tote bag under the desk as she turned to hang up her coat.

Lana reappeared, followed by one of her toadies, a bland girl with limp, mousy hair and a malicious smile.

"Rosa, follow me. Pat will answer phones."

Pat kept her eyes on the phone, as if it needed to be watched closely.

Rosie calmly picked up the tote and shouldered it as she stood.

“You won’t need that,” Lana said.

“I don’t want to leave it.”

Pat stiffened and narrowed her eyes.

Rosie smiled at her. The ticket was already changing her life. Yesterday she would have been shaking and fighting tears, wondering if she’d ever get another job that paid as well as this one.

Lana’s office was crowded with knickknacks, presents from vendors, but her desk was uncluttered, empty except for a personnel folder lined up in the middle, tagged with the colored stickers that corresponded with the first two letters of the employee’s last name. This one was marked “CA.” Caballero. Rosie’s heart thumped despite her previous calm.

“Sit, Rosa.” Lana waited until she was seated, tote bag on her lap like a shield.

“I’m sure this does not come as a surprise. You’ve been warned in writing about your tardiness, and today you appear half an hour late.”

Rosie started to speak but Lana held up a hand. “Not yet.” She launched into a speech about the team, company values, and blah, blah, blah. Rosie felt numb. She just wanted her paycheck.

“Am I boring you, Rosa?” Lana’s sharp voice made her realize that she was nodding off.

“Am I fired?”

Lana’s eyes widened. She looked down at the folder. “Well . . .”

Rosie stood up. “Then I quit.” She held the tote bag like a baby as she walked out, followed by a sputtering Lana.

“You can’t quit and decide to come back here, you know. If you leave, it’s for good.”

Rosie smiled at Pat, whose eyes were wide. “Move aside, Mousy. I still quit, Lana. I’ve had enough of you and your micromanaging ways.” She grabbed her coat from its hook and pushed past Lana and into the March morning. The air seemed crisp and fresh, full of possibilities. Then she remembered she hadn’t gotten her paycheck.

CHAPTER THREE

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Choose a financial advisor, and make sure he or she is reputable. Don't let yourself be cheated!

—*The Instant Millionaire's Guide to Everything*

Rosie debated going back for the check, but kept walking. No use spoiling a good exit, and Cheeto was getting paid today, too. His check could tide them over until they claimed their prize. Who cared if they cut off her phone? Tomorrow she'd buy a fancy little cell phone, and one of those silvery cockroach-looking things to put in her ear.

The bored drivers caught in traffic watched her stride by, revitalized by her confrontation with Lana.

Little do you know, she mentally told the drivers, *I am your dream come true, the person who hit it big*. She might have to share the prize with someone who'd picked the same numbers, but it was so much money that she didn't care.

She'd laughed whenever she heard lottery winners say that they'd never stop working. Who were they kidding? As of today, Cartwright's Queen of Micromanagement was out one receptionist.

She'd need an honest attorney, but how could she know whom to trust? The telephone directory didn't list them according to integrity. Maybe the lottery people could recommend someone,



or Abuela might know. Rosie's grandmother worked in a fancy downtown hotel, and she knew a lot about how rich people lived. She stored away every little fact she overheard. Abuela could probably write a book about how to be rich.

Rosie imagined what Cheeto would say about her news. He'd always dreamed of being his own boss. He could do that now. They could all do anything they wanted.

She stopped in front of the battered metal-sided trailer that was Harold's Diner. She'd tell Cheeto first, if he was here, and they could tell Abuela together.

The windows were less grimy than usual, and between the heads of the occupants of the booths that lined the diner's front wall, she could see Cheeto at the counter, waving wildly, talking with his hands, as usual. The guy next to him shoveled food into his mouth, while the cook listened, a spatula in his hand. Rosie took a deep breath, and with her hand protectively shielding the ticket in her pocket, she climbed the three steps and walked in.

Harold's was always packed at mealtimes. The tinkling of the bell on the door went unheard in the loud mix of conversations and CNN blaring the morning news from a TV high up in a corner. The wind slammed the door closed behind her, pushing her.

She stumbled in, then recovered her footing and crossed the cracked linoleum toward the counter, where Cheeto was now slouched over a plate of eggs and bacon, listening to the craggy, skinny guy next to him. Some of his coworkers were sitting in a nearby booth, but Cheeto hated booths, hated feeling shut in.

"A Corvette, that's what I'll buy. No, make that two. Chicks really love 'em." The skinny man leaned closer and grinned. He

was missing several teeth. He thought a Corvette would increase his chances with women? Pathetic. Major dentistry might make that happen. Might. He did remind her, however, that now she could afford to get her teeth whitened.

“Good timing, Rosie. Want to help out for an hour?” Fred the fry cook’s thick Eastern European accent made him sound like Bela Lugosi. He was cleaning off a table, which meant they were really shorthanded.

“Not today.” Not ever. She’d worked at the diner off and on for extra cash, but she’d never have to again.

Cheeto turned to face her, surprised. His round face, floppy brown curls, and big brown eyes made him look like a cute little boy. To her, he was an annoying younger brother. His many girlfriends described him differently.

His parents had died when he was little, and their grandmother had raised him. Abuela had begged Rosie to move in with them when Mami had finally died, but Rosie had refused. The tiny apartment held cherished memories of her parents. They’d dreamed of owning a house, of Rosie going to college, of retiring to the beach, and none of those dreams had come true.

“Why aren’t you at work?” Cheeto tapped his heavy white china coffee cup, a signal to Fred for a refill.

“I decided to take the rest of the day off.” Rosie dropped her canvas tote bag on the floor next to an empty stool.

“At nine in the morning?” Cheeto frowned and grabbed her elbow to pull her close. “Did you get fired?” His whisper was loud enough that Fred turned around to look.

Rosie pulled loose, embarrassed. “No, but something big happened. I’ll tell you later.”

“You can work for me, Rosie,” Fred called. “I’ll make room in the schedule for you.”

“Thanks, Fred, but I’m cool. Really.”

“Is it Rick? I heard he’s back with Nieves.” Cheeto’s brows twisted and he clenched his fists. “I never liked that guy.”

Rosie’s stomach ached. Word had spread fast about Rick and Nieves. She wondered if last night’s pathetic escape from the club was now part of the story.

“Is this your girlfriend, Cheeto? She’s hot.” The Corvette guy’s eyes were on her, doing a mental clothes peel.

“She’s my cousin, Grant, and you’d better back off.”

“You threatening me, little boy?” Grant the Corvette guy stood up menacingly, skinny lips flattened to a straight line.

“Take it outside,” Fred warned. He turned back to his grill. “Sheesh. It’s only breakfast time.”

“Yeah, dude. Calm down,” Cheeto said. “Now what I want is a loaded H2 Hummer with a matching Mini Cooper as a spare in the back.”

Corvette guy stared at him for a second, then grunted. “All size, no style.” He sat down again.

Rosie didn’t know if he was talking about the Hummer or Cheeto. She plucked the biscuit from Cheeto’s plate and bit into it.

“We’re deciding what cars we’ll get when we win the lottery.” Cheeto took a swig of coffee.

Her face muscles twitched from the effort to keep her secret. “Be careful what you wish for.”

“Yeah. Grant here wants two Corvettes. I want a Hummer. What about you, Rosita?”

She gave him the evil glare. She hated being called Rosita. "I'm getting a nice big Mercedes sedan."

"Old-school," Cheeto scoffed. "But a good choice for you, since you'll need a driver. Or you can learn to drive." He faked fear. "Watch out, Atlanta. Rosie's on the road."

"Can I talk to you outside?" If she didn't tell him the news she'd die, right here on Fred's grimy black and white tiles.

"I think she's hinting that she needs a ride home," Grant the Corvette guy said.

"Sure. Soon as I get my Hummer." Cheeto grinned, a disarming dental display that made women melt. It didn't work on this crowd, and Rosie was immune from repeated exposure.

She rolled her eyes. "*Pendejo*," she muttered.

"Such language. Shame on you. I'm telling Abuela."

"Right. This is her day off. Interrupt her canasta game and she'll cut you out of her will." Of course, she'd totally forgive Rosie for *her* interruption, as soon as she heard the news.

He laughed. "Oh yeah, I'll never get that set of Kmart dishes and the collection of creepy glass clowns."

Thunder made the windows vibrate.

"Looks like that storm's finally here." Fred ambled up from the fry baskets and aimed the duct-tape-mended remote control at the TV high in the retro diner's corner. CNN disappeared, replaced by the Weather Channel.

"Look at that." Fred pointed with a sauce-stained finger. The weather map showed Atlanta in the middle of a brilliant yellow streak dotted in dangerous reds and purples. "The front's moving through fast, but it looks hellacious. Guess you boys won't be working."

Rosie watched, dismayed. Even if Cheeto gave her a ride to Abuela's, she'd get soaked, and she'd just straightened her hair yesterday. Twenty minutes of styling down the drain.

"What about you, Fred? What kind of car would you get?" Cheeto picked at his nails with the twisted edge of a paper napkin, a habit that made Rosie grit her teeth.

Cheeto's nickname wasn't some funny Latino *apodo*. It came from his love of a certain brand of crunchy cheese-flavored snacks. As a kid his fingers were always coated with cheesy orange residue, and eventually, everyone forgot that his real name was Enrique.

Now the cheesy powder only accumulated under his fingernails, not that it was much of an improvement. She still found him gross, just like a little kid.

"I don't need a car," Fred said. "This lottery fever is ridiculous. The MegaBucks lottery hits six hundred million dollars and the entire city of Atlanta goes insane. I'm tired of hearing about it."

"I agree," Rosie said. "Buying a ticket is one thing, but spending grocery money on a game of chance? *Pura locura*. Totally nuts." Especially since she knew who held a winning ticket.

Cheeto reached up, snatched the remote control from Fred, and quickly turned the TV back to the news. The cook threw his hands up and stomped off, muttering in Bosnian.

"Listen to this one, guys." Herb Sanchez, a fellow landscaper, had come to stand next to her. He read out loud, stabbing each word with a finger as big and red as a chorizo. "Won the Lottery? Ten Things You Should Do from *The Instant Millionaire's Guide to Everything!*"

Rosie glanced down at her tote bag, which gaped open at her feet. The tabloid was gone. "You went into my bag!"

"What is that, the *Star*?" Cheeto laughed.

Rosie snatched the tabloid from the counter, leaving Herb pointing to the stained Formica. "Leave my stuff alone."

"Wait till I'm rich, baby," Herb said. "You'll be sorry you were so mean to me."

She leaned back. Herb needed a mint.

"Yeah, me too." Grant the Corvette guy clapped a hand on Herb's shoulder. Herb glared at him. The hand pulled away.

She leaned close to her cousin. "I've got something really important to tell you. Privately."

"Ooh, *privately*, Cheeto." Herb Sanchez laughed.

Rosie rolled her eyes and stuffed the magazine back into her tote. She looked around to make sure she had everything, grabbed her jacket, and waved at Cheeto. "Ready to go?"

Cheeto pretended to look scared. "*¿Con el tiempo de madre?* I don't want to drive in that big storm. We'd better stay here."

"We have enough time for you to take me to Abuela's house since you're not working any more today." *Your landscaping days are over.* Too bad her cousin couldn't read her mind.

"Whatever. The guys were headed over to Dave and Buster's by the mall to shoot pool. Go on without me, bros. I'll join up with you later." Cheeto grabbed her by the coat collar and started to drag her toward the door. "Come on, cookie. I can't wait to find out what's so damn important."

"You are such a jerk." She wrestled free of her obnoxious cousin and straightened her jacket. It was hard to act mature with him around.

Maybe she wouldn't tell him at all. It would serve him right to shovel manure and plant flowers at apartment complexes while she and Abuela lived in a mansion with servants. That wouldn't work, of course. Their soft-hearted grandmother would give him anything he wanted.

"What's so important that you ditched work?"

"I'll tell you when we get to Abuela's house."

Cheeto snorted. "They were right. It's just an excuse for a ride."

As usual, he drove his truck as if NASCAR scouts were watching him from every street corner. Okay, so Rosie knew there was no such thing as NASCAR scouts, but he *was* on a first-name basis with all the local cops. He skidded to a stop in front of Abuela's apartment building.

"Aren't you coming up?"

"Nope. I'm going to catch up with my friends. We're in the middle of a big landscaping job in Buckhead and we'll be back at it tomorrow, pouring cement and laying railroad ties. I don't know when I'll get another day off. But just to show you what a great cousin you have, I'll take you to work in the morning. We're coming right by your apartment around seven. I'll be in the big truck, but there's room for you in back."

"I'm not going to work tomorrow."

He frowned. "That bitch fired you. I knew it." He slapped the steering wheel. "You need any money? I know you're good for it."

She looked at him in silence. "I was thinking how immature you are, and here you're offering me money and rides to work." She dug in her pocket. "I didn't get fired." She pulled out the

folded ticket, her signature visible on the back. "I won the lottery."

Cheeto stared at the ticket in her hand. "You're shitting me. This is a MegaBucks ticket. You get four numbers? That's probably worth something." He sat straighter, excited. "Four and the big ball, that's more than a thousand bucks for sure."

"All the numbers, *primo*. All of them. I double- and triple-checked it." She took a deep breath, but it didn't stop her shaking. His excitement had brought back the thrill, and she was jumpy all over again. "It's why I left work early."

Cheeto's blank gaze was aimed at the raindrops running down the windshield; his mouth was slack, but gears were spinning behind his eyes. He gulped. "The news said a single ticket won."

"A single ticket?" She threw her arms around him and let out a yell. "I hadn't heard. I thought maybe there would be more than one winner. We don't have to share. We won the whole thing!" She released him and held out the ticket, along with the winning-numbers slip she'd picked up at Jorge's Quik Mart.

He took them, fingers trembling, eyes wide.

"Rosie," he whispered. "You're rich."

"*We're* rich," she corrected. "And Abuela. That's why I wanted you to bring me here. It wasn't safe to tell you at the diner."

She tugged the two slips from his fingers and put them deep into her coat pocket. "We have to tell Abuela. Ready?"

"Ready?" He whooped, opened the truck door, and started dancing in the rain. Rosie laughed and joined him. They jumped into puddles, yelling and splashing.

Their grandmother appeared on her tiny, plant-filled balcony.

"Rosie, Cheeto! *¿Están locos?*" She frowned, hands on her

hips. “What are you two doing? You’re acting like a couple of babies. Rosie, I called your office. What’s going on? Come in right now before someone calls the police.” She and her frown disappeared inside.

Water dripped into Rosie’s eyes. “My shoes are ruined. I’d better buy new ones.” She giggled.

“Get a million pairs. Hell, get six million.” He pointed at his beloved old pickup. “Look—my truck has a dent in it. Oops. Better get a new one.” He threw his head back and laughed, drinking down the rain.

She shivered. Water had dripped inside her coat. She was ready for Abuela’s warm apartment. “Race you to the door.”

They ran up the small concrete steps outside and then thundered up the interior stairs to their grandmother’s second-floor apartment.

“Wait till you hear our news.” Cheeto’s voice reverberated from the concrete walls.

“You need to sit down to hear this, Abuela.” Rosie pulled at her freezing-wet pants legs, trying to get them away from her skin.

Abuela stood in her doorway, face grim and arms loaded with folded towels. “I know your news. You got fired, and you are going to tell me why, but not until you’ve dried off.”

“I didn’t get fired—”

Her grandmother paid her no heed. “Take your coats and shoes off right here, then go straight to the bathroom. Rosita, take a shower first. My robe is on the hook behind the door.

“Enrique, go to my bedroom and put on your *abuelo*’s robe until she’s finished.”

“But Abue, we have something huge to tell you,” Cheeto said. He hadn’t complained when Abuela called him by his real name, a sure sign he was excited.

“Later, later.” Abuela pushed him down the hall.

Rosie rushed through her shower, afraid Cheeto would tell their grandmother the news before she got there.

“*Mucho mejor*,” Abuela said when Rosie entered the living room wrapped in a velour robe. “Much better. I thought something awful had happened to you. I called and called your office, *niña*. Different people kept answering the phone.”

She wished she could have been a fly on Cartwright Office Supply’s wall. The employees were probably all buzzing about how she’d quit. Or maybe Lana said she’d been fired. “I left work. Something great’s happened, Abuelita.” She threw her arms around her grandmother and kissed her.

Cheeto glared at her from the hallway. “You didn’t tell her, did you? Is there any hot water for me?” He made signals with his chin, eyes wide. *Don’t tell her*.

She shook her head. “When we’re all together. And there’s plenty of hot water. I took a quick one.”

“I don’t know what the two of you were thinking. Behaving like little children, and then coming up here all wet and leaving poodles on my floor.”

“Puddles. A poodle is what Tootie is.” Another thing for Rosie to add to her to-do list—what to do for her old dog, Tootie, who had once been her mother’s beloved companion. Doggie spa treatments, gourmet food. From now on Tootie would live better than Paris Hilton’s dog.

Abuela sighed. “Yes, yes. Puddle. Forty years you’d think I’d learn better English. *Impossible.*”

“So why were you calling me at work?” Rosie kissed her grandmother’s soft cheek.

“To invite you to dinner. My friends are bringing potluck and there will be more than enough for you. After our card game we’re going to eat, then play some more. Let me tell you, they are not happy with you at your office. I could tell in that Lana’s voice when she told me you didn’t work there anymore.”

Abuela folded her hands over her stomach, her signal for “you may commence with the excuses.”

Thunder crashed overhead, and the lights flickered.

Abuela gasped and crossed herself.

Cheeto appeared dressed in oversized khakis and a guayabera that hung on him. Their grandfather had been a big guy. He’d been dead for fifteen years and Abuela still kept some of his clothes. Cheeto waved a flashlight around, and then set it on Abuela’s dining room table. “Just in case.”

Abuela clasped her hands together. “So, the big news. The one that requires both of you here, and neither of you at work.” She pursed her lips, waiting for the worst.

“Sit down, make yourself comfortable.” Rosie sat at the dinette table, and Cheeto sprawled on the love seat that served as a sofa in the tiny room.

Abuela parked her gnarled fists on her ample hips. “I don’t have to sit down. What do you want me to know? Is it drugs? I don’t want to hear about drugs.”

“Not drugs. Did you see that a single ticket won the Mega-Bucks lottery?”

“Yes. Which just goes to show that we shouldn’t gamble. All that money wasted. How much did you spend, *m’ija*? Ten dollars? That’s what you spent the last time.”

Rosie tried to interrupt, but Abuela was on a roll.

“Ten dollars wasted, you know? You could have bought a chicken and some vegetables and made a nice dinner. Food for several days. Or even dog food for your poor *perrita*, that little dog that your Mami loved so much, may she rest in peace.” She crossed herself again.

Cheeto had both hands over his mouth. Suppressed laughter squeezed tears out of his eyes.

“One dollar.” Rosie almost shouted the words. She’d jumped up and now loomed over Abuela. “And it wasn’t wasted, because I won. I won—”

“You don’t have to shout. I am not deaf. And—”

“—I won the lottery.” Rosie felt deflated. She turned away and sat down hard on the dinette chair. This wasn’t the way she’d pictured it.

She heard a thump behind her.

“*Caray*,” Cheeto yelled and leaped over the coffee table. Glass clown figurines went flying.

Their grandmother had fainted and was stretched out on the floor.

“Abue!” Rosie looked around wildly. “Smelling salts. When I fainted at Mass once they woke me up with them.”

“Salt?” Cheeto was useless. He was patting Abuela’s hand as if that would wake her up.

She didn't have time to find smelling salts, if Abuela even had some. She ran to the fridge and got an ice cube. Holding it gingerly, she dabbed it against her grandmother's throat. Two dabs into her improvised treatment, the cube squirted from between her fingers and slipped into the neckline of her grandmother's cotton top.

Abuela sat straight up, yelling. Rosie had a second to think that she looked just like the Cryptkeeper coming out of its coffin before she tugged at the back of her grandmother's blouse and let the ice cube slide to the floor. The old lady gasped, relieved.

"Are you okay? I'm so sorry," Rosie cried, her arms around her grandmother's cushiony shoulders. "I was trying to wake you up."

"With ice? Cheeto, what are you doing?" She pulled her hand out of his. "*Gracias*, both of you, but you almost gave me a heart attack."

"I tried to help." Cheeto sounded wounded.

Abuela flapped her arms dismissively. "I'm glad neither of you decided to go into medicine."

"You made a joke. You must be okay." Rosie got to her feet and offered her grandmother a hand. "Didn't I tell you to sit down?"

Abuela leaned on them, and they helped her stand up. She grinned. "Is it true? You won the lottery?"

"Yes, it's true. I couldn't call you—"

"How much? Can you pay your student loan? Or maybe buy a little *carrito*? Maybe a used Honda. I hear they're reliable."

Cheeto jumped up and spread his arms wide. "*La gorda*, Abuela. The MegaBucks."

Abuela's rumpled face sagged. Her mouth opened, then snapped shut. "You won," she whispered. She flapped her hands, excited again. "*Dios mío*. How much, how much?"

"Six hundred million. After taxes, I think it'll be about three hundred million."

The screaming stopped, replaced by an open-mouthed stare. "*Madre de Dios*."

They heard another thump. It was Cheeto's backside landing on the dining room chair again. "Three hundred million. It just hit me how much that is."

She hadn't really stopped to think about it until now. Her knees felt rubbery, and she felt behind her for the love seat, then dropped into it.

"Who else knows?" Abuela reached over the coffee table, littered with toppled figurines, and grabbed Rosie's hand. "Who have you told?"

"No one else," Rosie said. "Just the two of you. We have to redeem the ticket at the lottery office downtown."

"What time do they close?"

"Five, but Abuela, we don't have to go today. It's better to wait a few days and decide what to do."

"Decide?" Cheeto was up again, dancing around the living room. "What's to decide? We're going to act like millionaires. Big cars, great clothes, every cable channel, season tickets to the Braves, and trips to Vegas for the boxing."

"Pick up the *payasos* you knocked over, Cheeto. They're Murano glass." Abuela got up and sat at the dinette table.

"By next week, I'll have servants to pick up all the *payasos* I

knock over.” He picked up the heavy glass clown figurine and put it back on the coffee table.

“I’ll have a servant just to tell the other servants to pick up *my* stuff.” Rosie helped set the table straight.

Abuela threw her arms up. “I’ll be in a big enough house that I won’t have to listen to the two of you order your servants around.” She surveyed her apartment. “Actually, I want to stay here.”

“You can’t be serious, Abuela. We can get a huge house. We can get three huge houses.” No more miserable apartment. Rosie didn’t think her grin could get any bigger.

“On the beach,” Cheeto added. “I want to live near the surf.”

“We have to plan,” Rosie said.

“*Claro que sí*,” Abuela said. “And meanwhile I’ll make us *un cafecito*.”

They huddled around the little dinette table and planned their next step surrounded by the aroma of brewing Cuban coffee.

“The best thing,” Abuela said, pouring the thick black coffee into tiny porcelain cups, “is that now Rosie will be able to find a good husband. Someone decent, not like that Rick person.”

Old ladies had big ears.

Cheeto dumped a hill of sugar into his tiny coffee cup. “For three hundred million dollars, she could buy one.”

“Buy a boyfriend? That’s interesting.” Now Rosie had to worry if men were interested in her for her money. A first.

“So what happens now?” Cheeto’s eyes were bright, and he squeezed his hands together like he did at ballgames when the Braves were behind and at bat with the bases loaded.

Rosie thought. “Now I go home and pack only the stuff I want to keep. I don’t think I want to go back to stay in my apartment.” The good times she’d shared with her parents made the little rooms precious to her after they’d died, but it had been years ago. She was twenty-four now. A giggle erupted as she thought of how much she could afford.

“You can move in here with me,” Abuela said quickly.

Cheeto rolled his eyes. “Give me a break. You aren’t really thinking of staying in this dump, are you? We can live large now.”

Abuela’s eyebrows rose in indignation. “Dump? I belong to the neighborhood watch. There are no gangs here, like over at Rosie’s—you’ll pardon me for pointing that out, *cariño*—and all of my friends live here.”

Her cousin shrugged. “I’m just saying. I want to live in a huge mansion, so you’ll have an extra bedroom. At least I don’t have to worry about whether you can pay the rent by yourself.”

“So you are packing up today and tonight,” Abuela said, turning her back to Cheeto and addressing Rosie. “What happens tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we go early to the lottery office downtown and claim the prize.” Rosie bit her lip. “Actually, the advice the experts give is to find a financial advisor and hide for a long time, then come forward when everyone’s forgotten about it, but I can’t wait.”

Abuela grunted. “Especially since you have no job.”

“Do you think you could go back to changing sheets and cleaning toilets at the hotel, knowing that you have three hundred million dollars?”

Her grandmother gasped and put a hand to her throat. “Every time you say how much, I am amazed again. What if it’s not true?”

Rosie thought of the ticket in her pocket and suddenly was afraid to pull it out. “Then I’m out of work and have no place to live. I’ll move in with you and find another job. Fred said I could help at the diner. I can do that until something else comes along.” Her heart thudded as she spoke, because she wanted the money so much. But it was true, she thought. She’d double-checked.

Abuela opened her arms, and Rosie went to sit next to her on the love seat, to be enveloped in her grandmother’s love.

“Tomorrow we claim our prize.” She kissed Rosie’s forehead. “Go pack your things, *nena*. My friends will be here soon for the canasta game.”

“You can’t tell them,” Rosie said, pulling away from Abuela. “We can’t tell anyone until we’ve claimed the money.”

“Why? Because someone might steal the ticket?” Cheeto’s grin faded as he considered the possibility.

“I signed the back of it, so I don’t know if anyone else can claim it now, but they might hurt us to get it.” Rosie shrugged. “I’m not sure, though.”

“Then why wait?” Cheeto stood up. “Let’s go. We’ll claim it right now.”

“But the financial advisor—”

“I agree,” Abuela said. “We can do it now.”

“Then what? Just go downtown to the lottery office, claim the ticket, and come back home?” Rosie shook her head. “We need a plan for afterwards. For instance, we shouldn’t come back here

for a few days. I read a great article in the *Star* that says lottery winners should stay in a hotel.”

“The La Quinta by I-285 is nice,” Cheeto offered.

“La Quinta?” Abuela looked offended. “We’ll stay at the Ritz. Either downtown, or in Buckhead.”

“That sounds expensive.” Rosie stopped talking and laughed. “Did you hear what I just said? I almost forgot.”

“So call the Ritz and make reservations,” Abuela said. “And we’ll take a cab from downtown, because we don’t all fit in Cheeto’s truck.”

“And it would be so stupid to get on the bus with the giant Styrofoam check.” Cheeto grinned.

Rosie laughed. “I’m going to frame that giant Styrofoam check and hang it in my new living room where I’ll see it every day.”

Abuela stood and picked up the coffee cups. Rosie hurried to help her. “So what’ll it be, Rosie, downtown or Buckhead? If we’re downtown, we’ll be close to the lottery office.”

“The Ritz in Buckhead,” Rosie answered. “Brad Merritt stays there when he’s in town, and it’s right next door to Phipps Plaza.”

Cheeto shrugged. “So?”

“Excuse me? Tiffany’s is at Phipps. I’m going to get some diamonds.” She was sure her eyes were sparkling as brightly as the diamonds she would soon buy.

“What I’m going to get is some sleep. All of you go home.” Abuela pointed at the door. “Rosie, think about what you want to keep from your apartment.”

Cheeto got up. “Come on, *prima*, I’ll drive you home.”

What to keep? It hadn’t occurred to Rosie that she’d have to choose.