



District 13

THE LIGHTWEIGHT

S. SILVA



CHAPTER 1

The final bell rang at Central High School. Most students rushed out of the building. But Ruben Santos stayed to tutor others. Mr. Baker, the math teacher, had asked Ruben to help some students. He appreciated the way Ruben talked to his classmates about math concepts.

Mr. Baker was also the weightlifting coach. Ruben was tutoring a few guys from the team. He was happy to help. One day, he planned to be a math teacher.

Besides, being at home was depressing.

Hours later, Ruben couldn't avoid it anymore. He arrived home. The second-floor apartment was tiny. Noise passed easily through the thin walls. A baby cried next door. Someone on the third floor was watching a game show. A couple argued across the hall. Ruben did his best to block out the sounds. It didn't always work.

The teen cooked dinner and ate. Then he wrapped up the leftovers. His mom would be hungry when she got home. Working two jobs gave her little time to eat.

Grabbing his backpack, Ruben went to his room. His half of the room was neat. The bed was made. Clothes were folded.

He tried not to look at the other side. Nothing had changed. It was exactly the way

his brother, Hector, had left it. Clothes littered the unmade bed. Books were scattered on the floor.

Hector had died over a year ago. But Ms. Santos wouldn't let Ruben clean up the mess he'd left behind.

The shock of his brother's death still hadn't worn off. They had been a family of three. Hector had been like the father Ruben never had. Everything changed after Hector's death.

Ruben didn't believe the rumor that his brother died by suicide. Hector wouldn't do that.

No one seemed to know what really happened. The police didn't care. They considered it a closed case. Hector was just another dead Hispanic kid.

Later, Ms. Santos arrived home. She looked exhausted.

“I made dinner,” Ruben said.

She gave him a tired smile. “Thanks, Rubenito.”

Ruben cringed. He hated being called “Little Ruben.” But the nickname was true. He was the smallest person in his grade.

Hector was gone. Now Ruben was a target. Some guys at school bullied Ruben about his size. There was nothing he could do about it.



Shortly after school the next day, Ruben went to his job. He worked at Lucky’s Diner. It was a dump. But the owner liked him. Her name was Myra. She gave him extra shifts.

He needed the money. His mother couldn’t afford the rent alone. Hector used to be the one who helped.

“You’re late,” Myra said. Her voice was rough.

“Sorry,” Ruben answered. “I had to stop by the library.” He tied an apron around his waist.

She jerked her thumb at the booths. “Tables won’t bus themselves. And take out the trash.”

Ruben piled dirty dishes in a bin.

Suddenly, the door flung open. The three guys Ruben least wanted to see entered.

“Hey! It’s Low Rider!” one said.

Ruben’s stomach tightened.



CHAPTER 2

It was bad enough to see these guys in school. But Ruben was at work. Now they'd probably bother him here too.

The guys were older. Slade and Tyler were identical twins. They had bad teeth and worse attitudes. Big Red was the third guy. He had red hair and icy blue eyes.

They were losers. Unfortunately, they enjoyed messing with Ruben.

The boys slid into a booth. Slade banged on the table. "Hello! Can we get some service?"

Laughter erupted from the others.

Slade pointed to Ruben. “I want the little waiter.”

Ruben’s cheeks felt warm. “I don’t wait tables,” he mumbled.

“I don’t wait tables,” Big Red mimicked.

Ruben gripped his bin. He pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen.

Myra walked over to the boys. “Are you ordering anything? If not, you have to leave. I don’t need trouble here.”

The boys shrugged.

Tyler stood up. “We’ll be back.”

“Can’t wait,” Myra answered. She followed them to the door.

The diner regulars had been watching the scene. They returned to their food.

Ruben burst through the back door. The alley was empty. His heart raced. *I wish*

Hector was alive. Then this stuff wouldn't happen.

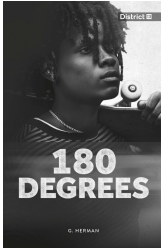
Ruben started kicking a trash can. Soon he was gasping for air. *Can't even kick a trash can without getting winded*, he thought. *I'm just soft.*

These days, Ruben got angry a lot. Life was hard. Hector was gone. His mom was a walking ghost. Ruben had no real friends. Worse, the deadbeats who liked to mess with him wouldn't leave him alone now. He'd forgotten what being happy felt like.

Myra popped her head outside. "What did that trash can do to you?" She winked. "Those jerks are gone."

Ruben forced a smile. *Great. Now Myra fights my battles. I can't stand being me.*

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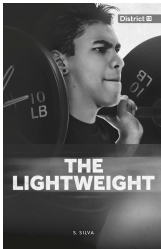
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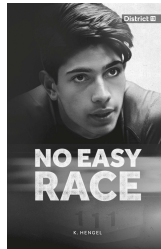
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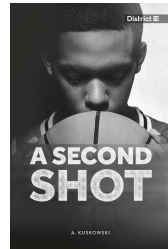
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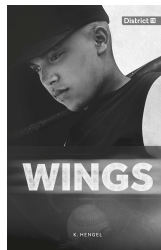
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Ruben's life changes after the unexpected death of his older brother. Without his brother's protection, Ruben is bullied. Will the encouragement of a mentor and the support of a coach help Ruben face his fears?

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