



District 13

# NO EASY RACE

K. HENGEL



## CHAPTER 1

**T**he September sun blazed. Heat waves rippled across the pavement. Children ate ice cream cones under trees in the park. Adults sat on benches. Some used misting fans to cool off.

Despite the heat, Victor Flores remained calm. His heart pounded. His legs pumped. He was in the lead. Victor knew he would win the race. He always did.

This race was no different. Afterward, Victor joked with his opponent and friend Ivan. “You’re getting faster!”

Ivan tried to catch his breath. His hands were on his knees. But he managed to speak. “You really think so?”

“Yes,” Victor said. “You were *so* close.” Then he turned to his other friend. “Wasn’t he, Carlos?”

Bouncing a soccer ball on his knee, Carlos shook his head. “Not at all. Sorry, Ivan. Too bad you can’t handle a soccer ball, Victor. You’re wasting that speed.”

“I use my speed when the ladies chase me,” Victor said.

The teens laughed.

Ivan was still panting. “Whatever, Victor. I’ll believe that when I see it.”

Victor grabbed the ball from Carlos. He threw it at Ivan. The ball hit Ivan’s hip and rolled away.

The group headed to a picnic table in the shade.

“Is it true?” Carlos asked Victor. “Your sister and Marcos are going out?”

“It could be,” Victor said. “Nothing’s official. My parents don’t even know.”

“Who’s Marcos?” Ivan asked.

“You know,” Carlos began. “The new track team captain. He transferred here from West Hill two years ago.”

It still hurt Victor to hear the words *track team*.

“Well, your sister’s missing out on a great catch,” Ivan said.

Victor raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Who would that be?”

Ivan pointed to himself. “You’re looking at him.”

Carlos scoffed. “Ivan, you’re hopeless.”

“At least I’m getting faster,” Ivan said with a shrug.

Victor chuckled. Then he wrapped an arm around Ivan’s shoulder. “You still have a long way to go, my friend.”

Ivan pushed him off and smiled.

“Let’s go,” Victor said. “I can’t be late for dinner.”



## CHAPTER 2

**T**he teens walked to Central Avenue. The stores there had signs in Spanish.

Carlos could read them. But Victor could not. He wanted to learn Spanish. At 17 years old, he felt like it was too late. Victor was already flunking English. *Maybe one language is enough*, he thought.

Ivan and Carlos lived in the same building. Victor's apartment was a few blocks away.

"See you tomorrow," Carlos said.

"Tell your sister I said hi," Ivan joked.

Carlos and Victor shook their heads. “Give up already, Ivan,” Victor said. “See you tomorrow.”

Victor walked home. He took a quick shower before dinner.

Mrs. Flores had made a roast. The family sat down at the table. Mr. Flores said grace.

Angela was Victor’s younger sister. She had an announcement. “Guess what? Marcos asked me to the homecoming dance!”

Mr. Flores’s brow furrowed. “Who?”

“Marcos. He’s on student council, and he volunteers at an after-school program.”

“And he wears a cape and a mask to fight crime at night,” Victor mumbled.

Mrs. Flores smiled at her son.

“What about his grades?” Mr. Flores asked.

Angela responded quickly. “Marcos is a straight-A student. He’s going to college too.”

Mrs. Flores passed the salad bowl to her husband. “He sounds great, Angie. But aren’t you still seeing Gus? Did something happen?”

“No. Nothing happened,” Angela said. “I just don’t like him anymore. That’s all.”

Mr. Flores swallowed a bite of tomato. Those homecoming dances aren’t cheap. You’re already in gymnastics. That’s expensive.”

Angela frowned. Mrs. Flores gave her husband a tight smile. Mr. Flores backed down.

“Bring Marcos to meet the family first,” he said.

Angela beamed. “Thank you, Dad. You will *love* him. I just know it.”

“We’ll see,” Mr. Flores replied. “How’s school so far, Victor?”

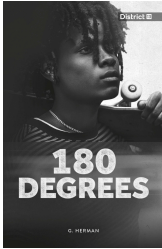
“Fine,” Victor blurted. This was a loaded question. A lecture usually followed. Victor knew the words by heart.



“I want you to graduate on time, Victor. That means no fights. It also means no failing grades. Do you understand?”

“I got it,” Victor answered. He suddenly lost his appetite.

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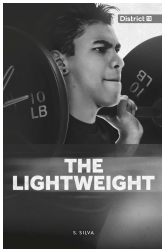
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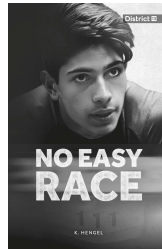
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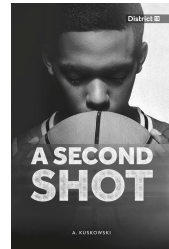
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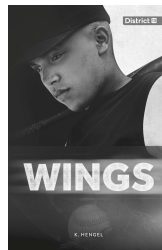
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Victor Flores is a natural-born runner, but his struggles with bullying throw him off track. Then a surprising opportunity presents itself. Does Victor have the strength and self-confidence to get back in the race?

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