

SAL & GABI

FIX THE UNIVERSE

CARLOS HERNANDEZ



RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

Disney • HYPERION LOS ANGELES NEW YORK



SAL COME QUICK I'M ABOUT TO FIX THE UNIVERSE

That's the text message that woke me up at still-dark o'clock in the morning. I read it like twelve times on my smart-watch until I was fully awake.

I didn't mind being woken up. Ever since Mami died, I've kept text notifications on because I'm scared of missing important messages. And I mean, this one seemed pretty important. Papi was about to "fix the universe," whatever that meant.

And hey, bonus: It had burst the nightmare I'd been having like a balloon. Glad to be free of it. Phew, baby.

Holding my smartwatch up to my mouth, I used speech-to-text to ask Papi, "Where are you question mark."

The response came a few seconds later: **REMEMBRANATION MACHINE HURRY**

If I'd been more awake, I would have known that the only place he could have been was inside the big computer that was the culmination of his life's work as a calamity physicist. Last I'd heard, it wasn't working very well. Sounded like maybe it was doing better now.

I sat up, flipped off the covers, planted my feet on the ground, and took a minute to try to Humpty Dumpty my brain back together again.

It'd been a rough night. You'd think that after having the same nightmare for five years I'd be used to it. Plus, most people wouldn't even consider it a nightmare. There's nothing scary about it. Most people who'd lost their mamis would welcome a dream in which she came back to life and was laughing and cooking in a kitchen, just talking about normal stuff, just being family.

But, see, the problem is then you wake up. Your mami vanishes along with your dream, and all that's left is the dark of night. Takes me forever to fall asleep again. I just stare at the ceiling for hours, feeling like I am my mami's grave.

Like you're your mami's grave?! I thought, making fun of myself. Come on, Sal. Overreact much? Nightmares suck, but now it's morning. Time to reclaim your brain. The brain is the king of the body, remember?

Whatever, brain. I'm moving, I'm moving.

Step one: Check in with myself. I felt groggy but fine. Nothing hurt. In fact, the more I woke up, the better I felt. Hungry? Yeah, a little. But I was absolutely parched. I smacked my lips: dry, dry, dry, dry, dry. I was as thirsty as a diabetic. Which makes sense, seeing as I *am* a type-1 diabetic.

Nothing to worry about, though. I had it under control. Mostly. Mostly mostly. A lot of the time?

This is why I had to use the smartwatch. It had all sorts of apps and tools for diabetics—monitors and reminders and *Did You Know?* diabetes trivia pushing itself into your eyeballs

at random intervals. After my blood sugar crash three weeks ago, which had earned me an overnight stay in the hospital, American Stepmom and Papi said it was either this smartwatch or a pump. I've tried the CGM thing before, and I know it's so great for so many people. But it made me feel like I was never allowed to forget for one second that I have a "condition." It kept waking me up at night. My smartwatch only does that when Papi texts me that he fixed the universe—and that has happened exactly once. With the smartwatch, diabetes doesn't feel like it's that big of a deal. It's just a pain in the pancreas, instead of being a 24/7 reminder that I have a disability with no cure and no chance of improvement.

Well, not in this universe, anyway. Not yet.

Well, no need to get depressed before I'd even gotten out of bed. I rose, stretched, and enjoyed the silky smoothness of my Bruce Lee pajamas. They never fail to make me feel powerful. If only they had pockets, they'd be perfect.

On my way to see Papi, I stopped in the kitchen for a bladder-busting, water-tower-size tumbler of water and chugged it. Ah. I refilled the tumbler again and headed for the living room.

Or what used to be the living room. The remembrance machine basically took up the whole space. (And let me tell you, that was an accomplishment. We didn't call our house the Coral Castle for nothing. It had a ton of rooms, and all of them were positively palatial.) Turning the corner out of the kitchen, I basically ran into the massive black box of humming metal that was the machine's housing. It hummed because of all the internal fans that had to run constantly to keep its computer

processors cool. It takes a lot of processors to repair holes in the fabric of spacetime, I guess.

“Papi?” I called out, and then sipped more water. Just couldn’t get enough this morning.

“In here, Sal!” replied American Stepmom from inside the remembranchment machine.

“Hurry, mijo, hurry!” said Papi. He was in there, too.

I walked over to the front, where the display monitor was mounted and one set of goggles (the ones that let you actually see calamitrons) hung from a peg. To the right of the monitor and goggles, the metal door into the machine lay open. I ducked my head and stepped inside.

This was exciting. I’d never been inside the remembranchment machine before.

The interior had an eerie green glow thanks to the tiny lights on the black metal boxes stacked on my left and right. The processors were rattling and jumping on aluminum shelves and overclocking themselves so hard you could smell hot metal. It sounded like a low-key wind tunnel in there, thanks to all the fans running.

Straight ahead of me stood Papi, wearing his white bathrobe and poofy white slippers, big as a polar bear in this confined space. He had on a pair of calamity goggles, too, and in his hands he held a pile of papers from which he was reading out loud.

Listening to him read was my stepmom, American Stepmom. She had on her favorite sleepwear: flying-squirrel footie pajamas, complete with flying-squirrel skin flaps under

the arms and a squirrel-head hoodie. I don't know how she could stand them. I mean, footie pajamas in Florida? She must have been a thousand degrees in that onesie.

“. . . going to raise the calamity saturation value by two point four two times ten to the twelfth power and monitor the permeation valence,” Papi was saying to her. “If PV rises more than point seven, Lucy”—he took a moment to whistle dramatically—“we'll know we succeeded.”

“Oh,” said American Stepmom, nodding fast, her flying-squirrel hoodie nodding one second slower than her head. “Yes, yes, of course. But what if the X factor starts to dance the electric bugaloo with my sonic screwdriver and I get sent back to ancient Egypt?”

Papi blinked. “What are you talking about?”

American Stepmom gripped his shoulders with her creepy squirrel mittens. “What are *you* talking about, Gustavo? I'm not a calamity physicist, remember? I am your darling wife, who is an elementary school assistant principal and a total hottie. Your science friends should be helping you with this!”

Papi laughed at himself. “I'm sorry, mi amor astronómica. I just couldn't wait. The inspiration hit me in a flash.” He flicked the pages in his hands. “This paper has had Bonita and me stumped for two weeks now. I couldn't make any sense of it. But last night, as I was sleeping, I figured out the first page in a dream. Or at least I thought I had. I had to see if I was right.”

“Buenos días, padres locos,” I said.

Papi went nova with joy when he saw me. He handed American Stepmom the papers so he could run over and scoop

me up. He's always been a scoop-you-up-and-hug-you-till-you-spit-up-your-guts-like-a-sea-cucumber kind of papi. "¡Mijo!" he yelled in my ear as he squished me. "¡Mijo, mijo, mijo!"

"Papi," I croaked. "Papi, Papi, Papi."

American Stepmom tapped Papi's shoulder to get him to release me before I lost consciousness. "Be careful, Gustavo! You don't want him to spill his water in here, do you?"

"I saw it," Papi said defensively, adding, "The machine is everything-proof." But still he put me down.

And that's just what American Stepmom wanted, because she took the opportunity to swoop in and give me a hug that wasn't nearly as deadly as Papi's. But it was, thanks to her squirrely skin flaps, just as enveloping. "Good morning, Sal," she said, in a whisper so low and sincere you'd think I hadn't seen her for a year. "How are you feeling today?"

"Got to pee," I said, finishing my water. "Otherwise good."

She broke off the hug and rapped her smartwatch with the pages she still held in her other hand. "I didn't get a report yet this morning. You didn't test your blood sugar?"

"I would have," I said to her, sounding more like a whiny kid than I liked to, "except that Papi texted me to come right away. Something about fixing the universe?"

"I didn't want you to miss it, mijo," Papi said, high on life. "This could be the solution to all our problems. If my calamity calculations are correct, Sal, you're never going to have to worry about tearing holes in the universe ever again. Not to mention that this is scientific history in the making! Come, come!"

He didn't wait for us to come. He bulldozed American Stepmom and me deeper into the remembrance machine. By

extending his hand, he asked for the pages American Stepmom had been holding. He visually scanned the first page one more time, then input some numbers on a touch screen on the back wall. He checked his math in the air, scribbling with his finger, and nodded.

“Okay,” he said, taking two deep bear breaths. “Okay, it’s right. I know it’s right. So let’s do this.” Then, suddenly inspired, he said, “Wait! You do it, Sal. I want you to have the honors.”

I generally enjoy having the honors. “Sure. What do I do?”

“Just press enter.”

Easy enough. I pressed the key on the video screen.

And then Mami, whom I had felt living in my chest since the day she had become Mami Muerta, was gone. Instantly there was nothing of her soul left inside me.

I felt as empty as a grave without a ghost.