

# A POWERFUL THING

## Chapter 5

**By Wednesday I'd met** a bunch of kids from my remote classes. A lot of them had been commenting on my posts all summer, and it was fun to finally talk to them in person. My favorite class, besides art, was going to be social studies. Maybe it was because of the activity we'd done on the first day, but everyone seemed to get along. I really liked talking to Adeline, and when Ms. Jacobs-Lee announced a group project, Adeline and I agreed to work together.

Adeline and I met for lunch that day and then headed to algebra together. The person at Mr. Djondo's desk was *not* Mr. Djondo. It was a substitute who hurriedly told us her name was Ms. Allyn. She rushed through attendance, barely looking at us, and pronounced my name "Macky-na." I wanted to correct her, but she jumped right into the lesson.

"Where do you suppose Mr. Djondo is?" I whispered to Adeline.

Ms. Allyn's arm stopped in front of the whiteboard. "Adeline, do you have a question?"

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I squirmed in my seat. "Um, I'm Makena."

"Let's just focus on the board, Adeline," she said, like she hadn't heard me.

I glanced around. Adeline and I were the only two brown-skinned girls in the class—and we weren't even the same brown. I raised my hand.

"Excuse me—" I tilted my head toward Adeline's desk. "That's Adeline. I'm Makena."

"Stop disrupting class, please!" Ms. Allyn said sharply. She turned her back. "Now, all eyes on the board."

Adeline raised her eyebrows at me and looked down at her textbook.

I was stunned. I wasn't used to getting scolded at school, and no teacher had ever cared so little about getting names—or students—right. I tried to pay attention, but I was distracted.

After class, Adeline and I walked out of the room together. She spoke before I could.

"I don't know what happened in there," she said. "Do you think we look alike?" she asked.

We were passing a display case in the hall. I stared at our reflections. "Not even close," I said.

"I don't think so either," Adeline said, clearly as annoyed as I was. "See you tomorrow, Ma-KAY-na," she said loudly.

Najee and I took the train home together, and I told him about the name thing. He was quiet for a while, and then he

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said, “My dad used to say a name is a powerful thing. I’m named after him.”

I bit my lip. Najee’s father was a soldier who’d been killed fighting in Iraq.

“All I know, Makena, is that your name is something it’s totally okay to stand up for.” He gave me a half smile. “That’s coming from someone who’s always saying, ‘I’m Nah-jay, not Nah-jee.’”

“You’re right,” I said thinking about when Mr. Djondo took the time to learn my name. “My real algebra teacher says names matter.”

Najee nodded. “True that.”



When Amari and I got home, I sprawled across my bed. I couldn’t stop thinking about the mix-up, or what Najee had said.

I have four names: Makena means “happy one” in Swahili; Liliias was my dad’s mom, who died when he was a boy; Cook, for Mom’s family, and Williams. They all matter, and they make me who I am. Why couldn’t that substitute teacher see that Adeline and I were two different girls? I sat up suddenly, staring at the jumble of shoes on the floor of my closet. I got an idea.

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I pulled out one black flat with a bow on the toe, and one shiny black loafer in fake croc. Two different shoes. I dug my phone out and took a picture of the shoes. I posted it with the caption, “Just because we’re both black doesn’t mean we’re the same.”

I took out my pile of books and started on homework. In seconds, there were pings. I counted ten before I looked.

“What is going on?” Amari came in, curious. I grabbed my phone before she could, and scrolled, reading the comments out loud.



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"I don't get it," Amari said. "Why'd you post mismatched shoes?"

"It was a sort of experiment," I said. "Some people *didn't* get it, but I'm glad that so many did!"



The next day was Friday, and Amari had basketball practice after school. I got permission to meet Evette and Maritza at Cherry Blossoms. Evie and I dove into the racks right away and found a bunch of cute stuff. Itza wandered around for a bit but didn't pick up a single thing. "Don't you want to try anything on?" I asked.

"I do," Itza nodded, but she looked discouraged. "I'm just not much of a shopper. I never know where to start."

"I can help you find something that's your style if you want," I said. "Did you see that bright blue shirt with the lightning bolt by the door? It would look good with these," I said, pulling a pair of leggings off a shelf.

Itza's eyes brightened. "Oh, yeah! Cool. Thanks."

"And maybe this?" Evie said, handing Itza a denim jacket. She grinned at me. "You can't go wrong with a denim jacket."

We hustled Itza into a fitting room. A few minutes later, she opened the curtain tentatively. "What do you think?"

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I tilted my head. “That blue is beautiful on you. But let’s try different pants. And cuff the jacket,” I called as I went in search of some skinny jeans. In a moment, I was back. “This would look good with brown ankle boots,” I said, tossing the pants to Itza over the curtain.

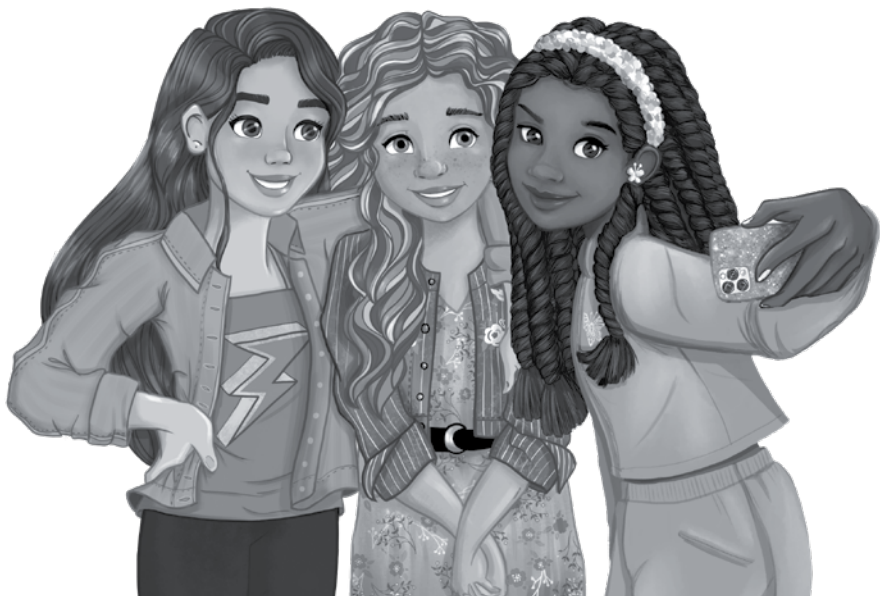
“Boots?” Itza repeated, sounding doubtful.

“My grandma might have some in her closet,” Evie said. “I’ll check.”

When Itza opened the curtain again, she was grinning. “I love it,” she said. “Makena, you’re so good at this.”

“Aw, thanks,” I smiled. “You still look sporty ... but we kicked it up a notch. Let me take a picture.”

“You *are* good at this,” Evie said. “You could start your own YouTube channel to show people how to put outfits together.”



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“Yeah, right,” I said. “Who’d watch that?”

“We would!” Evie and Itza said at the same time.

I shook my head. “Well, there’s zero chance my mom and dad would let me start my own channel.”

“You still have really good ideas,” Evie said.

Itza nodded as she headed back into the dressing room. “Would you send me that picture?” she asked. “I can’t buy all this stuff today, but I want to remember what it looks like.”