

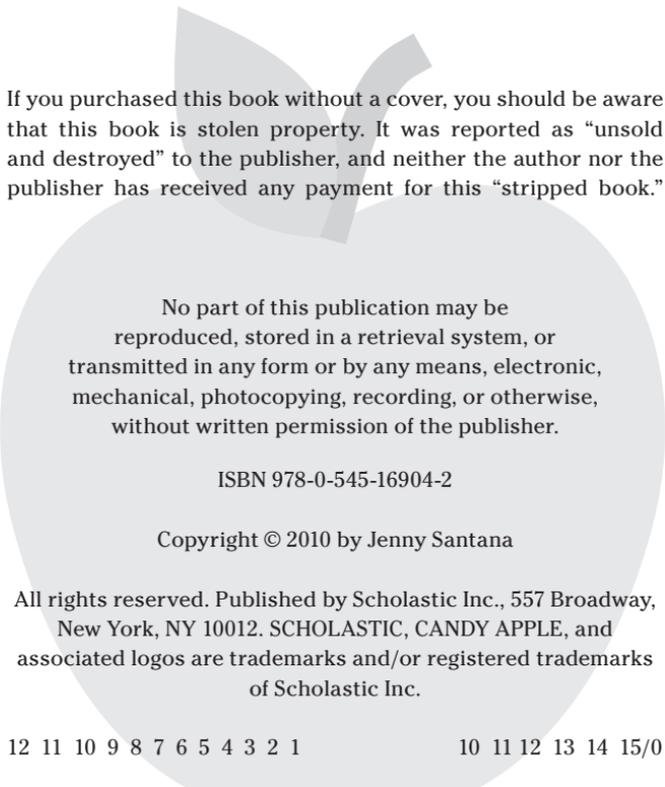
# Winner Takes All

by Jenny Santana



**SCHOLASTIC INC.**

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ISBN 978-0-545-16904-2

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Printed in the U.S.A.  
First printing, October 2010

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# Chapter One

“No excuses,” Celia Martinez said to her best friend, Mariela Cruz, over the phone. “Come over now or I won’t tell you about my secret plan.” She clicked her phone off and smiled to herself, knowing that her dramatics always worked on Mari, and that Mari wouldn’t risk missing out on a juicy secret just two weeks into seventh grade.

Mari was also Celia’s neighbor, in addition to her friend — she lived only five houses down the block. It was Sunday and they’d both finished their homework, so Celia knew Mari had no reason not to come over. Minutes after they hung up, Celia heard a knock on her front door, and seconds after that she heard Mari’s footsteps in the hallway.

“This better be good,” Mari said as she huffed across Celia’s bedroom. “The people next door to you have their dog out in the yard again, and I had to run past their fence just to keep from getting eaten.”

“Mari, Poochie is a *Chihuahua*,” Celia said. “He couldn’t eat you even if he tried!”

Mari flopped down on Celia’s bed and said, “Whatever, that dog is evil. I know he has it in for me.” She nuzzled against Celia’s multicolored throw pillows and tried to catch her breath, her long stick-straight black hair fanning out like a dark spill on Celia’s bedspread. Celia loved Mari’s hair and wished hers were that straight. Her own hair was brown and very, very curly, the tight ringlets springing up all around her head. It was hard to control, especially in the high humidity of Miami, and it always looked a little wild, sort of like a mad scientist’s, helped only by lots of gel, sturdy butterfly clips, and heavy-duty hair ties.

“Maybe you need to take a hint from the Dog Whisperer and remember that *you* are the pack leader.” They both laughed, remembering the one afternoon that summer they’d wasted watching a *Dog Whisperer* marathon on TV. Neither of them even *had* a dog.

Celia and Mari had met the year before in sixth

grade, when Celia joined the drama club in an effort to revamp her image. She'd hoped to fall in with the cool drama clique at Coral Grove Middle School, but her big win in last year's science fair — a total accident and surprise, as sixth graders almost never won best project overall — had placed her solidly in the school's nerd scene. Celia thought it wasn't the worst place to be. The teachers liked her, and all sorts of students — jocks, rockers, cool kids, wannabes, people from every grade — had congratulated her on the science fair win when they saw her at lunch and in the halls. And at least her crazy hair finally seemed to fit in somewhere.

Her attempts to change her image by joining the drama club definitely hadn't worked. In fact, she was pretty bad onstage — her everyday dramatics just didn't translate to the official Drama World. During her first-ever audition, she'd started over twice, flubbed most of her lines, and her hands had shaken so badly she could only keep them still by shoving them into her jeans' back pockets. The club's advisor even stopped her mid-monologue, yelling "Cut!" like a movie director. "I've seen enough, thank you," the advisor said as she rubbed her temples. She asked Celia to leave the stage and not bother with the musical portion

of the audition (which was a relief to Celia — she *knew* she couldn't sing, especially not an audition piece from *High School Musical 3*, which she still hadn't even seen yet). She stayed in the drama club to vote on which plays and musicals the school should do and to help with set design, but she was never actually in the plays, unlike Mariela, who usually got a big part. Still, Celia had fun running lines with the good actors and she had a new best friend, Mariela, to cheer on from the box office.

“So I need your help,” Celia said. She plopped down on the bed next to Mari. “I was actually hoping I wouldn't have to ask you, but it looks like I have no other choice.”

Mari stopped picking at the bright orange polish on her nails and tilted her head at Celia.

“What could have possibly gone wrong already? We're only two weeks into school,” she said. “In most ways, it's exactly like last year.”

“That's the problem,” Celia said, standing up again. She started pacing around the plush purple rug in the middle of her tile floor. “I was really hoping I'd be able to shake off this nerd image in time to run for seventh grade representative, but it just doesn't seem like anyone's forgotten about it.”

“Celia, you worry too much about what people think.” Mari sat up and clutched a feather-covered pillow to her chest. “And you should totally run! You’d make a great representative. You’d work well with that girl the eighth graders just elected last week.”

“Yeah, Krystal ran a great campaign. Even people *not* in eighth grade knew who she was and what she stood for. And I bet it didn’t hurt that she’s captain of the dance team and super-popular.”

Mari shrugged her shoulders and said, “That’s true. I don’t even remember some of the people running against her. But even as great a race as the eighth grade just had, I bet you could out-campaign them all.”

Celia thought so, too. In fact, she’d spent the whole summer planning her campaign, designing posters in her head, and putting herself up against possible candidates in the final big debate. Her mind was filled with ideas for school dances, trips, and seventh grade-only activities. She wanted to institute a seventh grade spirit week that would end with a picnic lunch, and she would sell the administration on it by pitching it as a way to boost attendance. Celia imagined pitching her proposal to the principal: *I can assure you, sir, that*

*students will respond positively to the reward of a spirit week, and the attendance numbers of the seventh grade class at Coral Grove will soar.*

Celia pictured herself no longer a nerd, but a school rep everyone knew and wanted to be involved with — and she couldn't help but get excited. She'd even secretly scribbled "Celia Martinez, Seventh Grade Representative" in her notebook, on the same hidden page where she'd written her crush's name, Lazaro (Laz to his friends), next to hers and surrounded it with hearts.

With so many ideas for making their class the best Coral Grove had ever seen, Celia was more than ready to be a great seventh grade representative. There was only one hitch: Celia was not going to run.

"You know how bad our school is about cliques, Mari. Just look at Yvette and her little band of dance followers."

Yvette and her friends were the very definition of "clique." They always hung out together, sat next to one another at lunch, and participated in all the same clubs, namely the dance team. Saying the name "Yvette" brought to mind the picture of not one girl, but a whole team of them, all dressed in the same tight jeans, with the same super-high

ponytails and wearing the same lip gloss. Sometimes, at lunch, when all of the dance clique walked in together, Celia couldn't even tell them apart. They weren't mean girls; they were just picky about who they did and didn't say hi to in the hallways for fear of tainting their image as one of the school's cooler groups. They always said hi to Mari, but usually ignored Celia, even if she was standing right next to Mari. At best, they got her name wrong, mumbling "hey, Claudia" as they strolled to their lockers.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad, the clique-iness," Mari admitted. "But don't you think you should still try? I mean, you've obviously been thinking about it."

"Yeah, but a science fair winner has never also won the election — it's the kiss of death! It defies our school's logic to elect a nerd." Celia stopped pacing and sat down in the middle of the rug, crossing her legs and putting her elbows on her knees. She tried to look really upset, though she'd thought her plan through so many times, she was sure it would work. Still, she needed Mari to agree to it if it was going to go anywhere, and Mari was more likely to say yes if she felt bad for Celia, so Celia kept pouting.

"Who knows?" Mari said. "There's a first time for everything."

“You sound like my mom,” Celia said. It was true — Celia’s mom had said the exact same thing when Celia told her she wasn’t planning to run for the student council position. “Still, the odds are against me. I’m not running.”

They sat quietly for a minute. They heard Celia’s mom yell from the garage for Carlos, Celia’s big brother, to come help with the laundry — it was Carlos’s day to help wash and fold, so Celia was off the hook. Mari rearranged herself on Celia’s bed so that she was flat on her stomach, her head propped up in her hands.

Mari finally said, “So if you’re not running, then what’s this secret plan for the election you were talking about?”

This was the opening Celia was waiting for. She jumped up from the rug and launched into Presentation Mode, which involved great posture, eye contact, and the clear enunciation of every word. She’d gone into Presentation Mode when faced with the judges at last year’s science fair. It came naturally to her; she was good at public speaking when she knew her subject matter, when it was her own work she was presenting. It was acting she couldn’t manage to do — she could not take someone else’s ideas and make them her own, not without a lot of stuttering.

“You agreed with me before that our school is kind of dominated by cliques,” Celia said. “And you agreed that certain cliques have certain roles. Am I right?”

“I guess,” said Mari, starting to worry. She recognized Presentation Mode when she saw it. It was what helped make Celia a straight-A student, but it was always a little weird to see her fall into it outside of class.

“Let’s look at the facts,” Celia said. “We know nerds never win popularity contests, and the seventh grade representative election is exactly that — a popularity contest. Remember last year?”

When they were in sixth grade, the winners of all three grade-level rep campaigns — sixth, seventh, and eighth — had been some of the school’s most popular, well-liked students. Those winners all ran stellar campaigns and did well in the final debate, but the fact that they were already popular to begin with couldn’t have hurt their chances of winning.

“I don’t think it’s one hundred percent about popularity,” Mari said as she absentmindedly braided her hair, “but I see your point. None of the past reps could be labeled as straight-up nerds. In fact, a lot of them were . . . drama types.”

“Exactly,” Celia said as a smile crept onto her face.

“No, no, no!” Mari cried. She squirmed off the bed and stomped away from Celia toward the bedroom door. “It’s a terrible idea!”

Apparently, convincing Mari to run for seventh grade rep — but with Celia’s ideas and with Celia doing all the work behind the scenes in secret — was going to be harder than Celia had hoped.

“But you don’t even have to *do* anything,” Celia said. “It’ll be easy. I’ll take care of everything. I just need you to be the face of the campaign — just *act* the part. You can totally win this for us!”

Mari turned back to her and said, “But Celia, it’s *not* like acting. It’s dishonest, isn’t it? We’d never get away with it. And plus, I don’t *want* to be seventh grade rep. *You* do. So you should just stop being scared and run yourself.”

Celia took a step back and her breath caught in her throat. Was Mari right — was Celia just scared to run on her own? Was that what her whole plan was really all about? No, she told herself. She had thought about it all summer. There was no way she would win a popularity contest, even if she proved to be the best person for the

job. Still, the seventh grade class deserved a great representative, and she knew she had the brain to do the job. She wanted to give her ideas a shot, even if she couldn't give the rest of herself one. She had to convince Mari that this plan was the only way.

Celia put her hands on Mari's shoulders and pushed her down so that they were both sitting on the purple rug together. Mari's hair was so long she almost sat on it.

"Look," Celia said. "This is about teamwork, about getting the best person elected. I think this plan has a great chance of working. Do you want all the seventh grade dances to be cool or not? Do you want to get stuck going on lame school trips? Do you want us to have a real voice in how lunch period is run, or how much funding student clubs like drama should get? That's what's at stake here."

Mari looked Celia straight in her brown eyes. Celia could tell Mari was thinking about it. "I don't know," Mari finally said. "If I win, how will we keep this up for a whole year?"

Celia hadn't given this too much thought, but she did know how to answer Mari's question. "I'll sign up to be part of student council as a general

member, and then I can just volunteer to ‘help’ with everything.”

“But why can’t you just run —”

“It’s not that I can’t run myself,” Celia said, knowing what Mari was about to say. “I mean, maybe I am a little scared. But it’s really that I think you plus me equals victory. It’s a way of guaranteeing that I—we—win, and that the ideas for making this year awesome get heard. I’m sure this kind of thing happens all the time in real politics. It’s all about an image, and I just don’t have a great one. You do.”

Celia felt a little sad admitting this, but she swallowed it down and remembered everything she’d told herself all summer: *It’s not about me; it’s about making our seventh grade year the best year ever.* She tried to smile.

Mari pouted and raised her eyebrows. She looked down at the carpet and started pulling at the plush fibers. Celia bit her lip and then leaned in to Mari, putting her hands on her best friend’s knees.

“Think of it like this,” Celia added. “You’re who everyone sees, and I’m who everyone hears. It’s like you’re the drama, and I’m the science behind it. In some ways, it’s the biggest part you’ve ever

played! It'll be like a year-long rehearsal for your graduation performance next year in eighth grade."

Mari stopped pulling at the carpet and sat up a little straighter.

"Well, that sort of makes sense, and when you put it that way . . ." Mari trailed off. After a few seconds, she cleared her throat and said, "The only reason I'd do it is because you're my friend and I want you to be happy, and because your ideas really are great, and it would be super-lame if you didn't win. Plus, it does sound like a really challenging role, and I don't know how big a part I'll get in this fall's play, so I may need the practice . . ."

She looked down at her fingernails again and started chipping away more polish. "I'll do it on one condition: You stick with me at all times. I don't want to look stupid, not knowing an answer to some campaign question. Once I say yes, you can't abandon me."

"Of course!" Celia yelped. She wrapped her arms around her friend and new campaign partner. "I'll never leave your side. I promise. I'll stick to you like Poochie does when you invade his territory," she added.

“Ugh. Just what I needed. More Poochie problems.”

They both laughed, neither of them knowing that as far as problems went, Poochie would be their smallest.