

**E-BOOK  
SAMPLE**  
(Selected Pages)

# MY NEW AMERICAN LIFE



Gaby Triana



# Chapter One

February, 1961—

I flipped through a fashion magazine announcing all the newest styles of dresses for 1961. *Should my dress be pink or blue? Or beige?* Beige was an elegant color, very sophisticated. Pink was for little girls, and in just eight months, I would be turning fifteen—no longer a little girl.

For my birthday, Mami and Papi promised me a *fiesta de quinceañera*, a special celebration for girls turning fifteen, and I couldn't stop thinking about it! On October 12<sup>th</sup>, friends and family

would come to our house here in La Habana. We'd play the latest pop songs, eat delicious vanilla cake (with a figurine of a *quinceañera* on top!), and best of all, my crush, Ricardo Piñeiro, would be here to celebrate with me.

“Yoli!” my eight-year-old brother, Luis, called from the hallway. He should've gotten to bed an hour ago.

“Shh. *Baja la voz*. Lower your voice.” I opened my door. “What is it?”

He slipped into my room in his plaid pajamas. “Who's the man at the door?”

“What man?” I rushed to my window to see if I could catch a glimpse of anyone standing on our front porch. “I don't see anyone.”

“He's in the foyer, talking to Mami and Papi. He seems angry.”

“I had no idea anyone was here.”

“Because you’re so busy with your magazines, you can’t think of anything else.”

“Not true.” I hugged my doorframe and tried to eavesdrop on the adults’ conversation. Sure enough, someone was talking to my parents just inside the house.

I craned my head out further into the hallway and heard a man’s slightly muffled voice speaking to my parents. My father’s tone was calm and collected, though every so often, hints of restrained annoyance surfaced.

What was going on?

“We have reason to believe...” the man began, but I couldn’t quite discern the rest. I didn’t like the way his tone of voice changed suddenly, as though he were scolding my parents.

“Sir, we are very pleased with *el máximo líder*’s new changes,” Papi said flatly. “So if you don’t mind, my wife and I will say goodnight. We were just about to retire.”

I didn’t know why this man was here talking about *el máximo líder*, Fidel Castro, but I could tell my father was lying about being pleased with the changes. Unfortunately, Castro had been our prime minister for two years now, and there was nothing any of us could do about it.

Luis pushed through the doorway to hear better, making me miss whatever the man replied to my father. “Stay out of it, Luisito. This is grown-up talk.”

“Then why are *you* listening?” Luis climbed onto my bed. “*You’re* not a grown up.”

“Hush. You’re so annoying!” Where was Abuela? With her bedroom right across the hall, our grandmother should have caught on to Luis being out of bed by now and dragged him back to his room by his ear.

I ignored Luis and focused back on the man at the door. I caught the word *indoctrination* from my father, and suddenly, it all made sense.

Changes were happening at my school. First, Sister Perez started teaching us new ideas in history class about communism—how everyone should have the same things, how there should be no more rich or poor people, how this kind of equality was fairer to all. Men wearing military fatigues had visited and told us to prepare for a new future. They said there was a high possibility that soon we’d be relocated

to a school in the countryside where we'd sing patriotic songs, learn military exercises, and begin an improved way of life.

I didn't see anything wrong with our current way of life or understand why it had to change. My family had a nice four-bedroom house in La Habana. We weren't very rich, but we weren't poor, either. My father made enough money as an accountant to make sure Luis and I could both attend a good Catholic private school.

When I'd told my parents about the military men's visit, they'd looked concerned. They'd told me not to discuss it with anyone, to keep my mouth shut and carry on as usual. That night, I'd pressed a glass tumbler against their wall and heard them talking in their bedroom. They had mentioned the word *indoctrination*. Mami's fear

was that Castro would take away parents' rights to plan children's education, but my father had dismissed it as *bobería*—nonsense that would never happen.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

Just as I stuck my head into the hallway again, my mother appeared around the corner.

“Mami!” My heartbeat spiked suddenly. “You scared me.”

She looked stressed, clutching her house robe tightly to her body. “*¿Yolanda, qué estás haciendo?* What are you doing?” she asked frantically. “*Ya es hora de dormir.* It's time to sleep.”

“Yes, but I, uh, have a little problem.” I showed her who was perched on my bed way past his bedtime.

“Luisito!” Mami gritted her teeth. “Get to your room right this minute!”

Goodness. My mother was usually so even-keeled. The strange man’s visit must’ve put her on edge.

Abuela finally emerged from her bedroom across the hall. How odd for my usually overprotective grandmother to be too distracted to notice my brother out of his bed.

Then, I saw the glass tumbler in her hand. Apparently, someone else in this house liked to eavesdrop, too. “I’m sorry, *hija*, I didn’t know he was awake,” Abuela said to Mami. “I, eh . . . had the radio on a little too loud. Luisito, go back to bed.”

“But who’s the man at the door?” Luis asked again, getting up from my bed.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” Mami said. “Go to sleep, or you’ll be tired for school tomorrow.”

“*If* you go to school tomorrow,” Abuela murmured.

Mami shot her a wary look; Abuela quietly closed the door to her room, as my mother glanced down the hall worriedly.

“What did she mean by that?” I asked Mami.

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “Just get in bed, Yolanda. The man will be gone soon, and then we can all get some rest.”

I was disappointed that my mother wouldn’t share details with me. Didn’t she trust me?

“Okay. Goodnight, Mami.”

“And Yoli?” Her green eyes softened, as if suddenly remembering how much she loved me.

She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek.

“*Te quiero*. I love you,” she said, caressing my hair.

“I love you, too.”

“Everything will be okay.”

“I know.” I smiled and closed my door, but my stomach turned a quick somersault. Of course everything would be okay. Why wouldn't it be? I slipped into bed and turned out my light, trying not to dwell on the question.

## THINK ABOUT IT

- 1. Why are Yolanda and Luis sent to America, and where do they go after they get there?**
- 2. Review chapter six. How does the principal's interaction with Yolanda help her understand what is happening in Cuba and why other people in America may be unkind to her and Luis?**
- 3. This book is based on real events from the 1960s. Even though the details of Yolanda's experiences are made up, how does her story help readers imagine what the real children of Operation Pedro Pan went through?**

## CHALLENGES & CHOICES

# MY NEW AMERICAN LIFE

The year is 1961. Yolanda's fifteenth birthday is just months away, and she can't stop thinking about plans for her *fiesta de quinceañera*. But as her home country of Cuba experiences changes in government, her family's future becomes uncertain. Her parents seek help from a secret operation, and Yolanda and her younger brother are suddenly sent to America to live with a foster family. Now Yolanda has much more to worry about than a birthday party. Can she cope as a stranger in a new country, and will she ever see her family again?



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### Genre

Historical Fiction

### Subject/Strand

Social Studies/History

### Key Words

Cuba, Fidel Castro, Pedro Pan Operation, communism, propaganda

### Vocabulary

apprehensive, brandish, confiscated, novelty, temporary

### Level

GRL T  
Lexile 810L

### Word Count

8,303

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