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★★ LUCY LOPEZ ★★

CODING STAR



••• Claudia Mills ★ pictures by Grace Zong •••

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CODING STAR

Claudia Mills

pictures by Grace Zong

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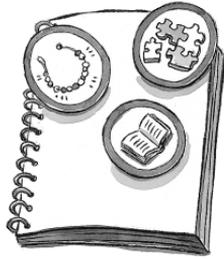
*To my beloved sister, Cheryl Mills,
who made the Let's Have Fun Club with me,
and to all younger sisters everywhere*



★★ **LUCY LOPEZ** ★★

CODING STAR

★ one ★



Lucy Lopez poked her older sister, Elena, who sat hunched over the keyboard in front of the family-room computer. On the screen a kangaroo was dancing to a hip-hop beat. The kangaroo kicked to the right, kicked to the left, then twirled in place, paws waving.

Of course a kangaroo would dance to hip-hop.

“You’ve been on the computer *forever*,” Lucy complained. If only Elena would finish up and work on their special club badges with her instead. But ever since Elena had attended a four-week after-school coding camp a month ago with her best friend, Juniper, it was hard to tear her away from the computer.

Elena ignored Lucy's comment. With another few motions of her busy fingers on the touchpad, Elena had changed the code to make the dancing kangaroo a dancing hedgehog, hopping just as energetically.

"Mom said only one hour," Lucy pointed out.

"Yes, and I still have one minute and forty-seven seconds left," Elena replied, glancing at the timer on the table.

Elena paused the dance to turn the hedgehog into a turtle moving jerkily like a robot, and then—hooray, hooray!—only five seconds were left on the timer—four, three, two, one, *ding!*

"*Now* let's work on our badges!" Lucy said.

She and Elena had created a special sisters' club after their mother announced she was done forever with any activities that involved anybody having to sell anything: wrapping paper, coupon books, or—especially—cookies. So Lucy and Elena had made the Let's Have Fun Club, where they created their own badges, designing what each badge looked like in a Let's Have Fun Club handbook, and making up lists of the things they had to do to earn

each one. Once they earned a badge, they cut it out of the handbook and taped it onto a crepe-paper sash.

The club name was perfect because earning badges was the most fun thing in the entire world. So far they had earned badges for making bracelets, reading books, and completing jigsaw puzzles. The jigsaw-puzzle badge was Lucy's favorite. She was the one who had made up its list of requirements:

1. Finish three 100-piece puzzles.
2. Finish one 500-piece puzzle all by yourself with no help from anyone else.
3. Do five 25-piece little-kid puzzles in under five minutes.
4. Do one little-kid puzzle with the pieces turned picture-side down.
5. Make your own puzzle by pasting a picture from a magazine onto cardboard and cutting it up into jigsaw-puzzle pieces.

But these days all Elena wanted to do was

sit at the computer and code, code, code—even though the hair-styling badge they were supposed to be working on was one Elena herself had created.

“All right,” Elena said reluctantly, pushing her chair back from the computer. “I’ll show you how to make those cute little double buns, one on each side of your head. That’s number four on the list of badge requirements.”

Ten minutes later, both girls had two dark knobs of hair sticking up on the tops of their heads, like extra pairs of fuzzy black-bear ears. When they inspected themselves in the bathroom mirror, Lucy could see the buns Elena had made on Lucy’s head were neater than the buns Lucy had made on Elena’s head.

“Are mine good enough for the badge?” Lucy asked.

Sometimes Elena was extra-picky about the badges. She hadn’t let Lucy count one of her bracelets for the bracelet-making badge since she had copied Elena’s design too closely.

“Sure,” Elena said. “Our handbook doesn’t say ‘Make a *perfect* double bun.’ Messy buns are in right now, anyway.”



Lucy let out her breath with happy relief. “Now can we make French braids?” she asked. “It’s the only thing we have left for the badge.”

Elena shook her head. “That’s enough club stuff for today. I’m going over to Juniper’s for a while.” In a whisper she added, “*Her* mom doesn’t put a timer on *her* computer.”

So ten minutes later, Elena was gone and Lucy was alone. She could start working on earning a different badge from the handbook—like the cookie-baking badge—but she and Elena had always earned their badges together. It wouldn’t be the same baking cookies all by herself.

Maybe they could create a coding badge for the club! And Elena could show Lucy how to write codes for it, the way she had shown her how to make the double buns. But for some reason, Elena never wanted to show Lucy how to do stuff on the computer. Of course, it would take a lot longer to teach someone how to do computer coding than to teach them how to make a new hairstyle. Elena had spent a whole month in coding camp to learn everything she knew now.

What if . . . what if Lucy went to coding camp, too? Lucy had a flyer stuffed in the bottom of her backpack for a third-grade coding camp run by the same teachers who had taught Elena's fifth-grade camp. If Lucy went to coding camp, she'd learn the things Elena already knew without having to nag Elena, and then she and Elena could earn a Let's Have Fun Club coding badge together!

Lucy found her mother on the couch in the family room, red pen in hand, grading Spanish quizzes. Looking up from her pile of papers, her mother focused her gaze on Lucy's head.

"What are *those*?"

"Double buns. Elena made them for me."

"Oh," her mother said. "Fancy."

"Can I go to coding camp?" Lucy asked. "Like Elena did? The one for third graders starts this week."

She held out the crumpled flyer she had retrieved from the bottom of her backpack.

Her mother gave a huge sigh. "Well, fair is fair," she said.

Lucy had expected the sigh. In addition to disapproving of programs that involved selling

things, her mom thought kids nowadays had too many scheduled activities. So most days after school Lucy and Elena walked across the elementary-school parking lot to the high school, where their mom taught Spanish and their dad taught history. There they did homework or read books until it was time for everyone to go home. Elena had used her best begging skills to convince their mom to let her do the coding camp.

“It’s just that . . . everything’s a camp or a class nowadays,” her mother said. “Whatever happened to kids having fun on their own?”

“Elena and I *do* have fun on our own!” They had created a whole entire club to have fun on their own! In fact, the only reason Lucy wanted to go to coding camp was because of the club the two of them had created.

“I know,” her mother said with another sigh, reaching over to push a stray strand of hair back into one of Lucy’s buns. “If you want to do the camp, we’ll sign you up.”

“Yay!” Lucy nodded so vigorously that one of her buns tumbled down, but she didn’t care. “Hooray!”



On Sunday afternoon Lucy didn't utter a single complaint as Elena's hour of computer time ticked down. Soon *she'd* be the one with the timer ticking; *her* fingers would be confidently moving on the touchpad; it would be *her* dancing kangaroo!

Now she had a reason to try to follow the blocks flying across the screen to figure out exactly what Elena was doing. How did the kangaroo become a bear? How did the bear know to start doing disco moves? But her sister did everything so quickly, it was still a mystery.

"Stop breathing down my neck," Elena snapped. "Why don't you go get the stuff we need for the French braids? I'll be done in four minutes and twelve—no, eleven—seconds."

French braids turned out to be harder than double buns, and Lucy was so excited about coding camp that she found herself tuning out during some of Elena's instructions. But half an hour later an elegant French braid lay flat against the back of Lucy's head, and a crooked French braid lay flat against the back of Elena's.

"Did I pass?" Lucy asked.

Elena craned her neck around to inspect the braid Lucy had made. She took longer to answer this time.

“Yes,” she finally said.

Lucy cut out the circular hair-styling badge from the page in their club handbook where the badges created so far were displayed. Then she promptly taped it to her crepe-paper sash.

She noticed Elena wasn’t cutting out her hair-styling badge. In fact, Elena hadn’t even added the jigsaw-puzzle badge to her sash yet. Didn’t Elena even care about the Let’s Have Fun Club anymore?

Was now the time for Lucy to tell Elena she was going to do the coding camp, too, so they could start earning Let’s Have Fun Club coding badges together? Maybe that would make Elena excited about the club the way she used to be.

But she found herself hesitating. Elena could be so prickly sometimes, like when she hadn’t let Lucy count her woven bracelet for the badge because its design wasn’t “original” enough. Still, Elena was going to find out about Lucy’s coding camp when Lucy didn’t walk

over to the high school with her tomorrow afternoon.

“I was thinking . . .” Lucy said. “I was thinking that if *I* learned coding, then we could have coding badges for the club, and so I talked to Mom, and she said *I* could go to coding camp, too.”

Elena didn’t say anything at first, busying herself with gathering up combs and brushes. She collected the rubber bands and returned them to their plastic container. She placed the mirror back in the bathroom vanity drawer.

“I don’t think you’re going to like coding,” Elena said then. “It’s really hard. It’s not like jigsaw puzzles, where it’s super-obvious how the pieces fit together.”

Lucy thought a five-hundred-piece jigsaw puzzle was hard. It wasn’t obvious how five hundred different pieces fit together.

Elena started unraveling the lopsided French braid Lucy had made for her, yanking at the intertwined strands of hair as if she were mad at them for some reason.

“I just can’t see computers being *your* thing,” Elena said, “the way they’re *my* thing.

You know, like how gardening is Dad's thing, but not Mom's thing? And how salsa dancing is Mom's thing, but not Dad's thing?"

But how could Lucy know if coding was her thing if she had never even tried it?

Then Elena shrugged. "Well, suit yourself. But if you get mega-frustrated with coding, don't come complaining to me."

"I won't," Lucy said.

She didn't plan to be complaining to anybody at all.

Elena didn't understand how fun it would be once she and Lucy could both do cool coding things on the computer for a Let's Have Fun Club coding badge.

Lucy closed her eyes and imagined two sister kangaroos, side by side, happily hip-hopping on the computer screen.

Together.