



He looks over at his sister, who is sitting under a guava tree reading a book. Her dream is to become a teacher. She is very smart, Alejandro knows, and he wants to see her succeed more than anything. Their mother was a good student, too, but she did not get the education she needed to reach her own dreams. She and Alejandro's father grew up in a time when Nicaragua was going through a lot of conflict. The government was unstable, and food and water weren't always available. Alejandro's



**Managua lies on the shores of Lake Managua. The city has been Nicaragua's capital since 1852.**

parents tell horrible stories about soldiers coming to their homes at night and stealing their things. One of Alejandro's uncles was even killed while fighting for a group called the Sandinistas. Alejandro and his sister never got to meet him, but their mother tells wonderful stories about him.

Their parents talk all the time about wanting Alejandro and María to have a better life than they did. They want them to have their own homes, their own careers, and maybe get married and have children. "But above all else, we want the two of you to be happy," they say. Alejandro wonders if this is even

possible. He and María have friends at school who come from very poor families that barely have enough to eat.

Alejandro's father earns good money working in a clothing factory, so food isn't a problem for his family. They grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs in their backyard, too. But Alejandro still has this nagging feeling that it could all disappear at any moment. His parents tell him the country is stronger than it has been in a long time, and that things are getting better. They just wish it would get better faster. Alejandro wishes that, too.

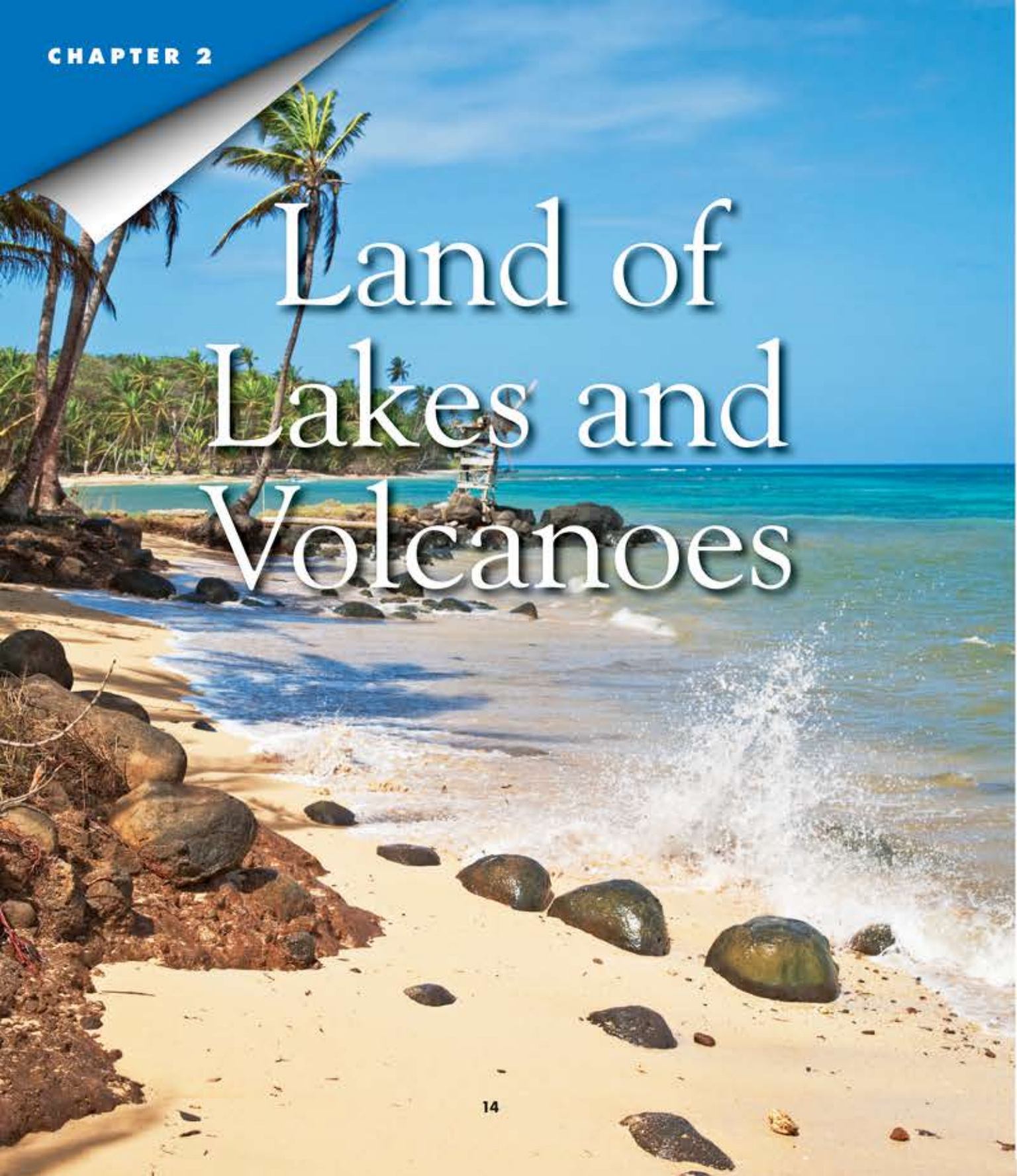
**More than eighty thousand people work in Nicaragua's textile factories.**



**Boys play baseball on the beach by Lake Nicaragua.**

Alejandro throws the ball against the house a few more times. It doesn't seem to bother María in the least. She is lost in that book of hers. He has always been impressed by how well she can concentrate. He knows she is trying her best with her schoolwork. And their mother is trying her best to take care of them. And their father works hard at his job. Alejandro has every intention of doing his best as well—at his studies, at his baseball practice, at everything. But will it be enough in a place that has seen such hard times? Will it be enough in Nicaragua, a nation that sometimes seems to be teetering between unmatched success and continued failure?

He hopes so.



# Land of Lakes and Volcanoes

**N**ICARAGUA IS ONE OF SEVEN COUNTRIES IN THE southernmost section of the North American continent, an area known as Central America. Together, these seven nations form a narrow link between Mexico and South America. Nicaragua's closest neighbors are Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south. To the west is the Pacific Ocean, and to the east is the Caribbean Sea.

Nicaragua and its neighbors lie in the tropics. This is the area near the equator, an imaginary line around the globe halfway between the North and the South Poles. Places in the tropics are warm year-round. Most are also quite humid, frequently receiving heavy rainfall.

*Opposite: Palm trees line the beaches in the Corn Islands, Nicaraguan islands in the Caribbean Sea.*